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## **The youth centre as a 'sanctuary' in aiding safer communities for young people**

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### **Introduction**

Young people's visibility in public space has been a prominent feature of concern throughout history, especially in times of social and economic uncertainty. There have also been specific moments in time when young people have been considered particularly 'problematic'. This is because historically, particular groups of young people have been considered a threat to the social order, requiring regulation and control (Cohen, 2002; Pearson, 1983; Humphries, 1981) and have attracted 'more theorising and moralising in the past century than almost any other social group' (Humphries, 1981: 1). Since 1815 various institutions have imposed social control on a specific, identifiable group of young people - the poor and the working class. But as Pearson (1983) reminded us, we have been plagued by the same concerns and fears, which characterise the young people of the day as 'problematic', from one generation to the next. The governance of youth therefore has evolved and developed through various institutions and agencies regulating the everyday lives of young people, particularly working class young people, through education, employment and leisure (Muncie, 1984; Humphries, 1981).



### **Recurring anxieties about youth: Place, order and regulation.**

During the Industrial Revolution, a period of rapid urbanisation and socio-economic change, child vagrancy was a prominent feature. Due to diminishing employment opportunities, the visibility of children and young people in public

space underpinned the founding of the 'child rescue movement' (Goldson, 1997; Platt, 1969). 'Children of the poor' were perceived to be *at risk* from the corruption of city life and also *a risk* to middle class children by means of contamination (Savage, 2007) and there were raised anxieties about young people 'running wild on the streets' (Cunningham, 1996). Therefore, we witnessed the start of 'rescuing' or 'removing' children and young people from public spaces. Their presence in public space prompted official anxiety in 1816 when the *Report of the Committee for Investigating the Causes of the Alarming Increase in Juvenile Delinquency in the Metropolis*, found that the principal causes of juvenile delinquency were:

*The improper conduct of parents, the want of education, the want of suitable employment, the violation of the Sabbath, and habits of gambling in the public streets' (Report of the Committee for Investigating the Causes of the Alarming Increase in Juvenile Delinquency in the Metropolis, 1816: 10-11).*

The 1816 report, therefore, marked the beginning of a distinct social category of children and young people, and paved the way for a separate system for dealing with them. Institutions such as Industrial Schools and Reformatories were introduced to detain specific groups of children and young people based on the 'rhetoric of moral rehabilitation proposed by social reformers and child savers' (Humphries, 1981: 212). Mary Carpenter, an influential reformer, argued for intervention based on a two tier model of 'perishing' and 'dangerous' juveniles, which echoed the provision for the deserving and undeserving poor institutionalised in the New Poor Law 1834 (Shore, 1999: 7). Carpenter distinguished between the 'deprived' and the 'perishing classes' on the one hand and the 'depraved' and 'dangerous classes' on the other, and advocated Industrial Schools for the former and Reformatories for the latter. The institutions that she promoted gained legal status in the 1854 Youthful Offenders Act and the 1857 Industrial Schools Act. Moral discourses were also expressed by evangelical reformers who placed blame on parents' 'lack of sufficient moral training' (Pearson, 1983; Hendrick, 2005) and an agenda of moral and Christian education was imposed on the young (Emsley, 2005). The introduction of Reformatory and Industrial Schools governing the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' young effectively served to remove a specific constituency of young people from public space.

Legislation, such as the Vagrancy Act (1824) and the Malicious Trespass Act (1827), exemplified a further condemnation of 'young' working class behaviour. These Acts considerably broadened legal conceptions of 'criminality', to include behaviour that was not previously deemed a criminal offence. The Vagrancy Act of 1824 stated that 'every person playing or betting in any street... or other open and public space' (Magarey 1978: 117) would be deemed to have committed an offence, (a precursor of the anti-social behaviour orders introduced at the end of the twentieth century). The criminalisation of traditional street activities, particularly those of working class young people, intensified when the Metropolitan Police was established in 1829, which 'focused attention on the streets and, therefore, on the labouring people who lived, worked and played there' (Rawlings, 1999: 77). The 1850s beheld the same concerns and fears regarding young people whose behaviour was similarly deemed to be

'problematic' or 'deviant'. Children and young people could, during this period, be imprisoned as a result of pursuing a range of activities in the streets including playing football, flying kites, or any game considered to be an annoyance to the public (Muncie, 2004: 58).

The 1870 Education Act introduced compulsory schooling for all young people. Springhall (1986: 70) claims that this can be framed in 'crude economic terms as conveniently removing large numbers of unskilled child workers from a flooded labour market'. This move occurred at a time of economic and social uncertainty where the problem of 'youth' once again became an increasing source of concern. Children and young people were taken from the dangerous 'illegitimate' space of the streets and the work place and placed into the highly regulated 'legitimate' space of schools. It follows that compulsory schooling was 'the single most important means of taming the young and clearing the streets' (Holt, 1992: 142).

### **Youth provision and informal governance**

The youth movement, at the start of the twentieth century, emerged at a time of social and economic uncertainty in Britain (Springhall, 1977). The concern for national efficiency coupled with the increasing public and press anxieties about the growth of 'hooliganism' and 'street gangs' among the working class youth (Humphries 1981) drove efforts to instill social conformity, to discipline and regulate young people's behaviour (Springhall, 1977: 16). The Boys Brigade (Est.1883), Boy Scouts (Est.1909) and the Girl Guides (Est.1910) were examples of some of the uniformed youth organisations that originated in connection with religious and charitable activity (Springhall, 1977; Gillis 1975). The emergence of these uniformed youth organisations, chart the recognition of informal regulation and governance of working class young people. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the work of the youth movement came to be formally recognised and led incrementally to the development of more ambiguous relationships between youth organisations and the government (Hendrick 1990).

Charles Russell, Chair of a Home Office Committee in 1908, recommended that 'juvenile organisation committees should be set up locally to coordinate and stimulate youth provision' (cited in Davies, 1999: 15). These were enforced in law by the 1918 and 1921 Education Acts which established, for the first time, a relationship between voluntary youth organisations and the state. Nonetheless, the impact of state involvement in the provision of youth work was limited owing to financial constraints, which continue to have ramifications for youth work to the present day (Davies, 1999: 15). The government's concern over national efficiency and the health of the nation played out consistently in the inter-war years and in particular at periods when young people seemed to pose a threat to social stability (Davies, 1986). The concern that periods of social upheaval - produced by war conditions - might lead to an increase in juvenile delinquency motivated the government to adopt a more interventionist role in youth provision.

On the 27th November 1939 the Board of Education issued a *Circular 1486*, to Local Education Authorities (Board of Education 1939), which marked the

beginning of the youth service in England and Wales and 'brought a service of youth into existence' (Davies, 1999: 7). The Circular 1486 gave 14 voluntary youth organisations official status including the power to nominate new local youth committees and formally recognised the emerging concept of youth work. The Circular stated that:

*The social and physical development of boys and girls between the ages of 14 and 20, who have ceased full-time education, has for long been neglected in this country. In spite of the efforts of local education authorities and voluntary organisations, provision has always fallen short of the need and today considerably less than half of these boys and girls belong to any organisation. In some parts of the country, clubs and other facilities for social and physical recreation are almost non-existent. War emphasises this defect in our social services; today the black-out, the strain of war and the disorganisation of family life have created conditions which constitute a serious menace to youth. The Government are determined to prevent the recurrence during this war of the social problem which arose during the last (Board of Education 1939).*

The Board of Education in 1939 became 'directly responsible for youth welfare' and youth organisations were regarded as an educational resource (Davies, 1999: 19). Funding was made available 'to help clubs hire premises, buy equipment and provide competent leaders' and by September 1940 this had resulted in the establishment of 1,700 new units, or clubs (Davies, 1999: 19). It was thought that 'universal social education' could only be achieved through experimental, extra institutional education projects that would reach 'unattached' young people who were perceived to be 'at risk' in a variety of ways (Fyvel 1961; Morse 1965). In this way, 'state resources had been made available mainly as a result of wartime pressures or the threat of war which had again converted the historic fear of youth into a moral panic' (Davies, 1999: 27). Some twenty years later, the Albemarle Report (1960), regarded as a watershed in the establishment of youth work (Davies, 1999; Davies, 1986; Smith, 1988), reported that the recent crime problem was 'very much a youth problem' (Ministry of Education, 1960: 17) and it was also viewed at the time as being a 'working class phenomenon' (Smith and Doyle, 2002). The recommendations of the report encouraged an increase in state spending due to a 'real decline in the range and extent of state resources for youth work during the 1950s' (Davies, 1999: 30). Since this time a universal state sponsored youth service, in particular youth clubs, have provided invaluable help and support to young people in England and Wales, 'in terms of the quality of peer relationships they can foster; the opportunity for informal, respectful relationships with adults; and the chance for participation and association' (Robertson 2000:74).

### **'Those who do not learn history are doomed to repeat it'**

In 2013, youth unemployment reached an all-time high in England and Wales (approximately 60 per cent of young people were unemployed in some European states (Burgen, 2013)). In addition, approximately £259 million was cut from youth service spending by councils and at least 35,000 hours of

outreach work by youth workers have been removed (UNISON 2014). Since 2012 councils have shut at least 350 youth centres and 41,000 youth service places for young people have been cut. Not only have these drastic cuts to youth service provision impacted upon young people lives, young people also bear the burden of other government reforms; abolition of means-tested student loans and the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) grants, and not being eligible for the National Living Wage until the age of 25 (Summers 2016). In a climate where young people (16-24) are nearly three times more likely to be unemployed than the rest of the population, the largest gap in more than 20 years (Boffey 2015) this is concerning to say the very least.

The impact of austerity measures is hitting young people hard, in particular in terms of their well-being and mental health. *The Lightning Review: Access to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (May 2016)* by the Children's Commissioner for England, Anne Longfield, reported that over a quarter of children and young people referred for mental health support are being turned away (Children's Commissioner 2016). Therefore, not only are young people experiencing the closure, reduction or threat of closure to youth centres and youth service provision in their locality, they are also without adequate available support to deal with their own well-being.

### **The governance of young people**

In March 2016 *The Telegraph* reported that McDonald's, a fast food outlet in in Stoke-On-Trent, had banned under 18 years olds from their premises unless they were accompanied by an adult 'in a bid to crackdown on antisocial behaviour' (Graham 2016). In the same week KFC followed suit with such places being labelled the 'youth clubs of 2016' (BBC 2016). This illustrates the reality of a large proportion of young people with no legitimate place to call their own.

Alongside this, Sections 34-42 of the Anti-Social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014 introduced new dispersal order powers to the police and designated Police Community Support Officers (PCSO) to deal with individuals engaging in anti-social behaviour, crime and disorder, not only when they have occurred or are occurring but when they are *likely* to occur and in any locality (CPS 2016). Amongst the additional powers there is no longer a requirement for the pre-designation of a 'dispersal zone' (CPS 2016). Dispersal orders combined with Criminal Behaviour Orders (CBOs), which replaced Anti-Social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs) in 2014, are two examples of intrusive attempts by the state to regulate behaviour in public space that are highly contested.

In addition, since 2014 Public Spaces Protection Orders (PSPOs) have provided local authorities with wide-ranging powers to regulate and criminalise activities in public spaces. Public Spaces Protection Orders (PSPOs), contained in the Anti-Social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014, allow local authorities to ban or restrict any activity which they judge has a 'detrimental effect on the quality of life of those in the locality' and are increasingly being used to target youth activities such as skateboarding, swimming, or even gathering in groups (Appleton 2015:4). To date 130 PSPOs have been issued, including against young people congregating in groups, (see Appleton 2015).

Whilst these figures are not in their thousands, measures such as these reinforce negative perceptions of youthful behaviour in public spaces which can have criminalising consequences (Crawford and Lister 2007). They reiterate and encourage messages of intolerance. In the current context, when the overall number of young people in the youth justice system is still continuing to reduce (Ministry of Justice 2016), one must ask why we still enforce and implement such measures – why do they still exist? As no other identifiable group in society would be subjected to this kind of discriminatory legislation (Stephen, 2009).

### **What it means to feel safe: young people's narratives**

I was fortunate and privileged to be able to conduct fieldwork with young people in two coastal resorts for one year. Two coastal resorts were deliberately selected and are referred to using the pseudonyms Sandton (a relatively prosperous coastal resort) and Rockford (a coastal resort beset by multiple forms of disadvantage). The research was concerned with how young people were governed and policed in their own locale. In particular, why young people's presence in public space becomes viewed as 'problematic' and the impact that this has on their lives. Importantly, I wanted to examine the wider 'harms' experienced and confronted by young people, which frequently lie outside current crime prevention paradigms, to understand from a young person's point of view, in a climate of perennial concern about young people and anti-social behaviour, how they conceptualised and experienced policing, crime, safety and security at the local level.

The research findings demonstrated that it was imperative to provide a safe place for young people. Young people needed safe places outside of their homes to 'hang out' 'socialise' and 'feel safe' with their peers. Throughout the fieldwork youth centres were a 'sanctuary' for young people. Not only did they offer informal education, a dominant feature of youth work (Smith 1988), and extra-curricular activities, they also provided three basic needs, food, safety and shelter. The young people also regularly commented that they attended the youth centre as an alternative to 'hanging around' on the streets:

*I always come here every day ...didn't want to start drinking and smoking. Wanted to avoid falling into that way of life' (Male 14 Rockford Interview).*

*People are friendly and there's stuff to do to stop me from getting in trouble and stuff on the streets' (Female 15 Sandton Interview).*

When discussing safety and security the youth organisations were identified as safe places for young people in both localities. The youth organisation was perceived as a place offering protection by the staff that worked there:

*Young person (YP): 'It's a safe place it's the youth organisation'*

*Researcher (R): 'Why?'*

*YP: 'Because you're here'*

R: 'Because there are other people here then?'

YP: 'Yeah the staff they look after you. Because they won't let you out of their sight unless you ask them... They won't, you have to ask them' (Female 13 and Male 14 photograph method narrative in Rockford).

Figures 1 and 2 represent part of the visual methods employed with young people during the fieldwork. The young people who participated in the photographic activity were asked to take photographs of certain words that I had given to them, for example a safe place. Figures 1 and 2 are photographs taken by the young people demonstrating what a safe place and a safe place with friends meant to them.

Figure 1: Photographic method – A safe place in Rockford

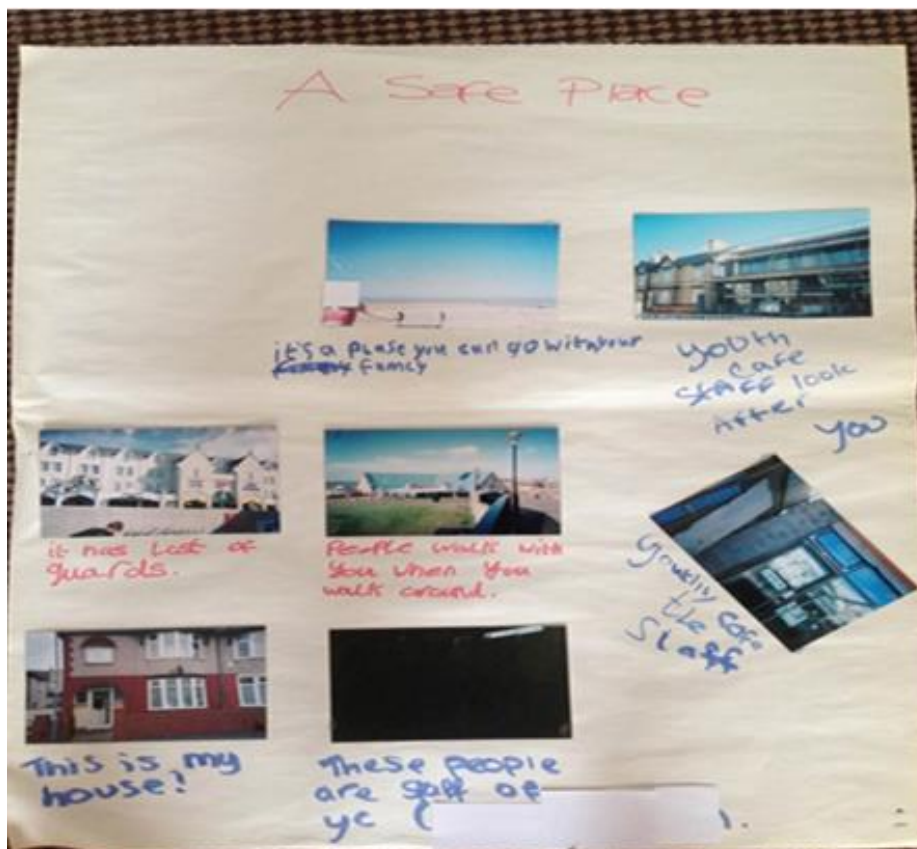




Figure 2: Photographic method – A safe place with friends in Rockford



Researcher (R): 'So why is it safe?'

YP: 'Because of the staff. Because no men or women can get in youth cafe, because no one can get inside like an adult or whatever' (Female 12 photographic activity narrative) (See figure 2).

The above narratives and photographic methods illustrated how important it was for the young people to have somewhere to go; to be safe, warm, fed and protected by adults. Research has also shown that young people from deprived areas have far higher rates of ill health, death and injury from accidents, both inside and outside the home (Hillman, et al 1990; Roberts, et al 1995; UNICEF 2001). Therefore, in areas such as Rockford, the youth organisation was of paramount importance to young people's well-being. However, since the completion of fieldwork in Rockford the youth organisation has now been closed, leaving no youth provision in the vicinity for the young people to attend. During fieldwork an older young person who attended the youth organisation illustrated how important this was:

*'I don't know where half the kids would go. Like I've seen like both ...I wasn't one of the kids that came in because I was starving all the time. I was quite lucky in that sense but the majority are starving. Rockford is full of people living in poverty like, not that they are like completely homeless got no money but what money they do get is not very much to live off really' (Female 17 Rockford Interview).*

In an already deprived and under resourced area this has left the young people feeling more marginalised and subsequently more vulnerable, particularly because the organisation was not only a place of safety, but it also provided a hot meal for the young people each night.

### **The youth centre as a 'sanctuary'**

The findings above provoked further critical thinking about the impact that provisions and youth services, in particular youth centres, have on young people's safety and well-being. The value in young people having 'somewhere to go, something to do and someone to talk to' is beyond doubt. As youth workers have feared if this is taken away then many 'young people [will be] left hanging about on street corners, rather than having youth centres where they can learn new skills and channel their energies into projects. The cuts disproportionately hurt those from poorer backgrounds' (Leftley, 2014:1). Through investing in young people, youth centres can aid safer communities for young people, and subsequently this can lead to safer communities for all members in that locality. By including young people within the community, of which they are often excluded, would encourage tolerance, belonging and collectiveness. To borrow the words from Robertson (2000:74) 'youth clubs have a unique role and one that should be valued and supported as they can make a big difference in the lives of many young people and their communities. Club based work can provide the warm, safe, friendly space for young people...' and years later this still remained true for these young people.

In the current uncertain economic climate young people's visibility in public space could inevitably become deemed 'problematic' once again. This could lead to further regulation and criminalisation of youthful behaviour in public space. In addition,

austerity measures are having serious negative impacts upon young people's health, well-being and social development (see Children's Commissioner 2016; Ayre 2016; McKee et al 2010). As Natasha Devon, the first Department for Education Mental Health Champion, declared before her role was terminated in May 2016 'this government and the coalition before them have engineered a social climate where it's really difficult for any young person to enjoy optimal mental health' (Ryan 2016). Providing a service for our young people combining educational and recreational elements, highlights the important role of youth work in young people's personal and social development (McKee et al 2010). This would help towards investing in young people's own well-being and providing them with a place of safety. As the Berkshire youth survey reported 'youth clubs are key to children's well-being' and children and young people who attend youth clubs will be happier and healthier than those who do not' (McCardle 2014).

### **Have we gone full circle?**

It can be argued therefore that the 'problem of youth' and 'juvenile delinquency' were constructed by means of social inquiry, employment legislation, the efforts of reformers and philanthropic organisations, and a liberal narrative of education, discipline and order (Humphries, 1981). The Industrial Revolution defined the spaces which young people could and could not legitimately occupy. The rescue and reformatory movements advancement throughout the early-mid nineteenth century, inevitably led to the gradual progression of state intervention into the lives of young people. The development of a universal youth service and the emergence of uniformed youth organisations, in the form of the Boy Scouts and the Girl Guides for example, reflected the informal regulation and governance of working class young people. The escalation of various police powers and legislation targeting young people from the mid nineteenth century also demonstrated the beginnings of the 'criminalisation' of young people that are very much in accord with the contemporary moment. As such, it becomes possible to see that 'youth and young people are much debated and highly contested elements of the social world' (Smith, 2011: 10), where young people's behaviour over the last two centuries has continually been 'singled out as symbolic of national moral decline' (Muncie, 2004: 52).

Consolidating austerity therefore, has raised a whole new set of research questions - the impact of the funding cuts upon the lives of young people are already having serious and damaging consequences on young people in the UK. Amidst a climate of cuts and high unemployment rates we have a deepening problem of a population of young people with no legitimate space, which is precisely the same situation that existed at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The reliance on policing and governing young people 'on the streets' continues to exist when many youth organisations have been closed and do not exist to provide alternative 'spaces of security' for young people. As discussed earlier, state intervention into the development of youth work would often appear persuasive in times of concern about the health, efficiency and morality of young people. Regardless of financial constraints, laws were enforced to provide state sponsored youth work. Local authority youth centres were established to provide 'universal social education'. However, over the decades when resources decreased from youth provision, this was said to result in a 'youth' crime problem. Given the current climate and decline in

financial resources it is possible to predict where we are heading, by not providing a 'universal social education' to young people today.

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## **About the author**

Dr Sarah Tickle is a lecturer in the Department of Criminology at Liverpool John Moores University. In 2015 she was awarded a PhD for a thesis on the ways in which young people conceptualised and experienced policy, safety, security and harm in two coastal resorts. Sarah completed her PhD at the University of Liverpool with funding from the ESRC and was also awarded the prestigious Duncan Norman Research Scholarship. She is a member of the Centre for the Study of Crime, Criminalisation and Social Exclusion (CCSE) at LJMU. Sarah is currently publishing outputs from her PhD research and has forthcoming publications in 2016.