

# The Power of Youth Work: A Longitudinal Biographical Study

July 2024



THE UNIVERSITY  
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No Knives Better Lives and YouthLink Scotland partnered with Dr Emma Davidson of The Centre for Research on Families and Relationships, University of Edinburgh, to explore how youth work impacts young people over time by capturing the stories, memories, and insights of young people. Specifically, the study sought to understand the significance of youth work during the transition to adulthood, its relation to key life events, and how relationships with youth workers influence personal development and life experience.

The research used biographical interviews with adults who engaged in youth work during their youth to identify its impact from a life course perspective. These interviews provided a rich context for understanding the diverse challenges faced by young people and the role of youth work in their lives.

YouthLink Scotland is the national agency for youth work in Scotland. Its mission is to ensure that all young people have access to quality youth work opportunities and that their voices are considered in policy and practice development.

The Centre for Research on Families and Relationships, a collaboration between the University of Edinburgh and other Scottish universities, conducts high-quality social research on families and relationships throughout life.

No Knives Better Lives is an initiative by YouthLink Scotland that collaborates with young people and practitioners to address youth violence through a sustainable public health model focused on primary and secondary prevention and advocates using a youth work approach. NKBL provides training and resources to adults working with young people to reduce youth violence.

### **The Presence of Risk Factors and Complex Lives**

Interviewees shared complex life histories, highlighting issues such as temporary accommodation, bereavement, family breakdown, bullying, mental health challenges, autism, ADHD, gender identity struggles, and community issues like antisocial behaviour and crime. These stories underscore the need for holistic youth services and the unique position of youth workers to support young people and connect them to specialist services.

### **Place and Space: 'A Place to Be'**

Most participants first engaged with youth workers in late primary school, often motivated by the need for a safe, local space to spend time. The physical presence of youth clubs provided a sense of belonging, with the relationships formed there being crucial to the significance of these spaces. These spaces were valued as 'cornerstone' community hubs.

### **Support and Care: 'The Small Things'**

Participants emphasised the cumulative effect of small acts of support and care by youth workers, which built trust and had lasting impacts. One interviewee recognised the extensive effort and care involved in youth work only after becoming a volunteer himself.

### **Creating Pathways: Meaningful and Affordable Change**

Youth work often served as a bridge between fun activities and meaningful change, helping young people navigate life challenges and access opportunities they otherwise wouldn't have. For example, one interviewee's involvement in a youth club led to college enrolment, internships, and volunteer roles that shaped his future. For other young people they got to experience activities and trips that they would not have been able to afford.

### **Youth Workers: A Pro-Social Adult**

Participants frequently recalled specific youth workers, noting their styles, advice, and the strong, lasting relationships formed. Youth workers provided emotional support and valuable information about opportunities, which contrasted with the knowledge available in schools. Youth work environments were described with terms like "home," "family," and "community," highlighting their integral role in participants' lives.

## Conclusions

The research confirmed the significant impact of youth work, highlighting its role as a place of safety, belonging, and community. Youth work services appeared during critical moments in young people's lives, providing support and stability. They helped mitigate social and economic inequalities by offering access to opportunities and resources. Participants' accounts reflected a broad range of experiences and support needs, influenced by factors like COVID-19, austerity, and the cost-of-living crisis. These challenges increased the complexity of youth work, underscoring the need for sustained funding to support physical youth work spaces and professional training for youth workers.

## What Next?

The study suggests that future research should be ambitious, longitudinal, and qualitatively track a cohort of young people over time to provide deeper insights into the support youth work offers at different life stages and locations. It should challenge de-contextualized performance measures and consider the voices of young people not engaged in youth work. This approach can help demonstrate the social and relational value of youth work and identify areas for improvement.

In conclusion, youth work plays a crucial role in the lives of young people, offering support, opportunities, and a sense of community. To continue making a meaningful impact, youth work must be supported through long-term funding and research that captures its dynamic and relational essence.

"Like not to be dramatic or that or like, but genuinely think that if she hadn't been the way she had been with me I would genuinely not have been here. She was just so amazing, and I treated her like shite. And again, it was because you were young, and hurting, and had emotions. Yeah, she was just a person that was nice to me, and I was, like, argh. I was like, why the fuck are you nice to me? Later, I remember at a residential she shared a story about her own life, and then I remember like I went to the dorm, and I just cried because I felt so horrible that I'd been like nasty there. And I remember I wrote her this long letter I was like, I'm so sorry like blah blah blah. I remember it's just this moment. I was like oh just like changed everything for me"

"I was lucky to find [youth worker] at the right time. The system hasn't done it, for sure. It really required the youth worker to put me into the system at the right time. They were being an advocate, having different contacts, always willing to push, and cut through the red tape"

"It was like a wee push that I didn't know was happening. This one helped me leave the house, this one helped me get fitter, this one helped me get money, this one helped me get pals. I can't really explain it, how that change in me has happened over three years, it's amazing. Two years ago, I would never have been sitting down with you for a chat, nope, no way never"

"The school never understood. They just said you need to go to school and that was it. There were too many pupils, I just felt like a number even though I was begging them for help. They cared but there just wasn't the time. I think, I definitely think it [the impact on me] was to do with my favourite youth worker. Back then he was just young, and fun and just, you know, cool. You could talk, he would listen. Like that kind of guy. I enjoyed and respected the youth workers, I wanted to be there, so I respected that"

"Once I got involved in youth work that was it. My worker was consistent and persistent, like she was she was firm with it – but in a good way! She just realised that is what I needed, knew when to push and when to step back. Although she helped with jobs and college, it was the small things. It was the knowing someone who is constantly there. Like having a panic attack and being able to ask her what I can do different; getting advice; having someone to advocate for you, kick you up the arse when you need it. You know, small moments where there is someone who is friendly there, someone who won't judge, someone who knows how you are feeling, someone who empathises with you but without feeling like you are being pitied or treated with kid gloves. The reality is that I wouldn't be here today if it wasn't for youth worker. And I mean that in the real sense. She is the reason that I am here. She taught me how to have a voice. If I hadn't met her, I wouldn't have had this conversation with you"