

# Cultures, identities and purposes in youth justice – practitioner views

**Authors:**

Dr John Deering, Visiting Fellow, Faculty of Life Sciences and Education, University of South Wales

Dr Jonathan Evans, Associate Lecturer, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Open University

**Published by:**

Welsh Centre for Crime and Social Justice (WCCSJ)

2024



## **Cultures, identities and purposes in youth justice – practitioner views**

Dr John Deering, Visiting Fellow, Faculty of Life Sciences and Education, University of South Wales

Dr Jonathan Evans, Associate Lecturer, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Open University

Corresponding Author:

[john.deering1@southwales.ac.uk](mailto:john.deering1@southwales.ac.uk)

This research was undertaken with a small grant from the University of South Wales

### **Abstract**

This article is based upon a small online survey conducted with staff in Youth Offending Services in England and Wales. Some 20 years after the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 introduced Youth Offending Teams and made the 'prevention of crime' the main purpose of the youth justice system, the article explores notions of professional identity, culture and what respondents feel should be the purposes of youth justice practice. Qualitative data were obtained online via a questionnaire using mainly open questioning. Thematic analysis was undertaken.

The article concludes that respondents' views were underpinned by 'traditional social work' ideas and beliefs. We further suggest that there is a discernible youth justice practitioner identity underpinned by social work principles that has emerged since the 1998 Act. However, given the size of the sample (n=25) no generalisable results are claimed; rather the study raises questions that could be further explored.

## **Introduction**

This article draws upon data from an online survey administered to Youth Offending Services (YOS) staff concerning practitioners' views about occupational identity, practitioner culture and the purposes of practice. Working with children and young people who are on the cusp of entering the youth justice system, or have already done so, has undergone significant change in recent decades. These changes have included not only philosophical shifts in practice, but also institutional reorganisation. Before the passage of the 1998 Crime and Disorder Act (CDA, 1998), children in conflict with the law were dealt with by 'youth justice' teams located within local authority social services departments. Youth justice was effectively a children's service led by social workers typically working within specialist adolescent or youth support teams. Practitioners dealt not only with children's offending behaviour but also their welfare needs, which included working directly with families and the public care system.

The CDA 1998 had as its primary aim the prevention of offending. By embedding the Risk Factor Prevention Paradigm (RFPP, Farrington, 1995) in the newly formed Youth Justice Board's (YJB) assessment tool (Asset), there was a radical shift to a risk-focused approach to offending that identified criminogenic factors rather than welfare needs, although these often might overlap. The new service was established within multi-agency Youth Offending Teams (YOTs - now more commonly referred to as YOS) with statutory partners from Social Services, Health, Education, Probation and the Police.

## **Literature Review**

Whilst there is not an extensive literature about the views of YOT staff concerning occupational cultures, there are some early studies that considered the impact of the CDA

1998. For example, Cross et al (2003) reported on research conducted in Wales on the extent to which 'Children First' approaches were surviving within the new multi-agency YOTs within Wales. In brief, 'Children First' approaches involved regarding young people coming into contact with the youth justice system as children rather than offenders posing a level of risk of offending or harm. They were seen as not only in the process of developing, but also as relatively powerless and often experiencing personal difficulties and acute social disadvantage (Haines and Drakeford, 1998; Haines and Case, 2015).

The Welsh context was considered to be an important factor worthy of exploration because the Welsh Assembly Government (as it was then called) appeared committed to treating youth justice as a social service rather than a criminal justice agency and the youth policy. Extending Entitlement (National Assembly for Wales, 2000) reinforced the view that young people should be considered holistically rather than defined by their referral route to services.

The efforts of some practitioners to maintain a 'Child First' focus was placed under pressure by the new regime and the creation of both the YJB and YOTs. Cross et al (2003) identified three developments. Firstly, youth justice social workers were being required to focus primarily on children's offending and issues that related to family or the care system dealt with by social workers from Children's Services. This meant that a child who had contact with the youth justice system and Children's Services had two social workers rather than one. Secondly, the implementation of a case management model within YOTs risked privileging service delivery by youth justice specialists above genuinely holistic assessments and relationship-building. The third development was the 'probationisation' of youth justice, characterised by an emphasis on offence-focused work (often with a cognitive-behavioural

orientation) and a more routinised form of practice that threatened to erode practitioner discretion.

In summary, practice was increasingly being required to focus in an individualised way on the causes of offending, with structural and social factors being played down in what Goldson (2001) had referred to as the 'responsibilisation of children'. They found that whilst some respondents felt that a child first approach was still in evidence, others were experiencing a more offence and risk focused practice that was insufficiently holistic in its assessments and interventions.

Two studies published in 2007 explored the impact of the new youth justice governance and delivery arrangements on occupational identities and cultures at the local level. Souhami (2007) traced the metamorphosis of one Social Services Youth Justice Team into a new YOT. This ethnographic study details how the 'reconfiguration of the services and structures of youth justice...produced a period of intense disruption, anxiety and uncertainties', posing 'fundamental challenges' to practitioners' 'sense of professional identity and vocation' (Souhami, 2007, pp. 1-2). However, a sense of shared identity seemed to have been achieved through the 'incorporation of difference' (Souhami, 2007, p. 175) around the need to work together on shared tasks, such as new court orders.

Field (2007), meanwhile, considered the ways in which the various professions brought together in YOTs had maintained their own professional identities and cultures after a few years of working in a new environment. Interviewing practitioners, Field observed a complex evolving picture in which he argued welfare concerns were not so much marginalised, but rather recast via an optimistic view of intervention (as opposed to diversion) held by some as being potentially helpful to needy young people. At the same time, others maintained their

concern about bringing young people on the edges of offending into contact with a formal youth justice system known to be criminogenic and harmful of itself (Field, 2007, p. 312). Most professionals within his sample, including seconded police officers, saw welfarist intervention as necessary, if only as a means to an end (i.e., the prevention of further offending). Moreover, for social workers, their views of the relationship with young people had perhaps been recast as involving a 'qualified, revised' voluntarism and overall, he argued that seeing YOT practices as part of a 'punitive turn' as somewhat simplistic (Field, 2007, p. 326). Field concluded that whilst staff had tended to retain their (previous) professional identity, working within the YOT had brought an enhanced understanding of, and respect for, the identities and views of their colleagues.

More recently, and in the wake of changing policies that have, since around 2008, seen a significant reduction in the prosecution and incarceration of young people, Smith and Gray (2019) studied Youth Justice Plans and conducted interviews with managers and practitioners in England, and identified three typologies for teams and practice: offender management (OM); targeted intervention (TI); and children first, offenders second (CFOS). OM teams are seen as prioritising addressing an individual's offending to prevent recidivism, alongside focusing on the assessment and management of risk. Although welfare concerns are not ignored, they are conflated with risk factors and likely to be addressed as such. Linked to the OM approach, TI teams employ a range of particular interventions, often via specialist youth support. These are aimed only at young people who have offended, but rather as with the OM approach, the interventions will often address wider criminogenic needs, which include welfare concerns. Finally, CFOS teams are committed to promoting the best interests of vulnerable children and young people irrespective of whether they have offended. It is implicit in this approach that successful interventions will also reduce offending, mainly in line

with a desistance approach that emphasises focusing on positive and forward-looking interventions and support.

Their analysis cast doubt on the (continuing) existence of an orthodox practice in the wake of the CDA 1998 and the existence of any contemporary unified model of youth justice practice. They saw this trend as likely to continue and point to the emergence of youth justice ‘activists’ beginning to ‘articulate distinctive and progressive objectives and operating principles’ as a response to continuing change at government level and to localised reorganisation of social services departments after a decade of austerity (Smith and Gray, 2019, pp. 562-566).

### **The Study**

This article is based upon empirical data obtained via an online questionnaire sent to managers of all YOS in England and Wales in December – January 2019-20. Our intention was to reach as many staff as possible and to obtain a large sample based upon purposive and snowball sampling. We had no way of knowing how many managers passed the link to staff but were disappointed to receive only 25 responses from a range of staff. Moreover, as the Covid-19 pandemic took hold, we considered it inappropriate to attempt any follow-up to our initial request. We thus make no claims for generalisability for our data, but of course qualitative approaches to data tend to focus on an understanding of the experiences and views of respondents about certain phenomena, rather than any attempt to generate deductive predictive theory.

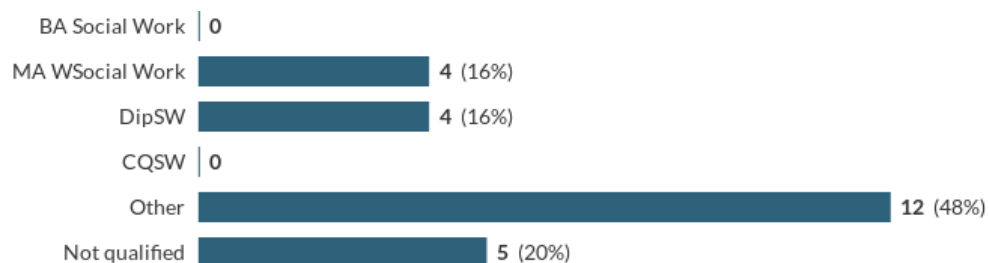
We value the contributions of our respondents as throwing light on the contemporary workplace and it is of interest that most of the data were homogeneous, revealing a level of agreement and commonly held ideas, from a diverse range of respondents. In addition to

basic demographic data, and questions about their current and previous jobs and qualifications, respondents were asked nine open questions about why they had joined YOS, their approach to practice and their values; and what they thought practice was and should be about. They were able to write as much as they wished in expanding text boxes.

The online study was conducted with professional respondents and dealt with professional matters. The details and reasons for the study were explained on the leading page of the survey and it was clearly indicated that by completing the questionnaire, the researchers would consider that respondents had given informed consent to participate. The study was approved by the Faculty Research Ethics Committee.

### The sample

Table 1. Qualifications



With reference to Table 1. above, it is of interest that almost half the respondents described themselves as 'other' in terms of qualification and 20% described themselves as 'not qualified'. None of the social work qualified respondents had the BA Social Work and many 'other' or 'not' qualified were in professional roles including case managers, operational managers, and more specific interventions work. On the face of things, some YOS may have diverse training and occupational profiles, presumably somewhat more so than social services departments.



There were 17 female and eight male respondents, a roughly 2:1 ratio and their length of service was spread fairly evenly from those with fewer than three years' service to those with 10 years and over.

Respondents were employed in a range of roles, which they described in their own words, rather than ticking a pre-determined box. These included: social work case manager; senior practitioner case manager; senior social worker; case worker; generic face-to-face worker; substance misuse worker; MA student on placement; court officer; speech therapist; pre-court and prevention worker; restorative practices worker; operational manager; Head of Service. Of the 25 respondents, we would classify 19 as 'front line', working directly with children and young people.

Previous occupations were varied, but interestingly only one respondent described her/himself as a social worker who had previously worked for a local authority social work department. Four had a probation background and others had worked in youth work and specialist education.

## **Findings**

### *Reasons for joining the YOS*

There were a range of reasons given for joining YOS, but these can be seen generally to fit into a pattern of what might be called 'traditional' social work values as defined by the British Association of Social Workers (BASW, 2021). This is the case for all respondents, including those not social work qualified. The most frequent response was the desire to work with young people by developing good relationships to 'help' and 'make a difference' to lives

usually experienced in difficulty and disadvantage. Mentions were also made of wishing to empower young people and to enable change.

Also of interest was that there was no mention of wanting to work within a criminal justice system to reduce offending and encourage compliance with and accountability to a sentence of the court. Given the history of YOS as being created within the Labour government's policies of risk assessment and management, public protection and promoting personal responsibility amongst young people involved in offending and punishment, it is perhaps surprising that none of the respondents made mention of any of these ideas.

#### *Professional values and working in YOS*

There were a range of responses on this topic, but one of the striking features was their homogeneity. Whilst respondents mentioned a range of different values, there were a clearly identifiable set of ideas about values (and also 'non-values' such as skills). Not surprisingly, these related closely to the reasons given for joining YOS. We identified these as fitting into the following categories: personal values; interpersonal values; professional values. Clearly these categories are not mutually exclusive and there are some overlaps between them.

In terms of personal values, respondents felt it was important to be non-judgemental and respectful of individuals, to be fair and honest, reliable, sincere, to work with integrity, and to be open to change and new ideas.

As far as interpersonal values were concerned, the most important value overall concerned a recognition of and commitment to the importance of the relationship between the worker and the young person. Clearly, this is also a professional value, and it incorporates the need to relate to others with compassion, empathy and with a belief in the ability of individuals to

change. Respondents identified the need to work with the positives in young people and to take an empowering approach.

Finally, the most frequently mentioned professional value was of a commitment to the professional relationship. Whilst this was not defined per se, the mention of other professional and interpersonal values indicated that this needed to be located within a child focused approach. Associated values were a commitment to children's rights and the UNCRC (UN 1989) and a recognition that much of an individual young person's problematic behaviour may be linked to trauma and Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs, Welsh Government, 2021). Less emphasis was laid explicitly on issues such as structural disadvantages suffered by children and their families, but some mention was made of a commitment to social justice. Respondents considered the focus of their practice should be the provision of 'help', 'support' and 'assistance' to facilitate change, as opposed to any notions of punishment, law enforcement or court accountability. That said, mention was made of the role of YOS in public protection and the need to make difficult decisions that were defensible. One respondent made the following comments:

*'Child First. We work with children who happen to be in trouble with the law. We do NOT work with young offenders who need to be taught a lesson they won't soon forget. Public Protection. Notwithstanding 'Child First', we also protect the public from harm. This may require a 'balance' to be struck to include difficult decisions'.*

*(Male senior practitioner, 10+ years' experience, social work trained)*

*The purposes and focus of practice and influences upon practice*

The focus of respondents was the broad support and assistance that they aimed to give to children and their families to improve their lives and thus reduce reoffending and risk. The way this operationalised was via the 'worker as expert' establishing a positive relationship and aiming to assist the individual and their families with their lives, decision-making, behaviour, mental health and access to services. Moreover, the focus is on the individual and their family and less so on their environment, the wider world and socio-economic disadvantage, although advocacy on behalf of the child within the justice and wider systems is mentioned. Tentatively, this suggests a traditional social work casework model, rather than an adherence to the RFPP (Farrington, 1995). Alternatives to conventional casework are not mentioned specifically in participants' responses (see also the Knowledge and Skills section below). This appears not to fit with Smith and Gray's (2019) outline of YOS typologies, seemingly not aligning with any of their three suggested models. That said, elements of this approach might fit with child first and follow-up qualitative interviews might have teased out other perspectives being applied in practice.

Respondents saw themselves as child-centred in that the aim of their interventions was primarily to facilitate fair outcomes for young people. Fair outcomes included diversion as far as possible from the youth justice system (YJS) as well as the direct work with young people. In terms of underlying causes of offending, theories of trauma were cited regularly, and it seems clear that these had become well-known and accepted as a legitimate basis for intervention via a casework model. A focus on trauma and the Enhanced Case Management approach (Skuse and Matthew, 2015) is evident. Risk (mainly in terms of re-offending rather than risk factors) was mentioned as a focus, but this was seen as being addressed via helping, supporting and advising young people with issues in their lives. In this way, a traditional

welfare model appeared to be in play, with little mention of the offence(s) or a focus on offending as such. One respondent did mention offending, stating that support and advocacy was not with the aim of 'minimising their behaviour or getting them off', and that via restorative approaches the young person is assisted to see the victim's perspective and to reflect on their actions.

More pragmatic elements of practice were also important, such as the need to keep up to date with policy and legal requirements in what was seen as a rapidly changing environment. Key Performance Indicators and local plans were influential, whilst budgets and access to resources were seen as problematic to some degree.

Despite recent promotion of and focus on theories of desistance by the YJB and the Inspectorate (HMIP, 2016; Deering and Evans, 2021) such ideas were not mentioned directly, but some respondents stated that they wished to 'empower' young people and did seek to advocate on their behalf with some agencies in the wider systems, although these were not specified.

One respondent commented:

*'The purpose of my practice is to improve outcomes and life chances for young offenders, by hopefully, stopping them from offending through their own choice, by using an educative approach to assessment of needs and intervention. My practice is child centred. I have strong feminist and socialist values. These dictate my style of work and inform my working style.'*

*(Female youth justice worker, <3 years' experience, not social work trained)*

*A knowledge and skills base within YOS*

Not surprisingly, the range and types of knowledge regarded as core to youth justice were considerable and clearly reflected what respondents had said about reasons to join YOS and the focus of their practice and values. Knowledge requirements fell broadly into three categories: child development and its impact upon behaviour; types and theories of intervention with children; the law, legal systems and processes.

*'Youth Justice is a knowledge-based profession. The YJ practitioner must be a 'consumer of research' who reflectively integrates that knowledge with their experience of practicing it.*

*That is to say, knowledge informs practice even as practice informs knowledge.'*

*(Male senior practitioner, 10+ years' experience, social work trained)*

In terms of child development, a range of theoretical perspectives were mentioned, but those receiving most attention were Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1953), ACEs (Public Health Wales, 2015) trauma theories, labelling theory (Becker, 1974) and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1943).

Specific theories of intervention were less clearly delineated, but the Cycle of Change (Prochaska, 1994) and Motivational Interviewing interventions (Miller and Rollnick, 2002) were prominent alongside theories of 'personal change'. These responses underlined the value base mentioned above, namely the belief in an individual's ability to change and, by implication, a belief in the possibility of YOS intervention facilitating and encouraging such change. Exceptions were mentions of restorative justice, in terms of its theory base and methods of practising it as an intervention, as well as the Good Lives Model (Fortune, 2018) .

Finally, it was clearly regarded as essential for YOS workers to have a professional knowledge of the law and legal systems in relation to children and young people, in respect of children's rights, as well as the criminal law (the YJS) and family law, in terms of the care system and safeguarding.

Of interest was the focus upon the individual and, to a lesser extent, the family. Whilst mention was made of the need to have knowledge of sociological theories of 'communities', of a knowledge of diversity and 'cultural competency', the focus of practitioner knowledge was the individual. This appears to be in terms of 'fixing' the individual and helping them to cope with disadvantageous circumstances, either as a result of their upbringing or their socio-economic position. This tendency is consistent with views expressed above about the focus of practice and reinforces the apparent 'traditional' social work/casework approach. There are mentions of the need for practice to intervene in wider social, educational and economic systems and to advocate on behalf of children, but these are fewer in number.

In terms of skills, these very much dovetailed with the reasons given for joining YOS and with the values and beliefs seen as essential to do this work. Prime amongst them was the need to possess communication skills to engage and develop rapport with children, young people and their families. Such empathic skills were seen as essential to building a proper, positive professional relationship built upon respect and openness, without which no useful work was likely to be undertaken.

#### *Professional identities within YOS*

Respondents were asked about their professional identity and if this had changed during their time working in YOS. Interestingly, fewer than half the respondents described a specific

professional identity. Not surprisingly, these were social worker, probation officer and youth justice worker.

As mentioned, very little was said about a specific identity. The majority of responses related to specific elements of their job, or personal beliefs, attitudes or attributes related to their role within the YOS. One respondent said that they did not understand the question.

Of those who did specifically address their professional identity, there were interesting things said about how important this was to them and, occasionally about why and how this had changed:

*'I'm a YOT social worker, I have worked in child protection before, but I did not enjoy this identity and unfortunately I found that the job did reflect the view that social workers remove children. I am proud to be part of a YOT and proud of the work we do. I enjoy the challenges that come with the job and feeling able to advocate and support children and families to have a voice.'*

*(Female social worker, 4-6 years' experience, social work trained)*

*'Yes, this has changed quite significantly. I always saw myself as a probation officer and felt proud as such and occasionally a bit frustrated with some social work colleagues who appeared to struggle with risk assessment, boundaries and being able to separate how much they liked a child from their assessment of their risks! This has mellowed over the years as my own practice has become much more child focused and flexible.'*

*(Female manager, 10+ years' experience, probation officer trained)*



Of those who were social work trained and employed in social work roles, none made any mention of their professional identity changing although, as mentioned, the majority of respondents said little if anything about their identity. The only discernible ‘trend’ was the former probation officers who did relate an identity based mainly in a shift to a more welfare-oriented, child-centred practice and away from a more justice-based culture. One respondent did mention respect for a range of different cultures (echoing Field 2007), implying that these did exist within YOS, but without being specific:

*'No I would not say that my professional identity has changed.'*

*I would say that working within the YOS that you must be able to identify and respect other people's professions, ethical considerations and viewpoint to be able to work in a multi-agency approach. You can have professional debates whilst still respecting and acknowledging other people's point of view and how they have been trained.'*

*(Female senior practitioner, 10+ years' experience, social work trained)*

#### *The impact of policy and practice changes in YOS*

Whilst there were a range of views regarding changes to the policy agenda and practice, one emerging theme (although not a majority view) was around the impact of the CDA 1998, which created the YOT system and included the abandonment of cautioning and its replacement by a reprimand and warning system which aimed to increase the numbers of young people being prosecuted. This in turn led to a rapid increase in the use of the new community orders and custody. This change and its underlying philosophy were seen generally in a negative light.

*'The CDA 1998 was a flawed criminogenic theory ..... It asserted children & young people needed massive intervention at the earliest opportunity, but also rebranded young justice provision. Youth Justice Team became Youth Offending Teams. Children became young offenders. Even custody became a Training Order. Repeat cautioning was deemed bad & replaced by an extra-ordinarily short ratchet to court (Reprimand & Final Warning) where many young people (who should have been diverted) were sucked into the Youth Justice System & given court orders..... they were all young offenders who needed to be taught a lesson. In many areas, anti-social behaviours were dished out like confetti for sub-criminal behaviours creating law on the hoof and proscribing otherwise ordinary and legal behaviour.'*

(Male practitioner, 10+ years' experience, social work trained)

However, these changes were seen as being slowly reversed from around 2008, resulting in a return to diversion, cautioning, a reduction in first time entrants to the YJS (FTEs) and in the use of custody. This was welcomed and, moreover in recent years the move to practice underpinned by trauma theory that (re)emphasises a developmentally informed and more welfare-based approach underpinned by well-developed professional relationships was seen as a positive development alongside practice based in desistance theory. The latter was seen as emphasising the development of young people's social and personal capital, focusing on the positives in their lives and their future, rather than the risks they might pose as a result of past offending.

Whilst elements of this picture can be seen in many of the responses, one person did give a counter-narrative which saw elements of the changes in the last decade as injurious to good practice, namely the reduction or removal of early intervention and prevention services as

missing the opportunity to nip offending in the bud. This was associated with what the respondent felt was a loss of a justice-based specialism within YOTs, including a focus on compliance and enforcement, sometimes with the merging of YOT provision into more general social work departments.

*'The loss of prevention services which means we cannot work with those on the cusp of offending and they are now picked up through other children's services .....*

*The dilution of the YOS as a multi-disciplinary team and the thinking that anyone can do it*

*The concern that some local authorities are merging YOS with other teams and the loss of the YOS specialism and the move away from enforcement.'*

*(Female Information Officer, 10+ years' experience, not social work qualified)*

More specifically attention was drawn to the rapid rate and extent of change in policy and subsequent practice, with the length of time spent on administration, assessment and the use of computers seen as negative, both due to their perceived lack of usefulness, but mainly for the reduction in the amount of face-to-face work caused by having to carry out these tasks.

This in turn was linked to the importance attached by respondents to the quality of the relationships they were able to develop with young people. This was seen as probably the single most important element of their job as without it little else might be achieved. In this sense the reduction in FTEs and hence caseloads in recent years were seen as important improvements. This had also brought a perhaps unforeseen consequence; that of the caseload being made up of an increasing percentage of young people who had particularly complex needs. This had made even more vital the need to have a sufficient (increased) amount of time to spend in face-to-face work with the young person.

*'There are far less young people in the system that when I first joined the YOT. I would say that although we now deal with less volume, we are now dealing with young people with far more complex issues. Practitioners needs to be highly skilled in what they do to work with the young people in the CJS today.'*

*(Female Head of Service, 10+ years' experience, other qualification)*

More specifically, other changes commented upon positively were the removal of the Anti-Social Behaviour Order, and the increased focus on learning needs and disability. Less positive changes included the increasing level of bureaucracy, including at senior level where much time was seen as being spent in reporting 'upwards' to little effect for practice and the continuing lack of resources in terms of education and health care services.

#### *Possible best practice in YOS*

Respondents were asked the following utopian question:

*'If the YOS was working in the best way you can imagine, what would its practice look like and what theories/ideas/principles would this be based upon?'*

This resulted in a wide range of ideas, both general and specific. In general terms, respondents wished to see the development of some of the changes of recent years, namely the continuation of diversion from the criminal justice system, resulting in smaller caseloads for practitioners. This would both remove most young people from the criminogenic impact of the YJS, but also allow for far more time being available for the development of good professional relationships with the neediest young people, which was seen as the cornerstone of effective practice; indeed, simply spending time with young people was seen as fundamental. In such a system, it was felt that the young people who were sufficiently

persistent or serious in their offending to receive statutory sentences were likely to have a range of complex needs, probably due to having experienced trauma and other ACEs.

As a result, practice would need to be trauma informed with enhanced levels of supervision and modified approaches to compliance. In general, practice would become more 'welfare oriented' and 'child friendly', but mention was made of the need to balance this against the issue of risk assessment and management where necessary. In terms of assessment, some respondents felt that the current AssetPlus system, whilst having some positive elements in terms of its more forward-looking and positive focus, was seen as far too time-consuming. Moreover, shorter assessments were seen by one respondent as capable of producing all the necessary information. This was also seen as part of a need to get away from excessive time spent inputting to computers in terms of assessments and contact recording.

*'The system at the moment is working well based on diversion, desistance and trauma recovery. What really needs to change is to get rid of the overblown, unnecessarily long Asset Plus. A colleague recently arrived from Children's Services told me that her Child Protection assessments took one tenth of the time of completing the Asset and she managed to properly identify all the issues and actions.'*

*(Male Senior Social Worker, 10+ years' experience social work qualified)*

It was argued that practitioners should be properly trained in terms of interventions, and also skills, but that there should be no 'theoretical fetishism', or one-size fits all approach to theory or policy and practice. Once in practice, clinical supervision should become normative, given the likely complexities of the caseload and practice should also be based in partnership working with practitioners being able to influence health and education providers to promote timely and suitable intervention and services for young people.

Mention was made of the renaming of YOTs, removing the labelling elements of the term and emphasising a social work service for children with complex needs. An interesting suggestion was the allocation of some of the Child in Need budget to help ensure a young person had no more than one social worker.

*'The YOTs would not be called YOTs (as labelling) but rather something which refers to a service for older children with complex needs and this would make it a suitable place for children at risk of criminal exploitation to be supported by those partners with the right skills. The new service would have far greater clout with regard to education: both in supporting academies to ensure they do what they can to help a child to remain in mainstream and also to have access to a greater variety of placements for a child who struggles in a mainstream setting.'*

*(Female Service Manager, 10+ years' experience, other qualification)*

Interventions should become overwhelmingly community based and be influenced by the voice of the child and include the following if and when appropriate: restorative justice; family work; education, employment and training provision with formal qualifications; substance misuse work; mental and physical health services; strengths based and forward looking; risk management; and offices should have open, drop-in facilities where young people could benefit from a range of interventions such as employment and trade skills, art, music and sport.

*'[There should be] .... skills workshops with qualified staff from the building industry (carpentry, brick laying, plumbing) and closer links with the PRUs ..... [and] a move from the traditional office based theme, towards a more open door policy where young people can drop in, chat, make food, wash / dry laundry, use I.T. or just feel safe.'*

(Male education and employment support worker, 10+ years' experience, other qualification)

*'[Ideally] we would spend a lot more time with the young people and do positive work with them in the community, i.e. in the gym or sports as more time spent with offenders is proven to help them to lead a positive life and stop offending, today we spend too much time behind a computer ticking boxes and making sure our backs are covered.'*

(Male Pre-Court worker, 10+ years' experience, not social work qualified)

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

### *The purposes of youth justice practice*

These data were gathered via a small online questionnaire but nevertheless represent the views of a relatively wide range of YOS staff in terms of their qualifications, job roles and length of service. What is interesting is the high level of homogeneity in all the responses. Overall, the picture that emerges is one of a casework model providing an individualised service to children and young people. Respondents had joined YOS for what might be described as 'traditional social work' reasons. Whilst mention is made of collaborative working with young people, a stronger impression is given of the practitioner as an expert offering guidance, support and other interventions as necessary. The focus of these interventions is the child or young person and to some degree their families, but there is also some recognition of structural disadvantage and related problems that will have had an impact upon behaviour and needs to be addressed, insofar as YOS are able to address such matters. Indeed, whilst this appears to fit to some degree with a risk factor approach, it is certainly not the case that respondents agreed with general early intervention, stressing the

importance of diversion; nor did they mention risk as a primary focus. Moreover, punishment was clearly not regarded as in any way appropriate to their role and, overall, there was a clear level of rejection of the more punitive elements of New Labour's original 'new youth justice' project. Elements of an approach more aligned to desistance theories is implicit, as mention is made of empowering young people, engaging with them to consider the future and work with their strengths (Deering and Evans, 2021).

Whatever the particular focus, the most important element in their work is spending sufficient time with young people to develop an effective professional relationship. Whilst this is not defined to any degree, there are mentions of being empathic and spending 'enough' time (which often implies more time than is perhaps currently possible) to develop the relationship, without which little is likely to be achieved.

The reduction of FTEs was welcomed for its own sake, but also as potentially allowing more time to work in depth with those young people still within the system. An eclectic, child-friendly approach seemed to be preferred, with training in 'effective' interventions necessary, but an opposition to programme fetishism and a one size fits all approach was evident.

Our respondents seem to have rejected the more punitive management elements of the YJS introduced under the CDA 1998, although it is the case that many of these had been moderated from around 2008. They saw both welfare and criminogenic needs as necessary foci of their work and regarded the professional relationship as the essential vehicle by which they might be addressed. Modes and methods of intervention were less clearly delineated. In terms of Smith and Gray's (2019) YOS team models, this may be seen as falling within a broadly CFOS model but one that also includes targeted Interventions; indeed theoretical orthodoxy is rejected.



### *Practitioner Cultures*

Practitioner cultures within YOS should ideally be considered and analysed from three different but related perspectives. Firstly, there is the occupational culture into which practitioners are socialised through their training and post-qualifying experience. The second perspective concerns the extent to which practitioners continue to identify primarily with their professions and the home agencies from which they originated. The third relates to organisational culture, which has local as well as national/jurisdictional dimensions. Although youth justice should be guided by those universal principles codified in international human rights conventions such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989), the application of those principles has always had to take account of local political and cultural conditions. Indeed, Goldson and Briggs (2021) have highlighted the importance of 'locality' in youth justice practice and differential outcomes. However, little direct mention was made of cultures or identity by our respondents, but much of our data were homogeneous in terms of personal and professional values and the ways in which respondents felt an 'ideal' youth justice practice might operate. In this way, it might be argued that a professional 'youth justice culture and identity' does exist but has yet to be articulated as such. Indeed Souhami (2007) did describe the emergence of a 'shared identity' at an early stage of the developments of YOTs. This identity might encompass the need to acknowledge and see worth in the views and values of colleagues from different professional backgrounds (Field, 2007) and thus a commitment to a potentially eclectic practice that eschews theoretical fetishism.

We would suggest that these elements might be seen to form part of a youth justice culture and practice identity: a social work approach to working with young people experiencing

difficulties, including involvement with the YJS; that this is based on the development of an empathic professional relationship that is facilitated by a range of inter-personal relationship and interventions skills and is the necessary building block for the use of an eclectic range of theory in terms of interventions.

These elements would be underpinned by an approach to young people's offending that argues for diversion from and minimal intervention within the YJS. Interventions should address young people's problems holistically (both welfare and criminogenic needs) and involve assessment and interventions that are, where feasible and appropriate, constructed in partnership with young people and their families. Interventions need to address both personal/psychological and social/sociological problems and disadvantages experienced such as trauma, experience of ACE's, poverty, poor housing and related structural inequalities.

## References

- BASW (2021). *The BASW Code of Ethical Practice for Social Work*. BASW
- Becker, H. (1974). *Deviance and social control*. Routledge
- Bowlby, J. (1953). Critical phases in the development of social responses in man and other animals. *New Biology*. (14), 25-32
- Cross, N., Evans, J. and Minkes, J. (2002). Still Children First? Developments in youth justice in Wales. *Youth Justice*. (2), 151-162
- Deering, J. and Evans, J. (2021) 'Lost in Translation or a Work in Progress? Developing Desistance-Informed Youth Justice Practice in the Welsh Context', *British Journal of Social Work* 51, 3172–3189
- Farrington, D. (1995). The development of offending and anti-social behaviour from childhood: key findings from the Cambridge study in delinquent development. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*. (36), 929-964
- Field, S. (2007). Practice cultures and the 'new' youth justice in (England and) Wales. *British Journal of Criminology*. (47), 311-330
- Fortune, C. (2018). The Good Lives model: a strengths-based approach for youth offenders. *Aggression and Violent Behaviour*. (38), 21-30
- Goldson, B. (2001). The demonisation of children: from the symbolic to the institutional. In P. Foley, J. Roche and S. Tucker (Eds). *Children in society: theory, policy and practice*. Palgrave

- Goldson, B. and Briggs, D. (2021). *Making youth justice: Local penal cultures and differential outcomes – lessons and prospects for policy and practice*. Howard League for Penal Reform
- Haines, K. and Drakeford, M. (1998). *Young People and Youth Justice*. Macmillan
- Haines, K. & Case, S. (2015). *Positive Youth Justice: Children First, Offenders Second*. Policy Press
- Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation (2016). *Desistance and young people*. HMIP
- Maslow, A. (1943). A theory of human motivation. *Psychological Review*. (50), 370-396
- Miller, W. and Rollnick, S. (2002). *Motivational Interviewing: preparing people for change*. Guildford Press
- Mullaly, R. (1997). *Structural Social Work: Ideology, theory and practice*. Oxford University Press
- Prochaska, J. (1994). *Systems of psychotherapy: a transtheoretical approach*. Brooks Cole
- Public Health Wales (2015). *Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) in Wales*. PHW
- Skuse, T. and Matthew, J. (2015). The trauma recovery model: sequencing youth justice interventions for young people with complex needs. *Prison Service Journal*. (220), 16-25
- Smith, R. and Gray, P. (2019). The changing face of youth justice: models of practice. *Criminology and Criminal Justice*. (19), 554-571
- Souhami, A. (2007). *Transforming Youth Justice: Occupational Identity and Cultural Change*. Willan
- United Nations (1989). *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*. United Nations

Welsh Government (2021). *Review of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) policy*. Welsh Government

*Published by the Welsh Centre for Crime and social Justice, University of South Wales, Pontypridd. ISBN: 978-1-909838-77-2.*

*Copyright © Welsh Centre for Crime and Social Justice, University of South Wales, 2024*

*All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means without written permission from the publishers.*

*John Deering and Jonathan Evans have asserted their right to be identified as the authors of this work in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.*

\*\*\*\*

*Cyhoeddwyd gan Canolfan Troesedd a Cyfiawnder Chymdeithasol Cymru, Prifysgol De Cymru, Pontypridd. ISBN: 978-1-909838-77-2.*

*Hawlfraint © Canolfan Troesedd a Cyfiawnder Chymdeithasol Cymru, Prifysgol De Cymru, 2024*

*Cedwir pob hawl. Ni chaniateir atgynhyrchu unrhyw ran o'r cyhoeddiad hwn, ei storio mewn system adfer, na'i drosglwyddo ar unrhyw ffurf neu mewn unrhyw fodd heb ganiatâd ysgrifenedig gan y cyhoeddwyr.*

*Mae John Deering ac Jonathan Evans wedi hawlio eu hawl nhw I gael eu hadnabod fel awduron y 30waith hwn yn unol â Deddf Hawlfraint, Dyluniadau a Phatentau 1988.*

\*\*\*\*

*Published by the Welsh Centre for Crime and social Justice.*

*ISBN: 978-1-909838-77-2.*

*Cyhoeddwyd gan Canolfan Troesedd a Cyfiawnder Chymdeithasol Cymru.*

*ISBN: 978-1-909838-77-2.*