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How peer support contributes to a Child First, trauma-informed, and reparative model for Youth Justice

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MANUSCRIPT DETAILS

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We draw on qualitative data from interviews and surveys undertaken with young people and parents/caregivers in a London youth offending service. The data was part of a broader mixed-methods study in the YOS that used observational methods alongside surveys and interviews to evaluate the effectiveness of its model of practice. Peer support emerged as a theme.

Participants expressed the desire to see young people working and volunteering in the YOS and felt this would help make it a safe and non-threatening space. Young people who had completed their time with the YOS saw themselves as roles models with the insight and skills to support others. These young people expressed a strong desire to work in the YOS and in some cases, to develop long-term careers in supporting young people.

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"I would want to see young people working in here, that's what I want to see…" How peer support opportunities in youth offending services can support a Child First, trauma-informed, and reparative model of practice for Youth Justice.

Abstract

Purpose

This article explores how peer support can support a combined Child First, trauma-informed and restorative approach for youth justice. While other scholars have identified clashes between these approaches, particularly between Child First and restorative approaches, a focus on reparative practice with peers has been under-explored as a more child-centred model for reparation-focused work.

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Findings

Participants expressed the desire to see young people working and volunteering in the YOS and felt this would help make it a safe and non-threatening space. Young people who had completed their time with the YOS saw themselves as roles models with the insight and skills to support others. These young people expressed a strong desire to work in the YOS and in some cases, to develop long-term careers in supporting young people.

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Our research challenges the notion that young people who have been involved in crime struggle to empathise, providing rich examples of their empathic understanding for peers. Peer support opportunities could offer a reconceptualising of restorative practice that is Child First and trauma-informed. Such opportunities would benefit both the young people being supported and those offering support, building a co-produced approach that is directly informed by the expressed needs and desires of the young people.

Key words: trauma-informed practice, Child First, restorative justice, youth offending, youth justice, peer support

Introduction

This article draws on data collected as part of a research study in a youth offending service (YOS) in London. The research focused on exploring the effectiveness of the YOS model of practice, which combined a trauma-informed approach with restorative justice and awareness of bias and

discrimination. We focus on the overall themes and findings from this research in another paper published in XXX, entitled 'XXX' (XXX and XXX, 2021). Therefore, in this paper, we extrapolate in detail one qualitative theme that emerged from our interviews and surveys with young people and parents/caregivers, this being the need for peer support opportunities in the YOS.

We explore how young people's desire to set up peer support activities in the YOS combines trauma-informed, Child First and draws on some of the principles of restorative approaches to youth justice. Our research suggests that while the provision of peer support opportunities is a key principle of the trauma-informed approach (SAMHSA, 2014) they have arguably not been implemented and formalised to the extent that young people are asking for. Deficit and risk-based framings of young people as well as procedural barriers have contributed to this (Burns and Creaney, in press). We use our research data on peer support to demonstrate how overcoming these barriers to fully embed such opportunities might offer potential for a reconceptualising of restorative practice that remains Child First and trauma-informed, co-produced and delivered by young people who have been involved in youth offending services themselves.

The examples in our study of young people's deep-felt empathy for their peers and their keen desire to offer support and even to develop careers in work with young people, present a challenge to other research that has suggested that young people who have been involved in criminal activity struggle to empathise (see, for example, Edwards, Adler and Gray, 2016; Trivedi-Bateman, 2015). Instead, it is arguable that typical restorative and reparative interventions have been misdirected and need to be reframed to be more child-centred, connecting with young people's empathic associations.

A reparative approach that focuses on young people's empathy for their peers, and desire to 'give back' to the services and communities they are part of, arguably allows for a form of practice that keeps the young person at the centre and involves them in shaping services and interventions. Rethinking and reframing the dominant focus on victim-centred approaches to restorative justice to move towards a reconceptualization of restorative practice that focuses on immediate peers (a group that young people can potentially more easily relate to and feel empathy for) is more compatible with the Child First and trauma-informed models of practice. Centring the Child First and trauma-informed models in reparative approaches provides potential for mutual reparation and support for young people and arguably contributes to a restorative practice that acknowledges 'harm done to (and not just by) young people, including by the professionals and institutions and that should protect them' (XXX and XXX, 2021: 33).

Strang (2017) recognises that definitional challenges in restorative justice have led to some practices being labelled as such incorrectly. She also recognises the credible use of wider community members in restorative justice, alongside the role of the victim. As such, we argue that the peer support approach we explore in this paper draws on some of the principles of restorative *approaches* or *practices* but cannot be defined specifically as restorative *justice.* In order to acknowledge the definitional tensions, we primarily refer to the peer support approach as *reparative* rather than *restorative* practice. Whilst we recognise that incorporating work with peers sits within the broad spectrum of and debates around restorative practices, we focus on it being a *reparative* approach that reconceptualises and draws on some principles of *restorative* practices because it would not fit with strict definitions of restorative approaches. This is due to the fact we are

suggesting it as a more child-centred *alternative* to involving the victim, rather than featuring alongside victim involvement.

Punishment versus support – the Child First approach

Over the last two decades, a focus on punitive rather than supportive interventions in youth justice has been increasingly questioned (Darke, 2011). Youth justice interventions in England have traditionally been framed by a 'prevent as enforcement' or 'law and order' discourse that focuses on the crime and its penal consequences rather than the vulnerabilities of the perpetrator – and this approach has been widely criticised (Darke, 2011; Hughes, 2011). At the international level (including some examples in Ireland, Australia and the USA) the use of approaches that focus on the young person and their needs as well as the links between maltreatment and offending have been found to be more effective (Arthur, 2010; Baglivio et al, 2015; Hughes, 2011). As such, scholars have increasingly argued for a turn away from a focus on punishment in youth crime interventions (Welsh & Pfeffer, 2013).

In response to the criticisms of dominantly punitive approaches in the UK specifically, alternative models for youth justice have emerged. Haines and Drakeford (1998: 89) first proposed a *children-first philosophy* where 'all young offenders' would be treated 'as children first'. This approach meant treating children in the justice system differently to adults, recognising their status as children, the limitations of their social environment and choices and, crucially, to work with them in a way that 'minimises harm and maximises their potential for the future' (ibid.: 89). Case and Haines (2015) later developed the 'Children First, Offenders Second' approach to youth justice work, arguing again that young offenders need to be recognised first as children and not treated as 'mini adults'. They refer to this ongoing tendency in youth justice, to view children who have taken part in crime through an adult lens, as the 'neoliberal responsibilisation' of young people. The children first approach accepts that young people are vulnerable, rather than simply criminal, and focuses on support over punishment. More recently branded as 'Child First', the approach is underpinned by principles of inclusion, participation, a focus on the welfare of the child, and on holistic support tailored to the individual's needs that enables them to reach their full potential (Day, 2022).

The Child First model has been increasingly adopted by statutory youth offending teams across the UK in recent years and the Child First approach is now recognised and promoted by the Youth Justice Board for England and Wales, including in its most recent Strategic Plan for 2021 to 2024 (YJB, 2021). This, to some extent, demonstrates a shift away from punitive approaches towards more progressive approaches that recognise young people's needs and vulnerabilities. However, Day (2022) argues that the Child First approach has yet to be adopted consistently at the local level. She identifies varying reasons for this including resistance from practitioners and services as well as contradictory messages from different areas of government about approaches to youth offending practice. Day identifies that a persistence of risk- and deficit-focused approaches to the monitoring of youth offending services presents a significant barrier to implementing Child First approaches. This suggests there is still some way to go for a Child First approach to be more fully enabled by national policy and embedded across the sector.

Trauma-informed practice

There is a substantial body of evidence that demonstrates justice-involved children are significantly more likely than non-offenders to have a history of exposure to traumatic adversity (Liddle et al, 2016). Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation (2017) conducted a review of youth offending services and in examining 115 case files for young people who had committed a serious offence, the review found that 81% had reported experiencing trauma. A key recommendation following this review was national incorporation of the trauma-informed approach into youth offending services.

Many youth offending services have begun to incorporate this approach, including the one where our research was based. This reflects an increasing recognition of impact of Adverse Child Experiences (ACEs) and their relationship to the need for trauma-informed practice in the UK (Gray, Smithson and Jump, 2021; HMIP, 2017; McCartan, 2020; YJB, 2017). The links between ACEs and offending are increasingly clear, with a wealth of evidence cited in recent UK reports, particularly from research undertaken in the USA (See, for example: Local Government Association, 2018; Scottish Government, 2018). However, as with the Child First approach, there are questions to be raised about how fully the principles of trauma-informed practice are implemented across services at the local level, despite the approach being formalised in national policy.

The trauma-informed approach to youth justice is still relatively new. There is evidence to suggest that interrupting the influence of trauma and enabling young offenders to access recovery and healthy coping methods can lead to greater levels of engagement with interventions and a reduction in re-offending (Levenson & Willis, 2019; Loughran and Reid, 2018: Skuse and Matthew, 2015). It is also recognised that a trauma-informed approach is needed in other social, community and health services, before and alongside young people's engagement with the justice system (McCartan, 2020).

A working definition of the trauma-informed approach was developed in the USA by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA, 2014). This definition is predicated on a set of key practice approaches and principles. The fundamental approaches to trauma-informed practice are to *realise* the impact of trauma; *recognise* and *respond to* generalised and individual presentations of trauma; and *resist* (re)traumatisation, with the goal of supporting service-users to access potential avenues of *recovery*. The key principles underpinning the trauma-informed model are as follows: Safety; Trustworthiness and Transparency; Peer Support; Collaboration and Mutuality; Empowerment, Voice and Choice; Cultural, Historical and Gender Issues. SAMHSA suggest the trauma-informed approach works best when these principles are embedded in policies, practices, values, and environments of a service. Building a culture of trauma-informed care also allows for adaptive practice that can be tailored where necessary to individual needs, suggesting it is compatible with a Child First approach.

In this paper, we are particularly interested in the 'peer support' principle of trauma-informed practice and how this can be better utilised in youth offending services, and support a Child First approach. This principle is described as a crucial element of trauma-informed practice because peer support opportunities 'are key vehicles for establishing safety and hope, building trust, enhancing collaboration, and utilising stories and lived experience to promote recovery and healing' (SAMHSA, 2014: 11). Engaging trauma survivors as collaborators (or *co-producers*) in service development supports the organisation to remain trauma-informed (SAMHSA, 2014). In our research, as demonstrated later in this paper, we found that young people were asking for such opportunities,

which they saw as a way of developing themselves as well as 'giving back' to others and improving the service provided by the YOS.

Restorative practices and peer support

Restorative justice has become an increasingly popular approach in UK youth justice over recent decades. Victims are often invited to contribute to youth offending panels, and reparation can be a requirement of a young person's referral order, to be facilitated by youth offending services (Ministry of Justice, 2018). Literature on the use of approaches such as mediation and restorative justice in youth offending work has suggested that drawing on young people's empathy for others may be an effective alternative to focusing on punitive measures (Walklate, 1998). However, more recently, the use of restorative justice approaches in youth justice have been critiqued by those who advocate for Child First practice, for placing the needs of the victim, rather than those of the young person, at the centre of the intervention, with its critics arguing that the needs and vulnerabilities of the child should remain paramount (Case and Haines, 2015). As such, Case and Haines (2015) argue that restorative justice is incompatible with the Child First model because it is victim-centred rather than child-centred.

Different approaches to restorative justice place differing levels of emphasis on the victim and offender and more 'balanced' models have been articulated (Cunneen and Goldson, 2015). The origins of restorative justice were more in line with these balanced models (particularly among indigenous groups of Australia, New Zealand and the Americas) (ibid.). Overall, however, current restorative justice models have shifted far from these ideals and are predominantly more punitive interpretations (ibid.).

The broader research literature suggests youth crime interventions should be relational, long-term and supportive (Creaney, 2014). However, within such research, emphasis on the importance of relational work tends to focus on the relationships between services/staff and the young person, rather than extending to others in their lives, including their peers and communities (XXX and XXX, 2021). Such relationships with peers could be more fully considered in reconceptualising restorative and reparative approaches for youth justice in particular.

Young people's connection to their peer communities in particular has arguably been under-considered as an alternative form of reparative practice to the dominant focus on reparation with victims. Community participation has been widely established in restorative justice - and peers, close friends and family of the offender have even been suggested as key participants (see, for example, Rossner and Bruce, 2016). However, this practice of community involvement has been researched and implemented only as an *addition* to victim involvement, rather than as an *alternative* form of reparative practice centred on the young person and their immediate networks. The current research, while focused on community involvement alongside victim involvement, does offer some indication of the benefits of such an alternative approach. Rossner (2008) for example, outlines the benefits of collective emotion in restorative justice and how the involvement of the offender's community can lead to a *reintegrative* shaming that differs from the *stigmatic* shaming of the court process, in that it supports reintegration into the community rather than exclusion from it.

Research has suggested that young people can struggle to develop empathy for their victims (Edwards, Adler & Gray, 2016; Trivedi-Bateman, 2015). This may be particularly so where they

cannot relate to them and are disconnected from their particular lives and experiences (XXX & XXX, 2021). In probably the most large-scale study on empathy in young offenders, Trivedi-Bateman (2015; 2021) found that violent offenders have less empathy for their victims than other offenders – and that lower levels of empathy correlate with lower levels of shame and guilt for their violent offences. This led her to conclude that lower levels of empathy, shame and guilt make someone more likely to engage with crime, and particularly violent crime. This suggests that restorative interventions will be less effective with violent offenders and those who are deficient on empathy. Trivedi-Bateman and Crook (2022) argue that interventions are needed that focus on developing empathy. However, while the guilt and shame scales used in Trivedi-Bateman's (2015) research did make some wider reference to others beyond the victim, such as family and friends, the emphasis of these measures was on the offender being observed by these people in their lives or of them being aware of their wrongdoing, rather than there being a focus on negative impacts of their behaviour for their families and communities. The empathy scales focused on strangers and friends but, similarly, without a strong focus on consequences of their actions impacting on their friends and family. Her interviews with offenders focused on the victim and then on how they would feel if parents or others found out – but, again, not on the consequences of their offending on their families and communities. Trivedi-Bateman's overall focus was on empathy for victims rather than others in the young people's lives. This suggests there is a gap in the research as to who young people might feel empathy for, beyond their victim.

The concept of *generativity* is used in research to explore offenders' desire to 'give back' and engage in reparative work or care for others. Halsey and Deegan (2017: 52) define generativity as 'the actions of an individual or group that enable others to care in meaningful ways for themselves and their significant others'. Links have been identified between such generativity (acts of care for others) and desistance, leading to the argument that generativity is a crucial part of post-offence interventions (Halsey & Deegan, 2017; Halsey & Harris, 2011; Kashy and Morash, 2022). The research on generativity focuses on significant others, as opposed to victims (Halsey & Deegan, 2017; Halsey & Harris, 2011). In research with young male offenders in custody, Halsey and Harris (2011) found that family and close friends were identified as these significant others. As such, a sole focus on victims may be limiting what is possible in terms of drawing on young people's generative capacity for those around them, that they can relate to more readily. Rather than a sole focus on generativity as a one-way process enacted by offenders, the research also explores generativity towards offenders by others – for example, in Halsey and Deegan's (2017) study on prison officer generativity. The research also suggests that capacity for offenders to engage in generativity is limited by their life circumstances, such as where they experience poverty, challenging family relationships and other challenges – for example, in Kashy and Morash's (2022) research on women offenders on parole and probation. The findings of these studies support an argument for any focus on generativity and reparation in youth justice to be trauma-informed and Child First – through it being a mutual process that goes beyond victim-offender binaries and through it taking account of wider factors that impact on young people's lives.

Strang (2017) outlines how, in Australian youth justice research, the effectiveness of restorative justice with victims varied according to the type of crime. For example, in contrast to Trivedi-Bateman's (2015) findings on lower levels of empathy among violent offenders, Strang (2017) outlines that restorative justice reduced young people's reoffending rates more than court

processes when used in cases of violent crime. Strang found, however, that the opposite was true, in relation to property crime (ibid.). The research reviewed also found that the approach was less effective in relation to violent crime for young people from minoritized racial backgrounds (Rossner, 2008; Strang, 2017). In UK research, Strang (2017) similarly outlines that restorative justice was more effective in cases of serious crime than in other forms of crime and that it was more effective with adults than with young people. This highlights some complexities in how young people's capacity for empathy and reparation is classified and suggests that young people may struggle to experience empathy for victims in some cases more than others - and this may be linked to how well they can relate to their victim in terms of race, class and other factors. Such factors need to be considered in relation to all research studies on empathy, generativity and restorative practices. For example, the shame and guilt scales in Trivedi-Bateman's (2015) study focused on a set of examples of things that people might feel shame for, such as stealing from a shop, which may be contextual for people of different backgrounds and levels of poverty as well as according to the type of shop (for example, a large chain store or a locally run small enterprise).

In addition, many of the benefits of restorative justice outlined by research focus on the positive impacts for the victim (Rossner, 2008; Strang, 2017). While this is clearly an important part of restorative justice interventions, it potentially compromises a Child First approach if the needs of the victim become more central than those of the child - and the concerns of Case and Haines (2015), key pioneers of the Child First approach, about this may well be justified. The research outlined above arguably has implications for the effectiveness of typical restorative approaches that centre only on reparation with victims. Young people may be better able to relate to and empathise with their immediate peers and a focus on this in considering Child First, trauma-informed and restorative interventions could offer a reconceptualisation that brings the principles of these three approaches together. A trauma-informed approach to reparative practice would maintain peer support as one of its key principles and remain child-centred. However, youth offending services could potentially be doing more to fully explore and embed such opportunities.

A note of caution is needed here. The incorporation of a peer support approach requires testing and evaluation before it is widely adopted. Strang and Sherman (2015) reflect on the ethics of using untried restorative practices without robust research evidence due to the risk of harm this creates - and they warn against the promotion of untested approaches. Additionally, in regard to the use of peer role models in youth justice practice, there have been some questions raised over the effectiveness of this when implemented uncritically. Harris (2019) for example, argues that the use of male role models as mentors to young people involved in violent crime can lead to issues such as over-identification between mentor and mentee, and in some cases promotes problematic mindsets such as hyper-masculinity. Harris ultimately promotes the use of 'home-grown youth workers' in responding to youth violence but with the need for an ongoing critical reflexivity about their role.

Other research suggests that the use of peer role models can facilitate positive relationships with young people, characterised by empathy and lack of judgement, that lead to trust and reciprocity, and allow for realistic understandings of desistance grounded in lived experience (Lenkens et al, 2021). In relation to the argument we present in this paper about the potential for peer support opportunities to contribute to reparative practices in particular, we acknowledge the need for more research and, specifically, an in-depth piloting of the approach, to build on the implications presented in this paper. Additionally, any incorporation of such an approach would require a robust

model of supervision for the peer mentors that encourages their critical reflexivity on their role (Harris, 2019).

To present our suggested approach as restorative would represent a significant reconceptualising of restorative practice, given our argument that peers could be an alternative empathic focus to victim-centred practices. However, when viewed through a trauma-informed and Child First lens, young offenders must be seen as *harmed* and not simply as *harmers*. As identified by the HMIP (2017) review, the majority of young offenders are victims of trauma themselves. Further, a number of scholars have identified that young offenders face a range of social adversities and vulnerabilities - and have argued that interventions should approach them as vulnerable rather than criminal (Case & Haines, 2015; McAra and McVie, 2010, 2016; XXX, 2019). These studies recognise the blurred line between victim and offender and the role of exploitation in young people's criminal involvement has been increasingly recognised in such research (XXX, 2019). In this sense, the *young people themselves* are the *victims* at the centre of any Child First and trauma-informed interventions with young offenders, and this could be better recognised in the dominant restorative approaches.

Method and sample

Our research took place in a Youth Offending Service (YOS) in a diverse London borough where 47% of the borough's population were from BAME groups at the 2011 census. Black African and Black Caribbean constituted the largest ethnic groups after White British and the proportion of BAME groups was much higher among young people than the all-age population (ONS, 2012). The borough was in the top 20% most deprived local authorities nationally with poverty levels just below the London average (MHCLG, 2015). The research was commissioned by the YOS and was focused on exploring the effectiveness of their model of practice. The research obtained ethical approval via Goldsmiths, University of London.

We conducted observational research in the YOS over a four-month period (primarily of staff meetings and interactions with each other) and conducted surveys and interviews with young people and parents/caregivers. The young people's survey contained a mix of 15 closed and open questions about the young people's experiences of the YOS and its impact on their lives, particularly in relation to: their feelings of safety, trust, being listened to and the YOS having an understanding of and helping them move on from their past experiences (trauma-informed practice); the impact on their relationships with family (restorative practices), and; their experience of how inclusive they felt the YOS and its staff were (awareness of bias and discrimination). The survey for parents/caregivers' asked similar questions but for their reflections on the impact on the young person from their perspective.

The survey was sent out to potential respondents via text message campaigns by the YOS as well as YOS workers encouraging young people who were interested to take part and, in some cases, supporting them to complete it. Interviewees were recruited via a combination of a question in the survey asking if respondents would be willing to be contacted about taking part in an interview – and via YOS staff who put potential interviewees in touch with the research team. Recruitment to interviews was disrupted by the first Covid-19 lockdown, the enforced end to the observational research and a shift to a reliance on remote contact. Interviewees who had not already completed the survey were asked to do so as a prompt for the interviews which were framed around similar questions about their experience of the YOS and its impact but with more qualitative depth.

Sixty-three surveys were completed by 44 young people and 19 parents. Nine interviews took place with six of the young people and three of the parents/caregivers who had also completed the survey. At least 81% of participants were from Black and other racially minoritised backgrounds: 63% were Black; 13% were mixed/multiple ethnic groups; 5% were Asian. 10% were white while 9% stated 'other' or 'prefer not to say'. 63% of survey participants were male, 35% were female, and 2% stated 'other' or 'prefer not to say'. In terms of religion, 39% identified as Christian, 37% as 'no religion', 11% as Muslim, and 13% stated 'other' or 'prefer not to say'. Of the young people who took part in the survey, ten were aged 13-15 years and 34 were aged 16 or over. This paper draws on some of the qualitative data from the research with young people and parents/caregivers, gathered through the survey responses and interviews. The young people who took part in interviews all identified as Black, two of them identified as female and four as male. One of these young people had finished their time with the YOS but returned regularly to visit, one had almost finished their time with the YOS, three were in the latter half of their time and one had recently commenced their time. Three female parents were interviewed, of whom two identified as Black and one as White. The young people who took part in the study were primarily those on statutory orders with a small proportion who were involved with the YOS voluntarily.

The researchers were not given access to information about the offence records of the young people who took part in the study. All young people at the YOS were invited to take part in the research and there were a mix of those on longer and shorter referral orders in the survey and interview samples. A couple of young people revealed in interviews that this was not their first order but we did not specifically ask about this.

The data was subject to thematic analysis where themes and sub-themes were identified through manual coding of the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). However, the identification of themes began as a broadly deductive approach, becoming more inductive as the detailed sub-themes emerged. The YOS were working to a model of practice that focused on three elements, these being trauma-informed practice, restorative justice and awareness of unconscious bias. As such, the surveys and interviews were designed, and the research data we gathered was analysed, primarily in relation to these three elements. These became broad deductive themes within which the range of inductive sub-themes emerged. Young people's desire for peer support opportunities within the YOS was one such inductive theme that emerged in open survey responses and interviews and forms the focus of our analysis in this paper. We have published a broader analysis of our overall themes from the quantitative and qualitative data elsewhere (see XXX and XXX, 2021).

The peer support theme was most present in the interviews, where it emerged in all six of the young people's narratives. For the young people who had completed or almost completed their time with the YOS, it emerged most explicitly as a desire to take on roles as the peer representatives in the YOS and even to develop long-term careers in work with young people. For those who had been with the YOS less time, it emerged more explicitly as a desire to see young people represented in the YOS with a sense that they would have the skills and understanding to contribute but this was articulated less boldly than those who had been engaged for longer. In the young people's surveys, which were primarily completed by those who had been with the YOS for less than six months, discussions around peer influence primarily emerged as a growing recognition of the negative impact of previous peer groups and the need to disassociate from these and form new connections, as well as some less prevalent comments about the desire to see young people represented in the YOS. For parents/caregivers in the surveys and interviews, there was caution expressed about the

influence of peers even where the young people seemed to be moving on with their lives. The rest of this paper focuses specifically on the qualitative data that emerged relating to peer support theme and analyses it in relation to how it connects with Child First, trauma-informed and restorative practices.

The need for peer support opportunities in youth justice

The peer support sub-theme that emerged links to the main deductive themes as outlined above, with it having something to offer to young people's experiences of youth offending services as trauma-informed, restorative and to avoiding them being viewed through a negative adult lens. It offers a clear argument for how the trauma-informed, Child First and reparative approaches to youth justice can be brought together.

The young people in our study viewed peer support as something that would help to counter the feelings of judgement that exist for young people when they access the YOS and feel that they are under the 'adult gaze'. In this way, it arguably offers a form of resistance to the 'neoliberal responsibilisation' identified and critiqued by Case and Haines (2015). Further, the young people viewed peer support opportunities as a way to make the space feel safe for other young people and to enable them to trust the service. Thus, this supports the avoiding of (re)traumatisation and clearly contributes to creating a trauma-sensitive environment. Additionally, young people saw peer support as a way of 'giving back', a form of reparative and restorative practice. This suggests it might support a co-produced and Child First approach to reparative practice that goes beyond the focus on reparation with victims and puts young people at centre of the practice. Below, we analyse in detail how the findings from our research relating to peer support suggest that the provision of these opportunities would support a Child First, trauma-informed and reparative practice approach.

Peer support enhances a trauma-informed approach

Peer support is a key principle of the trauma-informed approach (SAMHSA, 2014). The young people in our study articulated their recognition of this through explaining how access to peer role models in the service would make the space feel safer and less intimidating.

> Some young people don't trust adults in general. So, they're coming to a place like this and having to express their feelings to an adult, they're bound to find it hard. That's when they feel more closed up, don't say nothing… They've already been told what it's like, already made-up their mind and [it's] drummed into their mind that that's what they're going to expect. [There should be] young people because when you see young people in this type of environment doing something good, it changes other young people's minds. (Young person 1)

This and other examples (see those quoted in the next section) demonstrate that our participants understood how young people experience the 'adult gaze', particularly when first attending the YOS, based on their own feelings and experiences of this. The same young person articulated this further.

> You don't expect to get as much positivity from staff because obviously you're coming here because you've been sent here for a punishment basically is how I look at it… And I was like,

> you wouldn't expect much positive adults around you that still want to smile and still respect you. (Young person 1)

This young person went onto recognise that their first impressions had not been correct, stating 'Even though they know what you've done, they don't really look at you like how other people look at you'. However, it demonstrates how having peer role models present at first access might support young people to experience youth offending services as less threatening. Our participants understood that a 'trust gap' exists between young people and adults in authority, arguably more pertinently for justice-involved young people who may have faced multiple interventions in their lives from adult professionals and experienced the 'adult gaze' most sharply.

The example above (as well as those in the next section) demonstrates how young people recognised that this 'trust gap' and that their resulting expectations of the service and its staff had been strongly entrenched. They felt therefore that the opportunity to connect with a peer could support the building of trust, safety and enabling productive communication in relationships with the YOS. This supports SAMHSA's (2014) proposition that peer support can enable someone to remain connected with and progress with their trauma recovery process through connection to a role model they can relate to and that they observe also making progress. It also reflects the findings of Lenkens et al (2021) who found that relationships with peer role models supported feelings of non-judgement and trust for young people.

The young person above also articulated another key outcome of peer support, *changing minds*, highlighting how negative and often internalised narratives of young people can be challenged by the presence of other young people in positive roles (see first quotation in this section). For young people in youth offending services, challenging these narratives arguably plays a significant role in the formation of self-identity and esteem, which is a substantial element of the trauma recovery process (Skuse & Matthew, 2015). More broadly, changing mindsets through restorative peer support can potentially support minimising wider community stigma surrounding youth crime and young offenders that is perpetuated by the dominantly negative framings of young people through an adult lens.

Incorporating peer support develops a co-produced and Child First approach

The young people who took part in our research who had been engaged over a substantial period of time, or had finished their time with the YOS, expressed an interest in working at the YOS themselves or acting as mentors for other young people. They explained that it was important to see other young people at the YOS because it would have supported them better as service users, both at first access, but also in terms of ongoing support.

> I would want to see young people working in here, that's what I want to see… because once you have young people in this type of environment helping other young people, that's when the ratings go more up in my eyes… Even volunteering, that would still be good because they will still be making a change to young people… Just like a small little conversation you can have with a young person, you can change their whole aspect completely. (Young person 4)

> I think they should sort out young people to work in here, even volunteering and traineeships, anything. It will all be good. It will bring less distress to young people in certain ways, because they know when they come here they can see a young person that's doing a

> role that they're coming to see and they can actually feel more trustworthy speaking to them… I wish that was me in their shoes because I'm here too but I'm the one sitting in the chair answering the questions. Do you get what I'm saying? I want to be the one giving the questions, like yeah, "What did you do today"? (Young person 1)

This was something that the young people were offering to be involved in co-producing for other young people and that they keenly felt that they could contribute to because of their own experiences.

> Because I found that because of my experiences, I'll be able to understand some of the young people, why they do the stuff that they do, what they're going through because I've gone through similar stuff. So, experience… Because someone could tell you something and you would understand them – like why they would have done something like that and what they're going through at the time, how – what effects it has on them. (Young person 2)

Implementing this co-produced model would support a Child First approach where the young people influence how the service should be run, take part in service delivery and are supported to build their own skills and self-esteem. The peer support approach potentially provides a mutual support model where the needs of all young people can be centred in the service.

The desire to work in the YOS came particularly from those who were reaching the end of their time with the YOS, or who had already moved on. As such, it would offer a way for them to remain connected to support whilst also getting involved in a positive opportunity that supports their ongoing development and recovery. This presents an opportunity and a challenge – it offers potential to develop a long-term form of restorative practice but would require additional resource to support young people who have completed their orders to undertake such roles with the appropriate supervision.

Having young people who have been through the service on youth offending panels, as well as in the service itself, could support an approach that remains Child First. However, at present people under the age of 18 and those with particular or recent convictions are barred from voluntary roles on youth offending panels (Ministry of Justice, 2018). Victims, however, are encouraged to take part in these panels (Ministry of Justice, 2018). This involvement of victims but not young people arguably shifts the process away from being child-centred (Case and Haines, 2015). The development of a new role for youth members on panels, from those who have been through youth offending services themselves, would support co-produced and Child First practice to be more clearly centred in the referral order process.

Peer support opportunities as a form of co-produced reparative practice

When victim-centred restorative justice doesn't work, it is often concluded that the young people lack or have not fully developed the capacity for the empathic understanding required for such reparative work (Edwards, Adler & Gray, 2016). However, in challenge to this, several of the young people in our research did feel a strong sense of empathy, directed at their peers (as already shown in the examples above). The young person quoted below articulated this empathic understanding for their peers particularly clearly.

> My upbringing was all over the place, but because of it I understand – I've gone through things people my age couldn't cope with. My dad, he never got to watch me grow up because he passed early, so that just set in my mind, I just want to do him proud and that… I don't know what instilled it into me, I think it was just the way I saw my dad and that, but even if I see someone on the road, just getting bullied or something, I wouldn't just stand there and watch it, I would – like me in my heart, like my heart will tell me that, "You have to get involved." I don't know why, but even today I came out of school and I saw a boy in a younger year crying, and I asked him what was wrong. He said he got strangled and threw down the stairs. I was like – "Why did he do that to you? Did you say something?" He said, "No I just laughed when I was walking past him." But he said it was because he was on the phone and the boy just came out of nowhere. I got involved. I took the boy to one of the teachers that was talking to him and that and I think it got sorted out. (Young person 6)

The young people who expressed a strong desire to work in the YOS viewed this as a way that they could 'give back' to their peers and communities. Supporting such opportunities could allow reparative practice to be defined by young people, centred on their needs and choices, building mutual support, and not shifting focus from the child to the victim.

The young people identified how working at the YOS would benefit them as the young people offering the support, not just those receiving it.

> I think you've got to have a certain qualification. You've got to be over 18, as I know. Yeah, so I just need to get the qualifications and then hopefully I can probably. I tried a couple of months ago, quite a long time ago, I tried to ask them if they could sort out apprenticeships there because that would be good for young people that wanted to look into working with young people. But I don't know if they managed to sort that out but that's what I would want to do here to be honest, that would be good. (Young person 5)

Such opportunities were seen to build on skills they had developed or become more aware of in themselves through their own engagement with the YOS. The same young person drew on the leadership skills they felt they would bring to such a role.

> To me, from my perspective, to be honest, a good leader to me is someone that could face up to anything and everything, no matter what the circumstances is… And to be honest that's me. Anything that comes my way I'm willing to take it, hard or not. (Young person 5)

Other young people reflected on the insights and advocacy skills they would bring from their own experiences, recognising that their developing awareness of their insights and skills had been supported by their time with the YOS.

> Insight, it's given me insight about certain stuff. And understanding as well… Insight to myself and people in general, like why some people act the way they do. It depends on how they grew up and that… I – yeah, it will help me because say because of when I come here and work here, it's like the fact that I can judge someone's personality by hearing how they talk or how they act. It's like it will be helpful because I'm obviously going to want a job here. (Young person 2)

> I would bring a lot to the table because I've seen a lot, been through a lot, heard a lot, I could show them a lot I guess. Because a lot of young people need like an advocate as well as an adult that has experienced things that they're going through. So, they can have that

> person that relates to things that they're feeling, so it makes it better when they're communicating. Do you get what I'm saying? (Young person 1)

These examples of how young people felt they would benefit from working in the YOS and draw on their own skills and insights illustrates potential for a Child First model of reparative practice for the young people providing the support as well as those they are supporting. These young people saw themselves as relatable role models where mutual empathy can be developed.

The young people's reflections above suggest that their time with the YOS encouraged them to feel confident in their abilities to help support, guide and empower their peers, drawing on their own empathy and lived experiences. It appears from our study that there was still some work to do to fully explore and embed the co-produced peer support opportunities the young people identified as helpful and one challenge to this is clearly that young people may only be ready to take such a role when they have completed (or almost completed) their time with the service. The data suggests such young people were asking for these opportunities but that they had not yet materialised to the extent they were asking for, particularly in the form of training, apprenticeships and long-term opportunities for career development. This reflects Burns and Creaney's (in press) argument that risk-based approaches and a resistance to relinquishing adult control are restraining forces to participatory practice in youth justice. Legalities and structural barriers may be an issue here - for example, the rules cited earlier about who can be on a youth offending panel. However, another reason for this may be a level of caution over whether such peer influences are positive or negative, influenced by dominant risk and deficit narratives of young people. Such caution clearly feeds into the legalities issues around how easily a young person with criminal convictions can begin to develop a long-term career in the sector.

Negative peer influences?

Young people recognised the potential negative influences of their peers. For example, when explaining in the survey how they were making changes to their lives, young people reflected on the negative impact of their peer groups.

> I'm not associating with certain people anymore which is making my mother happy. She felt that some of the people I was hanging around with were bad influences. (Survey respondent – young person)

> I'm thinking more about my actions than previously. Even though I've gotten arrested since I started my order, this had been mainly due to others. I've been arrested due to the actions of friends and me following what they are doing rather than me committing the offence myself. (Survey respondent – young person)

Similarly, parents and caregivers raised concerns about peer influence. The extract below from an interview with a parent highlights the complexity in determining whether peer influences are negative or positive.

> **Interviewer:** And then, you've said you've seen quite a big change in his engagement with school, training or work. What is his situation at the moment?

> **Mother**: He's got involved with working in a kitchen as a volunteer which was through another friend who was also on a referral and he's been going to do that. And he also does

music himself which is all self directed stuff which he's trying at the minute to apply to college to go and do more of that. So, he's not in education or training really at the moment but he's very motivated to do something. He's going to need some help with that – with the application and things, I think, but yeah.

Interviewer: Right. So, this friend who's also doing the kitchen with him. Where did he meet the friend? It sounds like a great friendship to have.

Mother: I'm cautious about that friendship. So, it was a friend he met through the crowd he was hanging out with – they were mainly kids from his school but his secondary school is a fairly troubled, inner London comprehensive and a lot of his friends he went to school with have been in trouble with the police or have been to court and been charged with things. And this friend he didn't go to school with but he's the cousin of a friend he went to school with and he seems like a really nice young man but he did serve a sentence in a youth… in prison basically. And [my son] formed his friendship with him whilst he was in prison and then that's continued as the guy's come out. Now he served his… he's done everything he's supposed to do and he seems to be forging a life for himself and he seems to also be quite motivated to move on and not live like that anymore and they certainly… he is the only person from that group that [my son] now seems to be in contact with. But I still… obviously, I'm his mum and I'm cautious about the type of friendship he might have with other people. I think he knows that but yeah.

The mother's caution in this example reflects that a level of nuance is needed in discerning where peers might be providing a positive or negative influence in young people's lives, as well as how adults may sometimes tend towards assuming peer influence to be negative. However, if young people who have offended are under pressure (from themselves or others) to dissociate from negative peer influences, the need for different and healthier connections with peers and access to positive peer role models is arguably ever more pertinent.

Conclusion

The analysis above demonstrates how peer support might contribute to a Child First, trauma-informed and reparative conception of youth justice practice. Peer support opportunities in youth offending services could enable continuing personal growth and recovery for young people who have previously attended and who no longer have direct access to service supervision and care. For young people attending services, access to peer role models could support a Child First and trauma-sensitive experience. A focus on mutual support with peers as a form of reparative practice offers potential for a unique approach to reparative work that brings child-centred and trauma-informed approaches together.

There are some limitations to our study. The interview sample was relatively small and based in one YOS. As such, further research and pilots would be needed of a reparative peer support approach before broad implementation. Challenges that emerge in our data include that the young people expressing the strongest desire to work in the YOS as peer advocates were those who had completed or almost completed their time. As such, implementation of the long-term opportunities and career development they were asking for would require substantial investment to ensure it was well resourced, managed and supervised. Given these young people's strength of feeling about how

well they would relate to other young people, there is a danger of 'over-identification' between mentors and mentees, as outlined by Harris (2019). As such, a structured model of supervision to support critical reflexivity on their role as peer mentors would be needed (ibid.). Other concerns that would need to be investigated and mitigated for in further research and testing include issues around safeguarding young people who are acting as peers to other young people involved in criminal activity as well as how to avoid re-traumatisation.

Overall, more substantial research is needed to establish exactly how a reparative peer support model might be constructed but our research suggests it would involve current and previous young people being involved in supporting others. Given the tensions in the literature around young people's capacity for empathy and some of the nuances around this, further research is needed into young people's empathy and motivations. The young people in our study expressed great empathy for their peers and a desire to support them but this needs further exploration as it is currently a significant gap in the wider literature which predominantly focuses on empathy for victims.

On a national policy level, work would be needed to remove legal and structural barriers to young people's involvement in youth offending services, supporting them with training and long-term career development where they have a desire to work in the sector. Allowing young people onto youth offending panels might be one way to support a reparative peer support model. There are currently procedural barriers to this that would need to be removed (Ministry of Justice, 2018). A new role for an additional youth member of these panels would need to be piloted and evaluated before wider implementation.

Our research contributes to the international youth justice literature, demonstrating how peer support might form part of Child First and trauma-informed policy and practice models that address the tensions inherent in restorative practices that focus on the victim rather than the child, by drawing on young people's empathy for their peers and communities. It presents a challenge to the notion that young people who have been involved in crime cannot empathise with others, with multiple examples from our study demonstrating young people's deep sense of empathy for their peers. This demonstrates that rather than young people lacking empathy, some of the typical interventions designed to draw on their empathy for others may have simply been misdirected. This suggests a reframing of reparative practices to centre the child and focus on reparation with their immediate peer communities could be a possible alternative.

Within any reframing of reparative practices, there is a need to recognise that young people in the justice system have experienced harm and trauma themselves, rather than them being simplistically framed as the enactors of harm in restorative and reparative practices. The Child First and trauma-informed approaches to youth justice reinforce the need for reparative approaches that centre 'harm done to (and not just by) young people, including by the professionals and institutions and that should protect them' (XXX and XXX, 2021: 33). A key way to mitigate harm and (re)traumatisation by youth offending services could be through more forms of co-produced peer involvement in the design and delivery of services.

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