MOVING TARGETS:

THE PRACTICE AND EVALUATION OF STREET OUTREACH FOR AT-RISK YOUTHS IN SINGAPORE

By

Ng Kok Hoe
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INSIGHT SERIES

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FOREWORD

In 2010, when the Central Youth Guidance Office was set up, it got down to the task of identifying the gaps of support services for Youth At Risk (YAR). Through literature reviews and consultation with stakeholders, there was a common observation that YARs are not aware of services and/or do not like to seek help from agencies. Youth agencies also revealed that they lacked resources to provide effective and targeted outreach within the community. We know that if we want to reach out to YARs with intention and purpose, youth workers need to go to where YARs hangout, i.e. the void decks, the parks, basketball courts and soccer fields. Youth GO! was thus conceptualised.

With no local evidence of what works for street outreach in Singapore, best practices on overseas models were studied and adapted. We tapped on the experience and wisdom of practitioners from Hong Kong to train our local teams. The GO! teams learnt how to observe, assess and engage our youths on the streets. They also customised their intervention to be youth-centric and holistic within the Singapore context. With Youth GO! progressively establishing its presence on the ground, I am confident that street outreach will gain greater recognition as a professional strategy to engage youths.

My thanks and appreciation go to Dr Ng Kok Hoe, and the Youth GO! teams who have been instrumental in shaping street outreach work in Singapore. The teams’ efforts in documenting the various processes of Youth GO! contribute to the local literature on street outreach work. I hope that practitioners, students, and teachers will find this monograph useful and meaningful in their work with our youths of today and tomorrow.

Nancy Ng
Director, Central Youth Guidance Office
Ministry of Social and Family Development
Introduction
INTRODUCTION

In 2012, the Central Youth Guidance Office (CYGO), an inter-ministry unit set up to look into the needs of at-risk youths in Singapore, launched the pilot for a street outreach programme known as the Youth GO! Programme (YGP). This programme targets youths aged 12 to 21 years old and aims to promote better social engagement, such as school or work participation, and help at-risk youths to stay away from crime. The programme involved workers conducting street rounds on foot to recruit clients, in the tradition of street outreach programmes in other countries, as well as more intensive casework services also to be delivered in the natural street settings of these youths. The YGP was funded by CYGO and operated by two voluntary welfare organisations, each responsible for a district as defined by the Community Development Council boundaries. These are fairly large areas, each covering one-fifth of Singapore. The pilot was to be completed in two years, during which an evaluation exercise would closely track the processes, service outputs, and potential outcomes of the YGP. This author was responsible for the evaluation throughout the pilot. While commissioned by CYGO, the evaluation remained independent from both the funders as well as the service providers.

The evaluation results have been presented in a series of reports to CYGO (see Ng, 2014). This document looks at a different aspect of the YGP experience. Focusing on the two years between 2012 and 2014, it sets out the context and thinking behind the service model, the implementation challenges faced by the two outreach teams and their responses, and the difficulties encountered in the course of the evaluation. Owing to the fluid nature of outreach practice and the unpredictability of a programme during the pilot phase, the practice and evaluation of the YGP was in many ways akin to tracking moving targets. The outreach workers had to locate, keep up with, and give support to groups of youths who were constantly on the move within the neighbourhood and did not see themselves as clients at the outset. Evaluation, on the other hand, normally depends on precise definitions, standardised measurements, and data of consistent and high quality. But in this case, the evaluation concepts turned out to be very slippery once applied on the ground, and had to be continually refined and adjusted. This document provides a glimpse of these experiences behind the scenes, so to speak, in the hope that it may be useful to practitioners looking to introduce a street outreach programme; researchers who are interested in the interaction of evaluation design with fine operational aspects of service delivery; as well as service planners thinking about that challenging, initial period in the life cycle of a new social intervention.
The document is organised according to three perspectives – the service model, the practice, and the evaluation of the YGP. The next section introduces the basic features and diversity of street outreach, and the street context for outreach programmes in other countries and in Singapore, before explaining the YGP service model in detail. Section 3 turns to practice issues. It first describes the practice model that guided the outreach teams in their work. It then identifies some of the dilemmas the teams faced from having to deliver purposeful, professional intervention using flexible and creative strategies in an unstructured setting. Outreach practice was characterised by considerable anxiety among the workers at the beginning. But through a very explicit commitment to learning, the teams took significant strides towards developing local knowhow. Section 4 looks at the evaluation experience. It recounts the various evaluation options that were considered before the pilot and outlines the actual evaluation plan that was later implemented. Most of the difficulty in evaluation arose from the incompatibility between pre-defined categories of intervention strategy and client type, and the fluidity of the YGP in practice. This section also briefly summarises the evaluation findings. Finally the conclusion highlights the significance of the YGP in the context of youth services in Singapore, outlines developments since the end of the pilot, and argues for greater commitment towards community social intervention in general and street outreach as a way to help at-risk youths in Singapore.
What is street outreach?

Street outreach refers to services that locate street-involved youths within their environment and connect them to the interventions they require, so as to reduce harmful behaviours and promote reintegration (Connolly & Joly, 2012; Coren et al., 2013; Ferguson, Wu, Dyrness, & Spruijt-Metz, 2007). Most practitioners identify outreach by the way it encounters youths in their natural settings and promotes changes through a warm, trusting relationship. Common strategies include bringing prevention messages to the street and recruiting clients into services such as shelters, food banks, drug treatment centres, and health programmes, which may but do not always belong to the same parent organisation as the outreach service (Arnold & Rotheram-Borus, 2009). Most outreach services aim for outcomes such as service participation, access to education and employment, improvements in mental health and self-esteem, reduction of harmful behaviours related to substances and sexual activity, and enhanced family functioning.

Apart from these broad similarities, the specific workings of outreach services are extremely diverse. The service may be delivered on foot or from mobile teams that drive around in vans. Drop-in centres or other “store fronts” set up in locations where youths are known to gather are also regarded as a form of outreach. Mobile modes of outreach normally focus on giving information and providing supplies such as food, medicines, and condoms, whereas fixed centres are able to offer a fuller range of services including health testing, counselling, job skills training, and other therapeutic programmes (Slesnick & Kang, 2008). Outreach may be delivered by professionals, associate professionals, volunteers, or peers. Activities and engagement techniques range from conventional approaches such as counselling and group work to more creative strategies such as street theatre, photography, and yoga. A review of 11 programmes for homeless youths in Los Angeles reported 15 different services and almost 50 programme activities (Ferguson et al., 2007).

Specific programme choices reflect the issues targeted by outreach – such as housing, drug use, violence, and HIV infection – as well as the underlying theoretical model. For instance, outreach for homeless youths may be a way to provide information and recruit clients into an agency providing services to meet immediate physical needs, such as emergency shelter, as well as long term interventions, such as counselling, case management, and personal development (Heinze & Jozefowicz-Simbeni, 2009; Slesnick & Kang, 2008). Programmes attached to outreach services are often based on client-centred, strengths, or youth development perspectives (Connolly & Joly, 2012). They may also adopt social learning and behavioural theories (Arnold & Rotheram-Borus, 2009). Depending on how the presenting issues are conceptually framed, intervention strategies may focus on individual behaviour and problem-solving skills, family engagement and parental support, or the youth’s social network and access to services.
Traditionally street outreach serves homeless young people. The target population is also described as street-involved, street-connected, or detached, because many of these youths do not identify themselves as homeless or live on the streets all the time (Connolly & Joly, 2012). Instead, they move between various temporary and inadequate sleeping arrangements such as shelters, friends’ homes, neglected buildings, and open, public spaces (Heinze & Jozefowicz-Simbeni, 2009). Their situations may be due to social estrangement from their families, the lack of alternative sources of social support, and an inability to achieve economic stability and independence. The profile of street youth populations may also reflect local variations. One study, for example, has documented how the homeless youth population in West Greenwich Village of New York City consists mainly of gay youths who have become socially isolated because of problems related to their sexual identity (Gibson, 2011). Once on the streets, youths are exposed to many serious risks (Arnold & Rotheram-Borus, 2009; Connolly & Joly, 2012; Ferguson & Xie, 2008; Gibson, 2011; Heinze & Jozefowicz-Simbeni, 2009; Slesnick & Kang, 2008). The lack of a safe and stable living environment is associated with negative outcomes such as dropping out of school, unemployment, mental health problems including depression and suicide, substance abuse, malnutrition, and respiratory illness. In order to meet subsistence needs, street youths may be drawn into the street economy and become involved with theft, drug distribution, violent or gang-related crime, and prostitution or survival sex in exchange for money, shelter, and other basic material goods. Sharing needles when using drugs and risky sexual behaviours increase their risks of contracting HIV and other sexually transmitted infections, and the chances of unwanted pregnancies for young women.

This population can be hard to reach due to their unpredictable living arrangements, loose attachment to formal institutions, and distrust of authority and organised social services. Studies have found that homeless youths underutilise services because of concerns about safety in the shelter environment, rigid rules and programming, and the quality of care (Heinze & Jozefowicz-Simbeni, 2009). The flexibility of street outreach is advantageous for targeting these youths. But even so, there are difficulties. Life on the street for these youths entails negotiation and conflict with the police, private security agents, and the community at large. As the street youth population grows in a locality, residents and local businesses may worry about antisocial behaviour, crime, and the neighbourhood being “taken over” (Gibson, 2011). In response, the police may be asked to step up patrols, conduct more frequent identity checks, and move young people on if they are found on street corners or sleeping in public spaces. This has the effect of driving vulnerable, homeless, youths into ever more invisible and unstable living arrangements to avoid encounters with law enforcement, and making it more difficult for outreach teams to locate them.

Although much less is known about youth street culture in Singapore, youth homelessness, in the way it is described in the American literature, has not been documented here. Official school dropout rates are very low in Singapore, at less than 1% of each cohort in the past five years (Daipi, 2014), although these may not reveal the full extent of absenteeism and truancy. Relative to nearby Hong Kong, juvenile crime levels in Singapore have been low (Figure 1). Between 2004 and 2013, juvenile arrests per 100,000 persons in the relevant age group
decreased from 260 to 120 in Singapore. The number of arrests in Hong Kong also fell during this period but was on the whole higher. This is against the backdrop of an exceptionally safe city by international standards. Total crime in Singapore has been low and on a downward trend in recent years (Table 1). In 2012, Singapore registered fewer than 600 crimes per 100,000 population, compared to about 1,000 in Hong Kong, 1,400 in Tokyo, 2,400 in New York, and more than 10,000 in Paris.

Figure 1: Number of juvenile arrests per 100,000 persons in the relevant age group

![Graph showing the number of juvenile arrests per 100,000 persons in Hong Kong and Singapore from 2004 to 2013. The graph shows a decrease in arrests in both cities over the period.]


Table 1. Total crime per 100,000 population

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2008</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2011</th>
<th>2012</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Singapore</td>
<td>684</td>
<td>665</td>
<td>653</td>
<td>608</td>
<td>584</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hong Kong</td>
<td>1,125</td>
<td>1,113</td>
<td>1,081</td>
<td>1,074</td>
<td>1,061</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tokyo</td>
<td>1,814</td>
<td>1,750</td>
<td>1,640</td>
<td>1,414</td>
<td>1,387</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York</td>
<td>2,378</td>
<td>2,242</td>
<td>2,257</td>
<td>2,334</td>
<td>2,361</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toronto</td>
<td>6,749</td>
<td>6,500</td>
<td>5,902</td>
<td>5,685</td>
<td>5,271</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paris</td>
<td>10,973</td>
<td>10,668</td>
<td>10,847</td>
<td>11,150</td>
<td>10,455</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>London</td>
<td>11,300</td>
<td>10,900</td>
<td>10,700</td>
<td>10,300</td>
<td>9,500</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Hong Kong Police Force (various years)
But other evidence suggests that some youths in Singapore lead harmful lifestyles and experience various forms of social instability. A local study reports that about 600 youths run away from home every year (Khong, 2009), mainly to avoid conflict with parents. Compared to their peers who do not run away, these youths come from families with lower incomes and smaller housing types. They are also more likely to perform more poorly in school. These suggest that unstable living arrangements may be related to other more deep-seated social issues. Two serious incidents of violence in 2010 involving youths with gang connections triggered an outpouring of public concern (Toh, 2010; Toh & Chow, 2010). The police responded with a crackdown on gangs, while local residents and community groups organised school talks, family events, and citizen patrols (Au Yong, 2010; Ong, 2010). While these incidents do not happen regularly, they reminded the public that youth violence as a social issue has the potential to flare up. From a service planning perspective, street outreach fills a service gap because most of the existing programmes for at-risk youths are delivered through schools, including programmes targeting young people who may not attend school regularly (Lim & Ng, 2012). Other programmes serve youths who have already gotten into trouble with the law. Unlike these options, street outreach can target a broader profile of risk, is not constrained by any particular delivery channel, and has the flexibility to reach pockets of the at-risk youth population that will not otherwise seek help.

**The YGP service model**

During the conceptualisation of the YGP, it was envisaged that street outreach for at-risk youths in Singapore would have several distinctive features. As with most outreach services, it would focus on reducing harmful behaviours and promoting social engagement. But instead of targeting homelessness as in the American context, the YGP would adopt risk markers such as being out of school; not engaging in studies, training, or work; and antisocial or offending behaviour. Accordingly, the objectives are to encourage youths to be engaged in education or employment, to help them stay away from crime, and to support their personal development such as in problem-solving and managing relationships. The YGP service model would be distinguished from other social interventions for youths in a number of ways. Compared to conventional case management services, the YGP requires the workers to recruit clients instead of receive referrals, and does not normally involve scheduled sessions or operate in an agency setting. The YGP differs from drop-in centres in that clients are targeted rather than self-selected and in terms of setting. Due to its loose form, youth befriending and mentoring may appear most similar to street outreach. But the YGP has more specific objectives related to risks and an explicit behavioural change agenda. These differences are summarised in Table 2.
Table 2. Youth outreach as a distinct service model

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Youth outreach</th>
<th>Case management</th>
<th>Drop-in centre</th>
<th>Befriending and mentoring</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Client selection</strong></td>
<td>Targeting by outreach workers</td>
<td>Varied referral channels</td>
<td>Self-selected clients</td>
<td>Varied referral channels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Service objectives</strong></td>
<td>Focused, e.g. behavioural prevention, school/ work engagement</td>
<td>Focused, e.g. to develop resilience, mobilise resources</td>
<td>Broad, e.g. to provide safe space for social activities</td>
<td>Broad, e.g. to build life skills and confidence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Service setting</strong></td>
<td>Non-agency settings with community integration</td>
<td>Agency-based, with community links</td>
<td>Agency-based</td>
<td>Non-agency settings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Service model</strong></td>
<td>Explicit, flexible, and sustained intervention by professionals through in situ encounters</td>
<td>Planned intervention at both client and system levels by professionals through scheduled sessions</td>
<td>Unstructured leisure activities or recreational classes that may be supervised by professionals</td>
<td>Support, guidance, and advice by peers or other adults through loosely structured encounters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Formal service contract and termination</strong></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: These are stylised models based on common examples. Individual services may present variations.

Sources: Own descriptions based on Skogan, Hartnett, Bump, & Dubois (2008); NASW (2013); Singapore Children’s Society (2011); and National Mentoring Workgroup (2008).

The YGP also borrowed from Hong Kong’s experience. Like Singapore, Hong Kong has a majority Chinese population living in a dense, urban environment. Although it is also a generally safe city with low levels of crime (as mentioned above), it has a long tradition of using street outreach to serve youths facing risks related to dropping out of school, running away from home, offending, drug use, and gang issues. Started in 1979, Hong Kong’s outreach social work service is fully funded by the government and delivered by NGOs (Kwok & Lo, 2014). In 2013, there were 16 teams made up of almost 180 workers covering

1 Street outreach is delivered by many different providers in Hong Hong. See one example at http://www.hkcs.org/gcb/ylyot/ylyot-e.html.
the day shift from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m., and another 18 teams of 80 persons working the night shift from 10 p.m. to 6 a.m. In their service model, risk refers both to delinquency as well as social disengagement. The objectives are to address specific personal and behavioural issues among youths aged between 6 and 24, promote social integration through education or work, and support personal development in a broader sense. The outreach workers operate in different places frequented by young people, such as basketball courts, gaming centres, billiard centres, karaoke lounges, shopping malls, fast-food outlets, parks, playgrounds, housing estates, and street corners. The engagement and intervention strategies include recreational activities, group work, and individual casework. In addition, the night outreach teams also provide crisis intervention and emergency shelter services. Several of these features have since been incorporated into the YGP service model.

Upon implementation, the YGP service model consisted of three main strategies.

- **The first is outreach**, which refers here to the team visiting places in residential neighbourhoods where young people gather, to make contact with and identify youths who may be at risk. The aim is to eventually develop a working relationship with these youths. During the course of the pilot, the workers found that this strategy in fact consists of two activities – conducting street rounds to reach and recruit at-risk youths, and engaging groups of youths already familiar with the workers in order to build a working relationship. This is discussed in more detail in the sections to follow.

- **The second is casework and intervention**, which involves a closer working relationship between the outreach workers and young people who face specific issues related to school, risky behaviours, or other social and emotional problems. Unlike outreach programmes in other places that aim primarily to bring youths into agency-based services, the YGP was prepared to provide casework services in two ways – either on the street or, for youths who are open to a more formal working relationship, within the agency. The underlying change pathway was as such: Casework would enhance the youths’ perception of risk, show them alternatives to harmful lifestyles, develop a commitment to change, and eventually translate into outcomes such as positive social engagement.

- **Thirdly, the team is responsible for service coordination**, or reaching out to other organisations in the community that serve or come into contact with young people, including the police, GROs, schools, and other social service providers. This is to strengthen the network of community services for young people as a whole and help to prevent individuals from falling through the cracks. Over time, however, this element became less important due to operational challenges, which will be discussed in the next section.

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2 The term “outreach” may refer to the activity of conducting street rounds to locate and recruit clients, or to larger programmes of which such activities form a component. In this paper, “outreach” is used in the latter sense to refer to the YGP as a whole, except when mentioned in connection with the service model as stipulated by CYGO.
Practice
Practice model and implementation

The service model provided funding for a team leader, who must be a senior accredited social worker, and five registered social workers. But in practice the two teams had different staff complements of about eight members each. Both teams employed a mix of social workers, counsellors, social work associates, and youth workers. The social workers and counsellors focused on therapeutic engagement and case management, while the former were also responsible for providing clinical supervision to other team members. The associates and youth workers were mainly responsible for the earlier stages of work, such as observation, initial contact, and positive engagement. All team members participated in street rounds. These are conducted at different times as the service model allows some flexibility in this regard. Over time, the teams have settled on a pattern of afternoon rounds earlier in the week, and evening and night rounds on Thursdays and Fridays. From experience, they found that there are very few youths in the neighbourhood in the morning due to school hours and past midnight due to police patrols.

The outreach teams rely on a five-stage practice model to guide their work, which closely parallels the YGP service model described in the previous section.3

- The first of these is observation, to locate youths in the neighbourhood, learn how they use and share public spaces with other members of the community, and assess possible risks and needs.

- The second is initial contact, to befriend and build rapport with the youths, pass on information about the YGP, understand their needs and interests, and set up “return visits” where possible.

- Third, the outreach teams then move on to positive engagement, when they organise social activities for the youths, normally as groups, to replace risk-taking behaviours and build mutual trust. These activities also provide opportunities to assess group interactions and challenge attitudes, such as towards school or smoking.

- The fourth stage, therapeutic engagement, depends on the rapport developed through earlier stages. It is targeted at youths with explicit risks who acknowledge and are willing to set goals and address these issues. For some cases, this stage is also a transition to a more formal working relationship with a service contract.

- The final stage is termination, which happens when the intervention goals are met, such as greater stability in school, starting work, or better relationships with the family. Termination may also occur when the therapeutic engagement breaks down.

3 Details on practices are based on the author’s site visits, and interviews and other discussions with the outreach workers over the course of the pilot. The author also drew from a documentation of practices done by Emily Lim, a researcher from one of the outreach teams.
The earlier stages are unique to outreach work. It is a common but easily overlooked experience in street outreach work that the first challenge is to locate and identify potential clients (Gibson, 2011). Even before observation takes place, the outreach workers normally have to spend many hours on the street. The team leaders shared that conducting street rounds on foot for four to six hours at a stretch, combined with night shifts in the early part of the pilot, was extremely taxing and affected some of the workers’ health. It was particularly discouraging on days when the actual contact time with youths took up just a small proportion of total hours on the street and it felt like the physical effort did not translate into programme impact. The wide service boundaries of the YGP meant that it took some time for the workers to pick up on when and where the youths preferred to gather and the type of activities they engaged in. There is also a limit to how far these can be learnt even by the most experienced outreach workers, as the youths’ socialisation may not follow regular patterns.

Potential clients do not always show outward signs of risk or identify themselves as needing help (Gibson, 2011). Once the workers have found and begun initial contact with the youths, they have to make use of the brief interactions to make an initial assessment as to who may need intervention. The workers therefore combine casual chat with careful observation of the youths’ dressing, language, behaviour, and surroundings.

The third stage, positive engagement, marks an important point of transition from a social to a helping relationship between the workers and the youths. Managing the dynamics within groups of youths they meet on the street and transforming the encounters into a platform for unstructured group work demanded skill and experience. The workers devoted considerable time to understanding how each group worked – who was the natural leader in the group, who normally provided information, who organised activities, how the members of the group interacted, and how they handled disagreements. With each group, the workers initially allowed the youths to take the lead, then gradually stepped up their influence over the relationship by initiating activities tailored to the youths’ interests. These activities allowed the workers to begin separating youths with different levels of risk and impose rules regarding behaviour such as smoking. The entire process depended on accurate judgments about timing, strategy, and their rapport with the group.

Professional but flexible

The distinctiveness of intervention in a street setting can best be appreciated by comparison with conventional agency-based services. An agency setting provides a number of advantages that support intervention. Persons who step into an agency identify themselves as clients, which immediately helps to set the boundaries of engagement and establish a basis for the social worker-client relationship. Clients who seek help at an agency come prepared with some understanding of their own needs and purpose for speaking to the social worker, even if this may vary depending on whether they are voluntary clients and may also change during the course of intervention. If the client was referred by another service provider or organisation, the social worker would have some information on the client before the first meeting. Even without this, agency intake procedures provide a legitimate opportunity for systematically gathering information from clients about their background and presenting issues. Not least of all, those physical elements that may be taken for granted – such as agency premises and signage, comfortable counselling rooms, and the staff’s office attire – help to signify and impart a sense of professionalism.
In contrast, street outreach is stripped of most of the scaffold of professional social intervention. It is fundamentally unstructured and always, initially, involuntary. Youths that the workers approach do not regard themselves as clients. They are unlikely to have thought about how social intervention might be beneficial to them and have no expectations of the outreach workers at the outset. Given that outreach on this scale is new in Singapore, youths may not understand the workers’ intentions and methods. The outreach team have no more information on individual youths than what they can observe, even if they have general knowledge about the youth population in the area. Initial contact, engagement, and intervention all take place in the youths’ natural meeting places, which can sometimes be unconducive for focused one-to-one conversation. All these factors are stacked against the establishment of clear professional roles and worker-client boundaries. They also explain why outreach requires a wide range and high standard of professional technique. The outreach workers need to be exceptionally skilful at combining observation, listening, careful questioning, and well-paced engagement in order to gather information, recognise possible risks, build rapport with potential clients, and eventually progress to a working relationship with specific individuals. On the other hand, working in a natural setting is critical to the effectiveness of the service (Connolly & Joly, 2012). It reveals the youths’ peer networks to the outreach workers, more so than any formal intake procedure can. That the workers do not appear to represent adult authority or formal agency-based social services can also help to build trust. The challenge is therefore not to project a standard image of professionalism in spite of the unstructured nature of outreach, but to make use of the informal intervention setting to play the various roles of respectful observer, befriender, and professional helper at appropriate points.

While flexible strategies may aid intervention, they can also prevent community gatekeepers, other organisations serving young people, and even programme developers from fully appreciating the purpose and complexity of street outreach (Arnold & Rotheram-Borus, 2009). For instance, in an early discussion on the concept of the YGP, a community leader suggested that the programme, not unlike mentoring, could be implemented by grassroots volunteers and retired school teachers instead of professional social workers, since the youths merely required reminding about the importance of education. Experience from the pilot showed that organisations that work with youths in the community, such as schools and other social service providers, were also uncertain about the role of street outreach. As a result, while the outreach teams held meetings with many of these community partners to establish referral protocols in the first two years, this never became an important source of cases for the YGP. Referrals were not forthcoming even from government agencies. Some of the other elements of service coordination set out in the original service model, such as case conferencing, also never fully materialised.
Anxiety and resistance

Practice experience from Hong Kong suggests that working with at-risk youths through street outreach involves various forms of what is sometimes referred to as client resistance (Chui & Ho, 2006). It is not unusual for outreach workers to encounter rejection. Some youths may explicitly avoid outreach workers. Others, even after initial contact, may refuse to engage the workers, withhold information, openly challenge them, or resist change. Young people may also be cautious towards adults and social services due to negative experiences. They may assume and resent that they have been targeted as social deviants, and regard the outreach workers as representing interests other than their own, such as law enforcement, the school, or the community. In the case of Singapore, youths often suspect that the outreach workers are police or Health Sciences Authority (HSA) officers responding to noise disturbance or underage smoking complaints. The workers have noticed that many youths hurriedly tuck away cigarette packs when they see the outreach team approaching. It takes significant time to establish a firm connection with these youths.

Resistance may act in both directions (Chui & Ho, 2006). The outreach workers shared that their preconceptions of “street youths” at the start of the pilot contributed to a psychological hurdle in their outreach work. This was especially so as none of the workers had previously used outreach as a primary strategy to work with young people even though some of them came from a youth work background. The anxiety about possible risks to their personal safety was so real that one of the teams provided training in self-defence techniques for the staff in preparation for outreach. Once the pilot was launched, making the initial approach to groups of youths on the street proved to be very daunting. The workers worried whether the youths would be willing to talk to them, or whether they would be suspicious and hostile.

To address these concerns and support the development of the workers’ practice skills, CYGO arranged for clinical supervision by an experienced street outreach practitioner from Hong Kong for the two outreach teams. This was a huge boost, with one of the team leaders describing the experience as “eye-opening”. Over the two years, the supervisor visited each team several times, spending a few days each time accompanying the team on street rounds, demonstrating observation techniques, discussing initial approach strategies, teaching communication techniques, and debriefing the outreach workers on their attempts to engage the youths. One team member recalled the disconcerting experience of managing only a brief conversation with a group of youths, returning to the supervisor who was watching nearby for a debrief session, and then being dispatched to engage the same youths a second time.
Developing local knowhow

While clinical supervision from an expert foreign practitioner was critical to building up the outreach teams’ engagement skills, there are limits to the applicability of outreach strategies borrowed from other countries due to cultural differences. Singapore is more socially diverse than Hong Kong and service data from the pilot suggest that ethnicity matters to youth group dynamics (Ng, 2014). In the first two years of the YGP, around half of all the youths observed by the teams during outreach were Malay, while slightly less than half were Chinese, and 5% Indian. The over-representation of Malay – and male – youths indicates that not all young people take to socialising in public spaces in the same way. Ethnicity may also influence the way youths form informal social groups. Around 80% of the groups the teams observed were ethnically homogeneous, while only a fifth included members of more than one ethnicity. All-Malay groups were larger than all-Chinese groups, while all-Indian groups were the smallest. The outreach workers have further observed that Malay youths tended to be more welcoming to them, whereas Chinese youths seemed more guarded and took longer to show trust. All these point to the importance of culturally effective practice and local knowledge.

On the other hand, given Hong Kong’s more open and contested political system since the 1990s, social workers and outreach workers there have had greater exposure to collective action and policy campaigning (Ngai, 2007). This is sometimes reflected in components of their outreach work that resemble community youth work, such as creating public awareness of youth issues, lobbying for policy change, and training youths to lead social action over issues such as neighbourhood amenities, education policy, and policing. These aspects of outreach work in Hong Kong do not seem applicable to Singapore at the moment. At the same time, compared to Singapore, outreach workers in Hong Kong may be more alert to the critical perspective of their work, which stresses a conflict between the goal of delinquency prevention that implicates outreach workers as agents of social control to regulate at-risk youths, versus core social work values which demand that outreach workers respect individual dignity, uphold social diversity, and challenge the social injustice faced by these youths. It was therefore important for the YGP teams to develop practice strategies that are indigenous to Singapore’s social context.

Throughout the pilot, learning itself became a core component of outreach practice. Given the lack of established local precedents in outreach work, much of the learning consisted of reflecting on experiences on the ground and drawing lessons. The teams conducted debriefing after every street round, held regular sharing sessions between sub-teams once the main team split into smaller groups to cover more ground, and tried to codify their learning into practice principles. As noted in Hong Kong’s experience, operating and learning in this team approach can enable outreach workers to develop their practice model, promote a mutually supportive work environment, and help newer team members to get up to speed quickly (Chui & Ho, 2006). Along the way, the two teams made many discoveries and tested several innovations. For example, they:
• Sharpened the operational differentiation between street contacts, known youths, street cases, and agency cases. This is discussed in the next section.

• Came up with simple mnemonics to aid observation during street rounds, i.e. A-B-C-D-E, which refers to the youths’ appearance, behaviour, conversation, distribution (in terms of physical positions and social hierarchy), and environment

• Learnt to recognise which youths are more likely to be interested to talk to them when approached, and when it is appropriate to introduce the team as social workers, talk about the YGP, or ask for information about other youths in the area

• Became more skilful at deploying team members to engage large groups of youths, introducing engagement tools such as card games, drawing the attention of less interested members within a group, and finding useful working spots which may not be the same as engagement spots

• Kept records of youths’ profile, activities, needs, and previous discussions with workers in a way that ensured the continuity of engagement even if a group of youths encounter different workers on separate occasions

• Came to understand how to pace their engagement with the youths, from observing to joining in and eventually asserting their roles as helpers

• Experimented with and found success with a membership system as a way to reach out to the youths’ family, whereby they requested to meet the parents so as to obtain consent for the youths to take part in future activities as members
EVALUATION

Outreach evaluation options

There are several options for evaluating the effectiveness of street outreach. The first is the randomised controlled trial (RCT). RCTs are commonly regarded as the most robust design but they require a range of programme conditions that are not possible to achieve for many street outreach services. As a result, it is often an impractical option. The basic approach involves randomly assigning a group of participants to either a treatment group that receives the intervention under evaluation, or a control group that receives no intervention (or sometimes a basic or default intervention). The outcomes for the two groups are then compared before and after intervention. Random assignment is critical to this approach because it evens out any other differences unrelated to the intervention between the treatment and control groups which may bias the outcomes under study.

One example of a RCT is Slesnick and Kang’s (2008) evaluation of a cognitive-behavioural treatment programme for HIV prevention among homeless youths. The researchers recruited participants from among users of a drop-in centre. They administered diagnostic tests based on the DSM-IV to screen the participants, collected other personal information to ascertain eligibility, assigned individuals to different treatment groups, and finally implemented a battery of standardised tests at three time points to assess changes due to the intervention. The treatment itself was based on tested programmes with clear, tightly scripted protocols. The study illustrates the extent of control over programme conditions that is required for a RCT. In order to implement random assignment, the pool of potential participants must first be clearly identified and accessible to the evaluation exercise. Second, the researchers must be able to control who among this group of participants will receive treatment. Third, the treatment protocol must be clearly specified, consistently executed, and reach completion for all members of the treatment group, notwithstanding some attrition. Finally, the participants must be available and willing to contribute data on profile and outcome measures, whether these are part of administrative data collection or are expressly gathered for evaluation. These conditions mean that outreach programmes that are more structured (e.g. with a fixed number of sessions) and are delivered in an agency setting (e.g. shelter or drop-in centre) are normally more suited to RCT evaluations. More flexible outreach approaches pose serious challenges to this type of evaluation (Ferguson et al., 2007). In fact, in a systemic review of interventions for street-connected children and young people across the international literature, Coren and colleagues (2013) identified just eleven studies that implemented RCT or comparable research designs.

Take the YGP for example. At the first point of contact on the streets, outreach workers do not know which youths are potential clients. The mere identification of possible targets for intervention may take considerable time and skill. Even when they have been identified, youths do not normally agree to receive services without first going through a long engagement process for the workers to assess needs and for both parties to build trust. The dynamic nature of this process means that engagement blends into intervention in such a way that, in many instances, it is not possible to define the exact starting point of treatment. Engaging youths on the street often requires the outreach teams to attempt a range of different strategies and activities, a
process that combines elements of experience and experimentation. There is no standardised intervention protocol which can be consistently applied to all youths. Furthermore, from week to week, the outreach workers may not be certain if the youths will gather in the same place or show up for a pre-arranged meeting. Programme attrition is therefore a serious risk and tracking youths down for repeated evaluation measurement often very difficult. Finally, even the youths who develop a working relationship with the outreach teams do not go through an intake process during which their information can be systematically gathered. The street setting is often not conducive for collecting detailed personal data or administering comprehensive questionnaires on programme outcomes. These features ruled out the use of RCT to evaluate the YGP.

A second approach is community surveys with local youths, whether they have been in contact with the outreach service or not. This generates information on presence – whether the youths in the area have heard of the service and their impressions of outreach workers; reach – whether the service has recruited youths of the target profile; and programme impact – albeit based on one-off self-report from service users. One such study is an evaluation of a youth outreach service in Massachusetts, where the researchers used vouchers to encourage youths to recruit their peers to participate in a survey that asked questions about their demographic profile, educational and employment status, past arrests, gang involvement, homelessness, service needs, knowledge of the outreach service, and perceptions of the outreach workers (Pollack, Frattaroli, Whitehill, & Strother, 2011). An alternative is to implement a survey with service users only (see Chui, 2001, and Heinze & Jozefowicz-Simbeni, 2009), but this constrains the type of questions the study can answer. In any case, any surveys involving outreach clients will encounter the same challenges to data collection as with RCT evaluations. For the YGP, a community survey was ruled out as an option due to cost concerns.

A third option is to detect changes in general levels of crime in the area covered by outreach, or of some other behaviour that the service aims to reduce. This was used, for example, in an evaluation of a violence prevention programme in Chicago known as CeaseFire (Skogan et al., 2008). The programme targeted small numbers of street youths and gang members known to be at risk of involvement in shooting incidents and intervened by mediating conflict and stopping retaliatory attacks. Part of the evaluation monitored fluctuations in the level of gun crime in the specific areas where the programme operated, and compared them to matched neighbourhoods where the programme was not available. There are several issues with implementing this approach for the YGP evaluation. To begin with, crime and school dropout data for small geographical units are not available from the respective government agencies. Even if they were, trends may be difficult to detect given how low the national levels of juvenile crime and dropping out already are. At higher levels of geographical analysis, such as based on the five Community Development Council districts in Singapore, the service intensity of the YGP is not sufficient to justify attributing any changes to intervention. After all, the YGP adopts a more diffuse approach compared to the way CeaseFire works with small pre-identified target groups. There are also other methodological problems with evaluating outreach this way, such as spillover effects, under-matching of neighbourhoods, and interference from secular crime trends (Skogan et al., 2008).
Evaluation plan and implementation

With the above considerations, and since the YGP service model was in pilot phase and expected to be fine-tuned from time to time, an evaluation plan was developed to focus on processes but also collect some outcome data. The objectives were to monitor service delivery and uptake, understand the practice strategies, examine the robustness of the service model as a whole, and test the feasibility of the evaluation plan itself. Understanding how the programme works in practice is a prerequisite for measuring programme efficacy and for programme replication in the long run (Arnold & Rotheram-Borus, 2009). This is particularly relevant to the YGP as it was under consideration for expansion into other districts following the pilot. The evaluation plan at the start was aligned with the three major strategies in the service model (Table 3). For each strategy, there was a set of measures, which were in turn operationalised into specific indicators. To monitor the effort of conducting street rounds, the evaluation plan included indicators related to presence on the streets – such as the amount of time spent on street rounds and number of sectors covered; and reach – based on the number of youths observed and spoken with during street rounds, and so on. For casework, the evaluation was interested in targeting – such as the profile of youths recruited and their types of risk; engagement – such as caseload, frequency of contacts, and types of intervention; and progress – in terms of changes in educational status, family relationships, motivation for change, recent arrests, and so on. Finally, service coordination efforts such as meetings with community partners, the agreeing of referral protocols, and actual referral numbers were also tracked. Most of the data were gathered through monthly reporting by the outreach teams, who were provided with data templates for organising their records.
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<tr>
<th>Service strategies</th>
<th>Measures</th>
<th>Examples of indicators</th>
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<td><strong>Outreach</strong></td>
<td>Presence</td>
<td>Days with rounds</td>
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<td>Hours spent on rounds</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Sectors covered by rounds</td>
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<td>Reach</td>
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<td>Number of youths interacted with</td>
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<td>Youth location</td>
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<td>Awareness of YGP</td>
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<td><strong>Casework</strong></td>
<td>Targeting</td>
<td>Youth profile</td>
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<td>Family background</td>
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<td>Risk</td>
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<td>Engagement</td>
<td>Caseload</td>
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<td>Client contact</td>
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<td>Vocational training</td>
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<td>Living arrangements</td>
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<td>Self-awareness, insight</td>
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<td>Motivation for change</td>
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<td>Police arrests</td>
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<td>Case closure reasons</td>
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<td><strong>Service</strong></td>
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<td>Information-sharing protocol</td>
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<td>Referral protocol</td>
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<td>Collaboration</td>
<td>Referrals received</td>
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<td>Joint initiatives</td>
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Upon implementation, several practical problems became apparent. To meet the data requirements for street rounds, the workers had to find ways to capture information while they were on-the-go. Given that they did not want to be taking notes in the presence of the youths, this was not a trivial matter especially when the outreach teams encountered large groups that could number more than 20 members. Keeping up with the monthly data submissions required a special effort by the outreach workers as they were often not at their desks. The evaluation plan included a number of dynamic fields to track changes under the “progress” measure. These were meant to be continually updated. But the informal nature of engagement meant that it was often not possible to obtain the full range of personal information required in the evaluation plan, not to mention ensuring they are up to date. Many of the dynamic data fields returned empty and it became obvious that there would not be sufficient information for analysing outcomes. In response, the data templates were considerably shortened by removing some of these data fields to lighten the burden of data collection on the workers and to improve the quality of what data could be collected.

In anticipation that some of the youths may be willing to work with the outreach workers on personal issues but may not be ready to enter into a formal helping relationship with a service contract, the evaluation built in a differentiation between street cases – where most of the intervention takes place in the youths’ natural setting on the street, and agency cases – similar to those in conventional casework services. Into the second year of the pilot, the teams observed that they were spending a lot of time on an intermediate engagement stage between contacts during street rounds and intervention with cases, which was not detectable by the evaluation plan. It was felt that this stage constituted a distinct component of outreach work, with its own objectives and strategies. Whereas street rounds emphasised observation and information-giving through brief exchanges, and casework focused on achieving individual goals through one-to-one intervention, this intermediate engagement phase involved unstructured group work through a variety of activities for the workers to develop familiarity with the youths, build trust, assess needs, and identify individuals who may require closer attention. An additional layer was therefore introduced into the evaluation model and designated as working with “known youths”. With this change, the evaluation model eventually recognised four different “client units” – street contacts, known youths, street cases, and agency cases. This brought the evaluation into closer alignment with the service model and practice model (Table 4).

Table 4. Aligning service, practice, and evaluation models

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<tr>
<th>Service model</th>
<th>Practice model</th>
<th>Evaluation model</th>
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<tr>
<td>Outreach: Street rounds</td>
<td>Observation</td>
<td>Street contacts</td>
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<td>Initial contact</td>
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<tr>
<td>Outreach: Unstructured group work</td>
<td>Positive engagement</td>
<td>Known youths</td>
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<td>Casework and intervention</td>
<td>Therapeutic engagement</td>
<td>Street cases</td>
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<td></td>
<td>and termination</td>
<td>Agency cases</td>
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The continuum from street contacts to agency cases – or from observation through to termination – reflects the system of graduated interventions that is central to the YGP. Through this system, youths with greater risks are gradually selected and targeted for more intensive support through successive stages. In principle, these stages are fairly easy to distinguish. But in practice, the evaluation entailed a complicated process of disciplining the data. For instance, it turned out to be extremely difficult to pin down a definition for when a youth “becomes” a street case. Initially the evaluation took a data-driven approach by defining street cases based on the availability of key information such as age, schooling status, and risks. This threshold proved to be too low, as the outreach workers found that many of the street cases defined this way were not in fact prepared to work with them, leading to the closure of many street cases very soon after case opening. It was therefore agreed that the workers would only open a street case in their records when they were confident that a working relationship had been established. The teams also developed their own working criteria for this relationship, such as whether the youths showed up for a certain number of appointments. Elaborating the evaluation model by creating the additional category of known youths also presented a new conceptual problem – how to distinguish unstructured group work from other unscheduled contacts with group members during street rounds. These problems arose from the basic incompatibility between a standardised measurement framework that distinguishes stages and what is essentially a very fluid mode of service delivery. The basic dilemma is this: A more elaborate, precise, and tightly-defined evaluation framework is necessary for valid comparisons of service performance between teams and over time, but risks becoming overly stylised and rigid beyond a point. The alternative is to rely on a light evaluation framework that respects professional discretion and practical constraints. This is also simpler to implement but over time may lead to divergences in coding practices and the loss of data integrity.

Reading the results

When interpreting the evaluation data, it is not always straightforward to decide what readings on the measures indicate success. There are numerous examples of this. Even for a simple output measure such as the number of outreach hours, it is not a case of “the more the better”. Because the YGP service model requires each team to both cover a large district through street rounds as well as work closely with a small number of youths with higher risks, there is an unavoidable trade-off between hours spent on street rounds and on casework. The evaluation also tracks the proportion of youths encountered during street rounds who are already known to the outreach workers. In this case, a higher proportion may suggest that the workers have established visibility and presence in the community, but could equally indicate that the service is failing to extend its reach to new groups of youths. With street cases, the evaluation is concerned with measures such as total caseload, frequency of contact, and duration of intervention. As mentioned, the decision to create a new entry on the team’s street case register involves professional discretion. A lower threshold for recording a youth as a street case may boost the caseload, but if the working relationship is not strong yet, such cases will bring down the average overall frequency of contact with cases, and may also result in very quick case closures after a few months.
What has been helpful for interpreting the results is the continuity of data collection over many months, allowing the observation of patterns over the long run. The numbers pertaining to the level of outreach effort in any one month may not be particularly meaningful. But when this level dipped sharply in one part of the year, or was significantly lower for one team, it signalled the need to further investigate staffing issues, time allocation, outreach practices, and so on. The data were also read in context of the long trajectory of service development. For example, there was considerable disturbance to the evaluation data in the initial months as the service model adjusted and settled, and as the workers built up their practice experience (Ng, 2014).

Nearing the end of the second year, it was also noticed that outreach effort had shifted from street rounds to working with known youths and street cases, reflecting service maturation and sharper targeting of youths with higher risks. Considering the shortfalls of measuring outreach activities using a standardised framework, the evaluation also drew on other data sources, including interviews with the outreach workers, observations of street rounds by the evaluator, and one-off submissions of qualitative data such as group activity logs and case summaries. These helped to frame intervention outcomes from the perspective of the quality of interactions, which are often more important than the number of sessions or the time spent (Slesnick & Kang, 2008).

Within the space constraints of this publication, only a brief summary of the evaluation findings can be presented. Between 2012 and 2014, each outreach team spent 50–100 hours spread over 9–14 days making street rounds every month (Ng, 2014). In total, the teams recorded some 13,000 observations of youths on the streets and made around 9,200 contacts with these youths. The data they collected show that many youths do socialise in public spaces within residential neighbourhoods. This population is predominantly male, but the ethnic profile varies by locality. The youths present a range of risks, such as educational disruption, antisocial and criminal behaviour, smoking and substance abuse, and financial and family problems. Almost 300 known youths were engaged through a variety of activities, mostly in groups. The outreach workers met each group once or twice per month, and engaged each group for a total of three to eleven months on average. This process faced various obstacles. Group membership had high turnover, some groups dissolved after a while, and most were very mobile and did not meet at fixed locations. But by the end, the teams documented progress such as greater interest in studies, increased parental involvement, and attitudinal changes among some of the youths. Finally, the teams also worked with another 150 youths as street cases, holding each case for around nine months on average. It was not surprising that casework – the most formalised intervention – proved to be the most challenging to implement in the street setting. The workers used a range of strategies such as social activities, home and school visits, crisis support, counselling, and preparation for job interviews. Even so, almost one in five cases lost contact with the workers before the intervention goals could be achieved. For cases that were retained, the workers noted a reduction of risky behaviours, greater engagement in structured activities, and improvements in relationships and life skills.
CONCLUSION

The YGP pilot that began in 2012 was a significant development for youth services in Singapore. It was an important alternative strategy to serve at-risk youths who are weakly detached to the school environment and therefore out-of-reach to school-based programmes, and have yet to enter the system of formal prevention and diversionary programmes for those who have been in contact with law enforcement. The YGP service model was a unique local variant to the street outreach approach adopted in other countries. Outreach in the United States, for example, often aims to recruit homeless youths into shelters and drop-in centres so that they may access a range of services related to basic physical and other social needs, and eventually achieve more stable lifestyles off the street. In Singapore, where youth homelessness has not been widely documented, risk is instead more broadly conceptualised in terms of school or work participation, social engagement, and personal resilience. So instead of taking youths off the street, the YGP strategy has been to work with them on the streets, in their natural settings. The choice of setting is critical to the YGP service model. As observed in other countries, youths’ natural gathering places may also be highly contested spaces where various competing interests meet – local residents concerned about noise and antisocial behaviour; law enforcement agencies such as the Police and the Health Sciences Authority; as well as gangs looking to recruit and exploit marginalised young people. By working with at-risk youths in public spaces, the YGP recognises them as visible, legitimate members of the community, and stakes a claim to void decks, neighbourhood parks, and communal sports facilities as spaces that young people, like anyone else, can use safely and responsibly.

The translation of the YGP service model into practice faced numerous challenges. As this was a pilot programme with no local precedents of a comparable scale, the outreach workers had to learn much by doing, even with clinical supervision from an experienced practitioner from Hong Kong. The workers relied on a set of diverse and intricate micro-skills to observe and identify at-risk youths based on their natural interaction patterns, make an initial approach in an unobtrusive way, assess and make use of group dynamics to gain acceptance, select individuals who need help, and eventually work with them towards individual goals. This was in the context of having to conduct street rounds across very large service areas at irregular hours, which took a physical toll on some of the workers and contributed to staff turnover. From a service coordination perspective, the flexible strategies and natural setting of the YGP in contrast to conventional agency-based services also meant that community partners and gatekeepers took some time to understand what street outreach was and how they could better work together.

The parallel evaluation exercise encountered difficulties that reflect both the unstructured nature of outreach practice and the instability associated with programme pilots. Early on, evaluation approaches using RCT or neighbourhood crime data were ruled out as randomised treatment assignment and standardised data collection were not deemed feasible with the YGP, and because the intensity of intervention at the neighbourhood level were not considered sufficient to justify a connection with connection with changes in general crime trends. The evaluation plan therefore focused on process data...
with some outcome indicators. This plan was subsequently adjusted several times with better understanding of the service model in implementation, and in response to practice constraints on collecting comprehensive personal information in an unconducive public environment from youths who may not identify themselves as clients in the first place. There were other challenges – some of them quite persistent – to do with imposing a stylised conceptual framework that distinguished intervention stages and client types on what is essentially a very dynamic mode of service delivery. While the evaluation purportedly aimed to measure programme impact, all three levels of the YGP were in fact being tested and scrutinised – the programme as it was delivered, the service model stipulated by CYGO, as well as the evaluation model itself.

Since the end of the two-year pilot, there have been further developments with the YGP.

- In terms of the service model, there has been some recognition that the service boundaries need to be better aligned with the intervention strategies. Compared to street outreach in Hong Kong, the YGP expects the teams to cover more ground with fewer workers. The Northwest YGP team, for example, has about 8 members serving a district population of 157,000 (Housing and Development Board, 2014), whereas the average outreach team in Hong Kong has 10 members serving a neighbourhood population of 100,000 (Ngai, 2007). So in 2013, a variant of the YGP model was trialled in a very small low-income neighbourhood. The model is currently under review.

- With regard to practice, the need for ongoing clinical supervision and the pressure on individual team leaders to give guidance to their staff have been a concern. Given the lack of local expertise, the two outreach teams have explored joint learning sessions where they can share experiences from the ground, discuss specific practice issues in depth, and give better support to newer staff. Other aspects of practice remain challenging, such as the need for Malay and Malay-speaking staff – given the high Malay representation among the youth population on the streets – and how to better engage young women, who have been less open to receiving services so far.

- In evaluation, a new phase of data collection has been launched with several important changes. In addition to service data provided by the staff, the evaluation will now also collect information directly from the youths, through in-depth interviews with a small sample to understand individual-level programme impact, and a large-scale two-wave brief survey of all the youths engaged by the workers to be conducted on the streets. In combination, these data will provide a more comprehensive picture of the YGP and its outcomes, especially in terms of risk reduction.
For a pilot programme that has been this well-resourced, the hope is naturally that it has been useful to the wider social service sector in Singapore as well. The YGP, by taking workers out of an agency and putting them on the streets, signals an important reorientation towards community social intervention. Perhaps due to shifting emphases in social work education and training, and funding requirements that do not fully recognise the time that workers spend out in the neighbourhood, professional social services – even those meant to be community-based – have sometimes withdrawn into the clinical confines of the agency office in recent years. Street outreach, in contrast, requires workers to use their professional acumen to read the social needs in a community, does not assume that clients who need help know how or will choose to access it, and delivers help in a way that respects clients’ preferred settings. The commitment to evaluating the YGP has also been unusual in a sector where the patient piloting of new services paired with thorough evaluation still remains the exception. Most new services are pushed through due to policy imperatives or based on collective practice wisdom. The evaluation of the YGP, while in line with the principles of public accountability and evidence-based practice, has of course also placed it under considerable scrutiny. Hong Kong’s experience provides some perspective. In the 1980s, concern grew over small caseloads and the perceived inefficiency of street outreach (Chan, 2009). This culminated in a replacement of street outreach teams with integrated agency-based services for children and youths in the late 1990s. It took time for outreach practitioners to develop and test practice techniques, conduct and disseminate research on outreach and youth issues, and build up professional credibility in the public eye, before a revival of government support for specialised outreach teams in 2002. The popularity of particular programmes may rise and ebb over time due to forces beyond the control of service providers. One can only hope that the YGP will be allowed time to mature and demonstrate impact on the population it helps, and that the programme’s efforts and achievements will help to entrench the role of street outreach to at-risk youths in Singapore, delivered in one form or another.
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