

Provision of positive sexual health services for young people: a realist evaluation

SHEARN, Katie <<http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7209-8404>>, PIERCY, Hilary <<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7663-8858>>, ALLMARK, Peter <<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3314-8947>> and HIRST, Julia <<http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9230-1828>>

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A realist evaluation of the provision of positive sexual health services for young people

Authors

Katie Shearn, BSc^{ab}, Dr Hilary Piercy, PhD^a, Dr Peter Allmark, PhD^a, Professor Julia Hirst, PhD^a

Affiliation

^aSheffield Hallam University

Corresponding author address

^bHealth and Wellbeing Research Institute - Postgraduate Research Centre
Sheffield Hallam University
Chestnut Court
Collegiate Crescent
Sheffield
S10 2BP
k.shearn@shu.ac.uk

I am an early career researcher and this work forms part of my PhD study.

Background

English and International policy calls for positive, comprehensive youth sexual health services (PCYSHS) which support young people to achieve sexual wellbeing. In practice, youth sexual health services are often orientated solely towards reducing unwanted conceptions and preventing sexually transmitted infections. This study aimed to develop theory and recommendations for practitioners to support delivery of PCYSHS.

Methods

A realist evaluation was undertaken to uncover what works, for whom and under what conditions, to deliver PCYSHS. Concepts and initial theories were developed, by the authors, combining existing substantive theory with a logic model based on stakeholder's tacit knowledge, observational visits and data, relevant to underlying causal processes, extracted from academic and policy literature (number of sources (n) = 27). Academic sources were identified via a systematic search with four electronic databases using terms: 'sexual health', combined with 'sex positive', 'young people', 'service' and synonyms, ('reproductive health', 'sexual subjectivity', 'sexual rights', 'holistic', 'integrated', 'reproductive rights', 'preventative', 'comprehensive', 'young', 'youth', 'teen*', 'adolescen*', 'intervention*', 'framework*', 'paradigm*', 'programme*', 'model*', 'trial*', 'pilot*') with no date restrictions. Papers relating to whole system transformation to PCYSHS in developed countries, written in English, were selected. Papers that considered only: education settings, 'one-off' interventions, or information resources were excluded. Papers were appraised by rigour and relevance in accordance with realist methodology guidelines.

Evidence was then gathered from case studies of three services in England that had attempted implementation of PCYSHS. Data were derived via stakeholder interviews (n=24), social and print media (n=15), service specifications (n=5) and evaluation/consultation documentation (n=5).

Analysis of this data, using Nvivo, was directed at substantiating, refining or refuting the initial theories.

Findings

76 sources contributed to the development and testing of programme theories.

The theories articulate how local buy-in to PCYSHS can be led by the following factors: i) 'clarity' of both the concept and individual role, ii) 'conviction' in the approach to bring about positive change for young people and iii) 'coherence' with local and national priorities. The theories suggest the mechanisms by which these factors work and show the ways in which outcomes are contextually dependent.

Interpretation

This study explains some of the challenges of translating the policy ambition of PCYSHS into practice. The realist inquiry found theoretical mechanisms that may influence the delivery of PCYSHS and the contextual conditions which may hinder or enable them. These theories may help inform the development and evaluation of PCYSHS initiatives.

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Ethics approval

Ethics approval was gained from Sheffield Hallam University Research Ethics Committee.

Contributors

All authors took part in the discussions to develop the methodology and refine theory areas. KS screened the literature, undertook the interviews and populated the theory areas with the evidence. KS synthesised the evidence. All authors developed the narrative of the realist inquiry and contributed to the articulation of the theory areas. KS wrote the abstract with input from HP, PA and JH. All authors have seen and approved the final version of the abstract.

Declaration of interests

All authors declare no competing interests

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