Social Technology and Youth Justice: An Exploration of Ethical and Practical Challenges

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Abstract : This paper outlines ethical and practical challenges in the building of social technology for use with socially excluded and marginalised groups. The primary aim of this study was to design, deploy and evaluate social technology that may help to promote better engagement between case workers and young people to help prevent recidivism, and support young people's transition towards social inclusion in society. A total of 107 practitioners/managers (n=64), and young people (n=43) contributed to the data collection via surveys, focus groups and 1-1 interviews. Through a process of co-design where end-users are involved as key contributors to social technological design, this paper seeks to make an important contribution to the area of participatory methodologies by arguing that whilst giving 'voice' to key stakeholders in the research process is crucial, there is a risk that competing voices may lead to tensions and unintended outcomes. The paper is contextualized within a Foucauldian perspective to examine significant concepts including power, authority and surveillance. Implications for youth justice policy and practice are considered. The authors conclude that marginalized youth and over-stretched practitioners are better served when such social technology is perceived and adopted as a tool of empowerment within a framework of child welfare and child rights.