



Alliance
for Youth
Justice



Bridging gaps and changing tracks

Supporting racially minoritised young
people in the transition to adulthood
in the criminal justice system

February 2024

About this briefing

This is the first in a series of three policy briefings by the Alliance for Youth Justice on critical issues faced by young people in contact with the criminal justice system transitioning to adulthood.

It draws from a [evidence review](#); an expert seminar bringing together professionals from the youth and adult criminal justice, racial justice, voluntary and community sectors, including specialist organisations led 'by and for' Black and racially minoritised communities; visits and meetings with practitioners and civil servants; and interviews with Black, Asian and mixed heritage young people.

This briefing explores how racially minoritised young people experience particularly destabilising transitions due to deficits in support before and after turning 18. It highlights the crucial role the voluntary and community sector plays in addressing these shortfalls, arguing for reforms to better facilitate and fund the sector's involvement in racially minoritised young people's lives.

NB: practitioners, professionals and civil servants spoken to as part of this project are collectively referred to as experts throughout this briefing. Young people who are experts by lived experience are referred to as young people.

About the project

The '[Young People in Transition in the Criminal Justice System](#)' project is a three-year project by the [Alliance for Youth Justice \(AYJ\)](#), supported by Barrow Cadbury Trust. It examines the experiences of children and young people turning 18 while in contact with the justice system, exploring issues spanning the youth and adult criminal justice systems and wider support systems.

By drawing on existing evidence and engaging directly with children and young people, front-line practitioners and other experts, we aim to build a strong and credible evidence base; influence government policy and strategies; enable the development of effective practice; shape the narrative around young people in transition; and support young people to empower themselves as advocates to share their experiences and make change.



About the AYJ

The AYJ brings together over 80 organisations, advocating for and with children to drive positive change in youth justice in England and Wales. Members range from large national charities and advocacy organisations to numerous smaller grassroots and community organisations. The AYJ advocates for distinct systems, services and support that treat children as children first and foremost – underpinned by social justice, children’s rights and a focus on positive long-term outcomes. AYJ aims to promote widespread understanding about the underlying causes of children coming to the attention of the criminal justice system, and champion approaches that enable them to reach their full potential.



About Barrow Cadbury Trust

This briefing was made possible by support from the Barrow Cadbury Trust, an independent, charitable foundation committed to bringing about a more just and equal society. Transition to Adulthood (T2A) is convened and funded by the Barrow Cadbury Trust. It campaigns for a distinct approach for young adults (18-25) based on their ongoing maturation. Registered Charity Number 1115476.



Introduction

Young people transitioning to adulthood while in contact with the justice system face a steep cliff edge. As they move from Youth Offending Teams (YOTs) to Probation, how they are supported changes significantly. Key relationships and information are lost, contact levels drop, resources reduce. The overall ethos switches from welfare to enforcement, and services are often not designed for or tailored to young adults. This is far from the only change happening for highly vulnerable young people at this time. With prevalent experiences of violence, abuse, mental ill-health, neurodevelopmental disorders, substance misuse, and the care system, as they turn 18 many services may change or fall away at the same time, leaving them at risk of harm and continued involvement in the justice system.¹

The sudden shift in expectations and approach of the systems around them, and the substantial drop off and lack of continuity of support, is too often based on binary measures of age rather than on needs. This arbitrary age barrier is out of step with evidence on maturity and vulnerability, and is failing young people at a critical time for preventing needs becoming more complex and entrenched and promoting desistance.

While there is a welcome increased recognition in policy of the vulnerability of young people as they transition into adulthood, there is a long way to go to improve outcomes, and there remain significant gaps in understanding how different groups of young people facing layers of marginalisation and disadvantage experience the transition, and the response that is required.

Racially minoritised children are disproportionately likely to experience the transition from youth to adult justice systems due to racial disparities and systemic inequalities in criminal justice and wider society. They may be more likely to do so from a point of greater vulnerability, and may face additional barriers to desistance. It is therefore particularly important the disruptive impact of transition for this group is understood and addressed, yet this project's evidence review raised concerns that biases and skill and resource deficiencies in the justice system leave racially minoritised young people less supported as they transition to adulthood, compounding the impacts of the cliff edge at 18.²

This briefing takes a closer look at how issues such as adultification, stereotyping, a lack of cultural and age-specific competencies in the workforce, and wider system issues are leaving statutory agencies falling short and setting racially minoritised young people up to fail as they become young adults. It builds on evidence pointing to the role of the voluntary and community sector, particularly grassroots community-based organisations, in counteracting this by ensuring specialist, tailored, and relatable support is available. Despite these organisations being well placed to meet needs and cultivate meaningful engagement, the research highlights barriers in funding and commissioning that stop them from reaching the young people who need their support, and examines changes the government, funders and commissioners must make to improve the relationship between the justice system and voluntary sector organisations led 'by and for' racially minoritised communities.

Understanding what good support looks like for this particularly failed group of young people at this particularly tumultuous time in their lives, and improving the support available to racially minoritised young people in the youth and adult criminal justice systems is critical to stop disparities worsening, bridge the gap at 18, and build better futures.

We use the term 'racially minoritised'³ throughout this report when referring to groups that have been minoritised and marginalised as a result of their race or ethnicity, including Black, Asian, mixed heritage, Gypsy Roma and Traveller, and other groups. Other terms may be used if taken directly from literature. Where possible we seek to disaggregate and separately identify the unique experiences of different groups.

This research largely centres on the experiences of, and support for, Black and mixed heritage boys as they are the largest racially minoritised groups in the youth justice system,⁴ they are significantly disproportionately represented compared to 2021 census data,⁵ and experts consistently raised concerns about their treatment and outcomes in the criminal justice system.

Transition to adulthood in context



Young people in transition in numbers

Statistics on young people who transition from childhood to young adulthood while in contact with the justice system are not available. However, we know that:



28% of children in the youth justice system are **racially minoritised**; **11%** are **Black**, **10%** are **mixed heritage**, **5%** are **Asian**, **1%** are **Gypsy or Irish Traveller**.⁶



86% of children in the youth justice system **are boys**, **14% are girls**.⁷



29% of children cautioned or sentenced in 2022/23 were **17 years old**. **74%** were **aged 15-17**.⁸



On average there are **around 560 young people** supervised by the adult Probation service who are **on a Youth Rehabilitation Order** (community sentences given to children).⁹



There were 50,813 young people aged 18-20 sentenced in 2021/22, **compared to 11,388 10-17-year-olds**.¹⁰



38% of proven offences by racially minoritised children are **categorised as violence against the person**, **12% drugs**, **11% robbery**, **9% motoring offences**, **6% theft**, **5% public order**, and **4% criminal damage**.¹¹



Cumulative discrimination and disadvantage



Racially minoritised children face a range of inequalities that make them vulnerable to criminalisation,¹² and their transition to adulthood must be understood in this context. Complex social issues, structural disadvantages and racial discrimination have a cumulative effect of unmet needs, marginalisation, disillusionment, disempowerment, and contact with the justice system.

POVERTY AND AUSTERITY: Racially minoritised children are disproportionately affected by child poverty, which is rising¹³ and increases the risk of justice system contact¹⁴ and criminal exploitation.¹⁵ Youth services can decrease crime,¹⁶ provide a sense of belonging and community, and help cultivate positive relationships away from associations with those involved in serious violence.¹⁷ Over the last decade spending on youth services has plunged by 74%,¹⁸ which has disproportionately impacted racially minoritised communities and has depleted specialist services for Black young people.¹⁹

EDUCATION: Structural educational inequalities and racism mean Black children are particularly likely to have poor experiences in school.²⁰ Black Caribbean and Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children are most likely to be excluded from mainstream school²¹ and be placed in Pupil Referral Units.²² This puts them at increased risk of criminal exploitation,²³ lower educational outcomes, and missing out on valuable educational opportunities.

NEURODIVERSITY: A disproportionate number of children in the youth justice system have neurodivergent conditions or Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND).²⁴ Black and mixed heritage boys in the justice system are more likely than others to have an Education, Health and Care plan, and unaddressed SEND,²⁵ likewise Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children are more likely to have SEND.²⁶

MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING: Children in the youth justice system are more likely to have mental health needs than the general population.²⁷ Children from racialised communities are disproportionately at risk of poor mental health due to multiple intersecting factors,²⁸ including racism,²⁹ and are less likely to have these needs identified and responded to prior to involvement in the justice system.³⁰ Black and mixed heritage young people are more than twice as likely to be referred for support through social care or youth justice services than primary care.³¹

RACISM AND IDENTITY: As a result of racism and discrimination across society, racially minoritised children are particularly vulnerable to negative self-image³² – with Black children and young people in particular being widely associated with criminal stereotypes.³³ Labelling children as ‘criminal’ impacts how they see themselves and encourages offending.³⁴ Cultivating a ‘pro-social’ identity in young people to boost self-esteem and keep children away from crime is critical.³⁵



I’ve noticed some of the young lads, particularly the young Black lads... get that kind of sweeping judgement that they’re involved in a gang and it almost pushes them towards that kind of culture.”

Programmes lead, Voluntary organisation

THE CARE SYSTEM: Children with care experience are significantly overrepresented in the justice system,³⁶ and have higher reoffending rates.³⁷ Of children who have been in care, Black, mixed heritage, and Gypsy Roma Traveller children are disproportionately likely to end up in the justice system.³⁸ A third of Black and mixed heritage boys on YOT caseloads have been subject to a Child in Need or Child Protection plan.³⁹

GIRLS: The needs of Black and racially minoritised girls and young women are some of the most acute of the justice-involved population, yet minoritised by both their gender and ethnicity they are systematically overlooked in policy and practice.⁴⁰ Up to 90% of girls in the youth justice system have a history of being abused,⁴¹ sexual exploitation and violence is prevalent,⁴² and they are more likely than boys to be or have been in the care system, have mental health and physical health needs.⁴³ The [Young Women’s Justice Project](#) highlights how complex vulnerabilities and needs of girls and young women are sidelined by justice services that are structured to facilitate change and development for boys and young men.⁴⁴ For Black young women in particular, their history of abuse and exploitation can be ignored.⁴⁵

INTERSECTIONALITY: Many children and young people experience multiple and overlapping inequalities.⁴⁶ Various forms of discrimination and disadvantage on the basis of protected characteristics like gender, race, sexual orientation, religion, or disability, and other factors such as class and care experience, can interact with and compound each other.⁴⁷ By the time they transition into adulthood, young adults may have experienced cumulative oppression by multiple systems.⁴⁸

RACISM AND YOUTH JUSTICE: Racial inequalities begin to harm children well before their contact with the youth justice system. Once in contact with the system, racially minoritised children are less likely to be diverted, more likely to receive harsher sentences, and more likely to be sent to custody, sentenced or

on remand, compared to white children.⁴⁹ Children and young people particularly emphasise racial bias and mistreatment by the police.⁵⁰ They are more likely to be stopped and searched, strip searched, arrested, and subjected to use of force.⁵¹ Over-policing and under-protection,⁵² school exclusion, and ‘overlooked and misunderstood’ needs across different systems create a disproportionately higher reoffending rate for Black children than for other children.⁵³



I’ve been called a n*a by the police... A lot of the kids [at my youth centre], even some of them pre-secondary school, would explain how they had been racially profiled, abused, or beat up in the back of vans.”**

Young person



For racially minoritised young adults, inequalities risk becoming more entrenched as support services and safeguarding practices dramatically reduce after 18, with young adults with SEND, mental health concerns, housing needs and care leavers facing particular challenges in transitioning into adulthood.⁵⁴ Upon entering the adult criminal justice system young people are exposed to far more punitive and less welfare-based services,⁵⁵ despite evidence that young people’s brains continue to develop until at least the mid-twenties, impacting cognitive and emotional maturity,⁵⁶ showing the need for a distinct approach.⁵⁷ Racial disparity in the adult justice system continues, with Black adults continuing to be overpoliced, disproportionately likely to be subjected to stop and search and use of force, arrested, convicted, remanded, and sent to prison.⁵⁸

The transition to adulthood is a pivotal point. Young people may need additional support as they navigate new challenges, but this is also an important opportunity for supporting desistance – many young adults naturally stop offending as they learn, grow, and are particularly amenable to change.⁵⁹ Instead of entrenching and exacerbating racial and social disparities, with the right support in place the transition could be an opportunity to address the impact of childhood experiences and prevent inequalities widening.

Failing to support racially minoritised young people in the criminal justice system

Multiple factors that shape young people's contact with the criminal justice system interact to impact their access to quality support across the transition to adulthood. If racially minoritised young people receive poor quality or inappropriate support as children, there are fewer opportunities to address harms prior to the transition to adulthood. Where needs are not identified or met with appropriate and timely support in childhood and then shared with adult services, opportunities to access support as young adults may be limited. Particularly as the adult system struggles to take a welfare-based approach, leaving these needs unmet may make it harder to move away from criminal behaviour as they enter adulthood.

Racism, bias and labelling

Stereotyping, racial prejudices and unconscious biases such as 'adultification' shape the way practitioners respond to young people in the justice system.⁶⁰



I can't deny the racial prejudice they had."

Young person referring to one of his workers

Black children in particular experience racial discrimination known as 'adultification bias', where some children are not perceived as inherently innocent and vulnerable.⁶¹ Expert seminar attendees spoke of adultification starting from a young age, from practitioners in children's social care, education and across the criminal justice system, with children being treated as "4 or 5 years older" than their chronological age "if they talk or look a certain way", including if they are tall, broad, or have facial hair.



There can be a tendency for professionals to perceive Black boys to be older than their years and attribute a level of maturity to them that isn't appropriate given their age, before we even take into account these children tend to have additional needs that haven't been identified due to experiences in the system earlier down the line."

HM Inspector

Experts and young people described how racial perceptions may make practitioners more likely to label Black young people as "gang members", a "thug", a "drug dealer", and as "threatening", "aggressive" or "violent". They set out how conversely for white individuals the 'gang' is considered a social friends group, and the young person is viewed as "boisterous" or "at risk".

Girls and young women may be particularly at risk of adultification,⁶² such as in the case of Child Q, who was strip searched at school and without safeguards in place.⁶³ Experts highlighted girls and young women may be subjected to the 'angry Black woman' stereotype, while research finds hypersexualisation and cultural biases can mean risks including sexual exploitation are missed.⁶⁴

Young people also felt **their class may be just as important as their race** in impacting how they were treated by the justice system. Racially minoritised young people who are perceived as 'lower' class, are girls, or both, may therefore face layers of discrimination.



If someone is white, they are deemed as more vulnerable than someone of colour... the white boys get looked at as 'you're vulnerable, you're getting pressured by these people'... I've had mates arrested and the police saying 'has the Black boy got you into this?' Even I've had that."

Young person

When a young person is subjected to these prejudices, experts highlighted how the response becomes focused on control rather than protection. Previous research has found that Black children in particular are considered more culpable for their actions than their peers, which may impact the provision of safeguarding and support services.⁶⁵



You aren't seen as a vulnerable child that might be acting out because something is going on at home."

Advocacy lead, Voluntary organisation

Experts were concerned that the underlying causes of racially minoritised young people's behaviour may not be considered, they may be seen as choosing not to engage and not wanting help, as highlighted in HMI Probation research,⁶⁶ and given up on. They may feel less able to ask for help as more is being expected of them, and they may internalise and embrace the labels being thrust upon them.



Youngsters get fed up, they're fed up how white adults view them, and just run out of energy of trying not to be that trope."

Senior lecturer in childhood and youth studies

Ultimately, this lack of support and harsher treatment may accelerate and escalate racially minoritised young people through the criminal justice system⁶⁷ and create additional challenges in navigating the transition to adulthood.

Experts were concerned that although some YOTs seemed mindful of racial bias and may advocate for the child against prejudicial treatment, there may be nobody to do that once the young person moved into Probation.



Lacking the skills and resources to meet needs

Racially minoritised young people transitioning into adulthood may lose out on vital support due to a lack of cultural and age-specific competencies in the justice system workforce, and a system that is not set up to meet their needs.

Workforce skills

Experts and young people spoke about practitioners in YOTs and Probation not having the appropriate skills and experience to meet the needs of young people from racially minoritised communities. There are particular concerns Probation is not equipped to work effectively with vulnerable young people,⁶⁸ including not enough understanding of maturity, adverse childhood experiences and how those carry on into young adulthood. Experts highlighted resourcing constraints and insufficient training.⁶⁹



I didn't have much support. There was a lot of people who wasn't very trained to speak to me... A lot of the workers that came to me, you can tell it's textbook: You asked the same question the last person did a month ago and it's like, get out my face."

Young person



Literature raises concerns about a lack of diversity and ‘cultural competency’ (a term referring to the ability to understand and effectively interact and develop relationships with people from different cultures⁷⁰) in the workforce, and the impact this has on the system’s ability to respond to the needs of young people.⁷¹

Experts highlighted a mixed picture regarding cultural competence in the workforce, with some areas better versed than others, and reported a lack of confidence or effort among some practitioners in having conversations about racism, structural barriers, and other challenges specific to ethnicity, as highlighted in existing literature.⁷²



Some YOTs clearly just don’t have a clue, there are others working hard at it and they are the ones in a multi-agency partnership taking the most advocacy-led role with those young people, and are really aware of and trying to address issues where they feel there are systematically racist responses they are coming up against.”

Academic and ex-YOT practitioner

Young people spoke about how their YOT or Probation workers didn’t ‘get them’, didn’t have relevant life experience, and could make racially prejudiced decisions.



Sometimes the support was appropriate, sometimes they were borderline racist. I was told stuff about smoking weed, long before I ever started smoking... so then I was like... ‘well, might as well start!’ if I’m going to be depicted as that anyway.”

Young person

A Probation workforce that isn’t specifically skilled at working with young people or responding appropriately to the needs of racially minoritised communities puts this group at a double disadvantage. Staff diversity does not guarantee a culturally competent workforce, and passionate properly equipped workers of any ethnicity can work well with racially minoritised young people. However, experts spoke of the importance of having staff representative of the communities they work in, who have experienced and understand racial prejudices, but that is often not the case.



Worked with a lot of boys coming out of custody aged 18... quite often they would say to me 'what can you tell me about life, you know nothing about my experiences, you don't understand what my life is like'. And for me that's the starting point: no I don't, I'm not going to because I'm female and white and my experiences are very different and your cultural heritage... but that shouldn't be a barrier... for me that was the point: okay tell me about it, I need to learn and understand and appreciate the different factors."

Senior lecturer, ex-Probation and YOT practitioner



A lot of the people you talk to in these professional positions are only book-heads white people that are just like 'We're going to read this to you', and it's like 'listen to me'. No-ones listening to them."

Young person



Systemic issues and resources

Staff skills and representation are important, but that alone cannot ensure racially minoritised young people are appropriately supported in the justice system. Experts warned **the whole culture and governance of justice services needs to change in order to facilitate anti-racist practice**. A move away from an overriding deficit model, with assessment processes overly focussed on risk,⁷³ which may be a “mechanism for racism”, was also called for.



When I challenged cultural competencies in one outer London borough, the response was to get a Black youth worker, whereas actually the issue was deeper, the young Black kid was not comfortable to go to the provisions of the services offered. It’s more about the culture of the whole organisation.”

YOT practitioner

Experts and young people were particularly concerned about Probation not being “fit for purpose”. Starved of funding, divided and then reunified, and facing significant issues around staffing retention and wellbeing, a service struggling to keep its head above water lacks the focus on improving outcomes for racially minoritised young people that it needs. **HMI Probation's annual report for 2022/23 found all but one probation delivery unit inspected since reunification has been rated ‘inadequate’ or ‘requires improvement’, with the outgoing Chief Inspector calling for an independent review.**⁷⁴



Record levels of staff sickness, extended sick leave, people fleeing the service in droves – that then exacerbates every other issue we have. We can’t be ambitious, we can’t be progressive, we can’t make many changes if you’re barely able to keep the regime running.”

Senior Policy Advisor, Ministry of Justice/Barrow Cadbury Trust

Young people contrasted the experience of Probation to a YOT service, which may be more empathetic and relationship-based, more lenient regarding processes like breach,⁷⁵ more developmentally-appropriate,⁷⁶ and can be better positioned to understand and respond to the needs of racially minoritised young people.



[The YOT] was excellent at recognising [my vulnerabilities]. They were the people that got my autism diagnosis... they also helped find my accommodation after my parents made me homeless.”

Young person



Probation was the one that really sent me off the rails... it was the biggest mess for all young people... it doesn't help anyone, it's go to this meeting, speak to this person... if you can't because there's a lot of things going on they breach you, and now you've got more problems... it's meetings for no reason, it's not rehabilitation it's a nuisance.”

Young person

Even if a YOT can identify, share, and put support in place to address needs, upon transferring from YOT to Probation that information and access to services may be lost.⁷⁷ The transition is made harder by significant shortages in probation secondees in YOTs, who work to prepare a young person and share information,⁷⁸ as well as by delays in sentencing:



In a YOT all the services are there and can be coordinated in a way to meet the spectrum of needs... that is fundamental and a significant change when moving into adult Probation... My concerns for Black and mixed heritage boys is the raft of unmet needs they were presenting with in the youth justice system that would take a long time to unpick and put the right services in place. There can be limited time to do this if they turn 18 before the work is done and then are transferred to Probation where services are not always available... ”

HM Inspector

At the same time at 18 young people face a cliff edge as many services fall away: becoming a care leaver and losing mental health, safeguarding and other support is highly disruptive, undermines progress and leaves vulnerable young people at risk of harm.⁷⁹



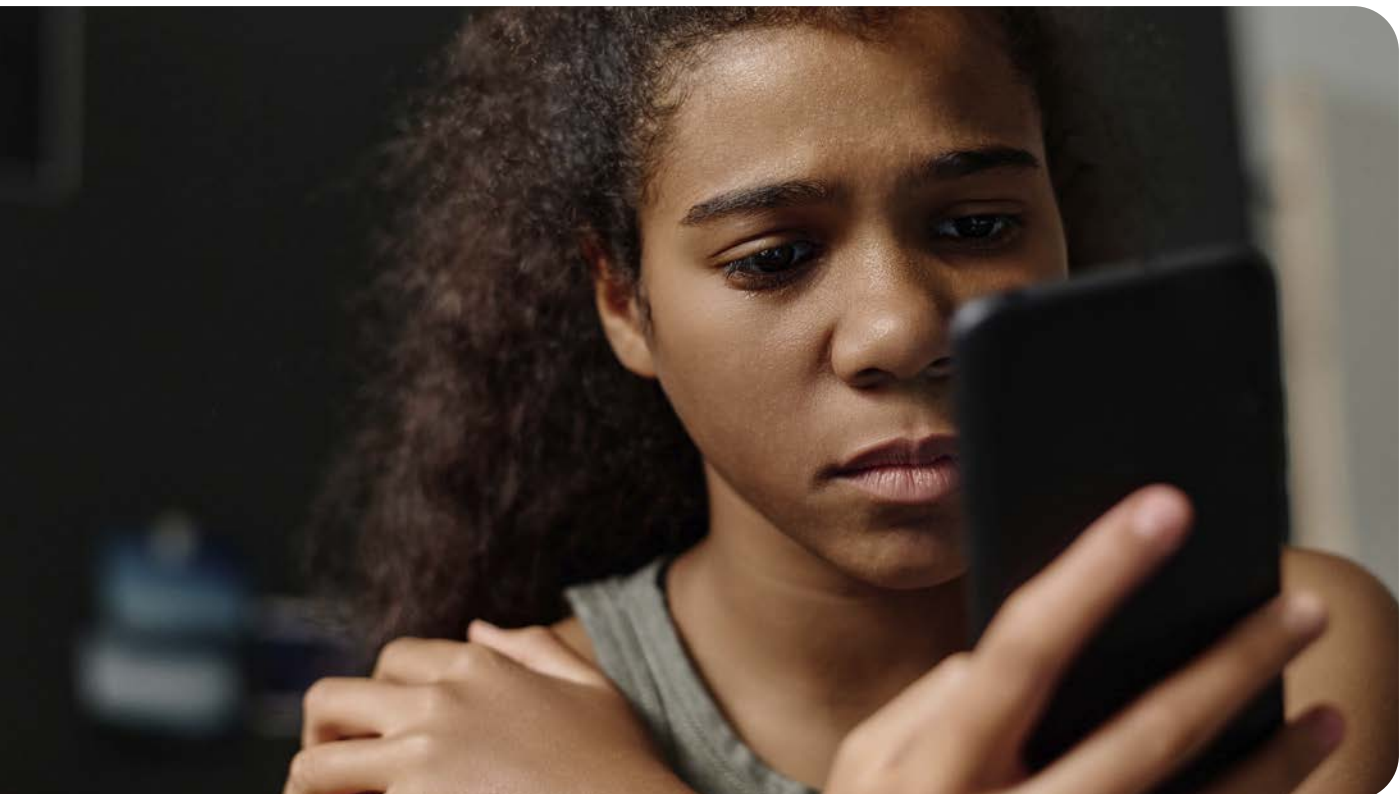
It was just like a knife, knife in the heart because it's like, therapy gone, all support systems gone. Mum said you're an adult now. I was already out of the house anyway by 18 but... it was just like, oh shit, I'm on my own."

Young person

The right services are often not available in YOTs and Probation to meet the needs of racially minoritised young people.⁸⁰ Black and mixed heritage boys often do not feel programmes and interventions they are accessing are tailored and suitable,⁸¹ and for racially minoritised girls this may be even less likely.⁸²

Experts and young people highlighted a lack of bespoke provision, and some felt they were either never offered culturally specific support, or it was misguided. This is echoed in literature that shows professionals being quick to turn to mentors or 'gangs' services, when actually education and housing support is needed, for example.⁸³

Where young people did get support they wanted, they felt they had to really push for it, and be especially good at articulating their needs, which they didn't feel all young people would do or know how to. This is particularly true after turning 18, as expectations are placed on young people as an 'adult' to advocate for themselves, where previously a professional or guardian may have supported this process.⁸⁴



Damaged trust and engagement

Experiences of being let down or unfairly targeted by professionals creates mistrust among racially minoritised young people, meaning they may be less likely to engage with support if and when it is offered.



Guilty before proven innocent... you kind of learn authority figures don't actually care."

Young person

Research with young people has highlighted how stereotyping experienced by young people makes them feel the justice system misunderstands them, is racist and untrustworthy.⁸⁵ Racially minoritised children are more likely than white children to have had negative experiences that reduce their confidence in justice and consequently their levels of engagement.⁸⁶ This lack of trust may stem from experiences at school or with the care system. It is particularly driven by experiences of policing,⁸⁷ and is historic,⁸⁸ multi-generational,⁸⁹ and rooted in generational trauma.⁹⁰ It may originate in childhood and persist and harden into adulthood.⁹¹ A disillusionment with systems that have failed them so much before means young people may be hesitant to participate in services or share information about their needs,⁹² including in new systems as they transition into adulthood.



I trust the system for my mums sake, but I don't trust them for my people's sake... it comes from an experienced place, with a lot of pain that's turned into intellect."

Young person





What does quality support look like?

There are ten key principles for support that, according to experts and young people, would be ‘culturally competent’ in practice and support racially minoritised young people as they transition into adulthood:



1. Developing positive identities

Take a strengths-based approach that focuses on empowerment, potential and opportunity rather than treating young people like a problem. Support the development of a pro-social identity, delving into specific issues around identity. Experts emphasised that this was particularly important for Black boys and young men. Examine masculinity and what it means to be a man, how to be vulnerable, and encourage mindfulness and reflection.



Someone to show me a career, show me what real life was. Don't show me how to work in a warehouse, what the job centre is... show me that I can make something of myself and be something that I want to be.”

Young person



2. Being age-appropriate

Developmentally-appropriate support for older children and young adults, taking a more fluid approach across this life stage – looking at sensory needs, functionality, and capacity rather than just chronological age. Distinct treatment of young adults that recognises maturation continues well into the 20s.⁹³



It's a nonsense what we've currently got, that at 18 we expect young people to wake up with capacity and to be treated very differently.”

Children's services practitioner



3. Bridging gaps

Support that stays with a young person as they transition from child to young adult and works with young people consistently for long periods of time. A strong, trusted relationship that carries the child through as they experience multiple changes, moving with the young person to help them navigate new systems, structures and processes.



4. Challenging structural barriers

Those working with young people have the confidence to talk about racism and structural barriers, helping young people to explore their experiences. They understand institutional racism, intersectionality, and challenge racial bias where they see it impacting a young person's treatment in the justice system.



5. Being relatable

Young people can relate to those working with them, finding them credible and relevant.

Practitioners with lived experience, who have been through childhood trauma themselves, can understand and connect with young people on that level.



Anyone with the experience, compared to anyone who doesn't have lived experience, will fundamentally have a different way of approaching a situation, speaking to somebody, understanding, opening up with empathy. A lot of people who don't, you can never understand with your heart, you can only understand your mind... You have to actually go through that trauma to understand."

Young person

Practitioners of the same class or ethnicity can be perceived by young people as more relatable and easier to engage with, particularly when talking about issues around race.



Young people say they love to speak with the Black coaches because you can just skip ahead – there's things you don't need to explain or say."

Advocacy lead, Voluntary organisation



It's not to say that staff can't be amazing mentors or Probation practitioners to service users, for example, of a different ethnicity to themselves – of course they can and for many young people it will work fine, but some may feel more comfortable with someone who has had a more similar lived experience. I think it's important that the service is able to provide that option.”

MOPAC programme lead

While race is important to some for relatability, it isn't everything. A practitioner's background and their motivation are critical, and they need to have developed the skills to relate to the diverse experiences of a range of young people.



I didn't care about my mentors ethnicity. I could tell if someone is genuine or authentic. Looking in their eyes I know if someone really cares or really mean what they're saying.”

Young person



6. Being passionate

Young people feel those working with them are authentic – genuinely concerned and interested in their lived experiences, including around race. Practitioners are passionate about working with this specific age group, want to tackle racial disparities and make a difference to young people's lives.



He was like late 50s early 60s so you wouldn't really expect it to be something a child could bounce off of, but I had a lot of love for him because he was always lovely to me, he always had the energy and time for me, he was always respectful to me, we were on a personal level.”

Young person



7. Being community-based

Support is localised, neighbourhood-based and provided by those who live in or have knowledge of the communities young people are from, who are well placed to have insider perspectives on issues impacting young people's lives. Support reaches out to and works with young people and their communities directly, to understand their experiences and build community assets.



8. Meeting specific needs

Identify needs and provide tailored, well-resourced, multi-agency support to address the prevalent vulnerabilities among racially minoritised young people in the criminal justice system, including speech and language therapy and mental health services. Support that addresses underlying causes of risks to young people, such as housing and financial instability, the latest methods of exploitation, and getting young people back into education or employment.



9. Hearing and standing up for young people's wants and needs

Young people co-create their support, and their experiences are heard and embedded within policy and practice development. Young people's rights and needs as they transition to adulthood are advocated for.



10. Being non-authoritarian and independent

Support that is seen as independent and different from the systems racially minoritised young people have been let down by, and doesn't take the directive, 'authoritarian' approach they have experienced too often before.





The role of the Voluntary and Community Sector

The Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS), particularly ‘by and for’ specialist organisations, has a vital role to play in addressing shortcomings of statutory services⁹⁴ and meeting the criteria for good quality support for racially minoritised young people transitioning into adulthood.

VCS organisations with Black and racially minoritised staff and leadership teams, that provide services for Black and racially minoritised people, are sometimes referred to as ‘by and for’ groups and organisations.⁹⁵ While there is no concrete definition of ‘by and for’ organisations,⁹⁶ they have been connected to the concept of lived experience and characterised as having an ethos focussed on anti-racism, social justice and intersectionality, and being driven by a commitment to build communities of “safety, nurturing, growth, dignity, belief and belonging”.⁹⁷ ‘By and for’ organisations may have a specific focus on reducing the harms of the criminal justice system, with research highlighting their potential role in increasing “optimism, hope and opportunities for the members of Black and racially minoritised communities who reside in disinvested communities.”⁹⁸

VCS organisations often work with individuals aged 16-25 and are therefore well placed to provide age-appropriate support that bridges the gap between youth and adult statutory services. They are able to provide consistency at a critical stage, to counter the impact of the considerable cliff edge that exists as a result of the child to adult cut off at 18,⁹⁹ and taking into consideration the distinct needs of these young people.



We stay with them... If they come to us at 17 we'll still be working with them at 19.”

Evaluation lead, Voluntary organisation

While statutory criminal justice services often place emphasis on the young person's criminal history and punishment, and fail to take a tailored approach,¹⁰⁰ the VCS often works with specific groups and focuses positively on the needs and culture of the young people that it supports. Young people highlighted that the at times punitive, retrospective and thinly-spread approach of statutory services alone was insufficient to equip them with the tools to build a future away from crime: instead, they required specific support and contact with those in the VCS who really understood their life experiences. Organisations led 'by and for' Black and racially minoritised communities can offer a space to celebrate cultural heritage and diversity and share different perspectives, as well as addressing harm.

The specialisms of the VCS are particularly important for supporting those with overlapping needs and vulnerabilities. For example, racially minoritised women and girls have particularly complex and nuanced needs and experiences¹⁰¹ that the VCS addresses with the sensitivity cultivated by those with lived experience and understanding of intersecting traits. Groups such as Milk Honey Bees¹⁰² offer Black girls and young women a safe space to express themselves and focus on aspirations and empowerment while also healing.



I would say [the VCS] support did help... gender wise – having a female environment, space, being able to speak about certain things we might be uncomfortable to speak about or can't speak about around other gender. Especially around race also, we all come from different people of colour backgrounds and can come together and make something of that, and be powerful and create something positive for both gender and culture.”

Young person



Young people highlighted the VCS' role in shedding light on new paths they could pursue when transitioning into adulthood, encouraging a pro-social identity and positive opportunities and aspirations by emphasising their potential outside of contact with the justice system, to build self-esteem and to alter their self-perceptions.



My dad didn't teach me much in the sense where a man should teach his young son what to do. It was the mentors I had that taught me, 'this is right'. And it's not even people telling me 'Oh, this is wrong', it's saying what you do, how you look at yourself. It's tough love. That was probably the best thing that ever happened for me, having someone there that really knew what was going on."

Young Person

Peer mentoring can help young people to focus on the options available for them to progress personally and professionally as they mature, guided by those who have had similar experiences to them and are living proof of how they can forge new paths.¹⁰³ Mentors can provide a consistent, trusting relationship that helps young people as they navigate changes. They can advocate for young people, and identify barriers and opportunities to facilitate engagement with other services. Experts cited 'Rites of Passage' programmes, for example the work of the Manhood Academy, which nurtures Black boys into men through achieving milestones and "social, emotional, economic and spiritual guidance".¹⁰⁴



One of the things I'm a real advocate for is peer mentoring – someone who's been through that transition, those challenges – you know, when you're going from YOT to adult services – having someone who's been through that to help you navigate it."

Lecturer and community organisations advisor



By bringing lived experience and expertise from a young person's own community, the grassroots VCS plays a crucial role in cultivating genuine engagement with racially minoritised young people. They see these practitioners as relatable and authentically invested in their development.



The only people that actually managed to get through to me when I was younger were lived experience mentors, because as a young person to hear somebody tell you that they went through it... it was a lot deeper.”

Young person

Young people distinguished between services and support that are “professional” (statutory) and “authentic” (VCS support that is relatable and tailored). Given the stigma that statutory services may hold for racially minoritised young people due to negative past experiences,¹⁰⁵ the VCS can provide a distinct source of support for young people who might be unwilling to engage with statutory services. The VCS can adapt to the needs of the young people that it supports, and is best placed to access and engage with those deemed ‘hard to reach’, who have become distrustful of state-led services.¹⁰⁶



Supposedly these children are ‘hard to reach’ – and yet everybody knows who they are. It’s not about being hard to reach; it’s about thinking, are we using the right approaches?”

Evaluation lead, Voluntary organisation

The relatability of VCS support – whether it be through experiences of trauma, race, class, gender, culture, the local community or specific needs – can be pivotal. During the transition into adulthood, the VCS can be a gateway into meaningful engagement with racially minoritised young people, mending trust and providing aspiration, addressing systemic disadvantage, and supporting young people to desist from crime.

Sammy Odoi
Wipers founder



Wipers Youth CIC – CASE STUDY

Mentoring support for young people in transition

Wipers is a Black-led organisation offering specialist mentoring to children and young people.¹⁰⁷ Wipers mainly works with children in the youth justice system, but now also provides mentoring services for young adults on probation, including at the Newham Youth to Adult Hub pilot.

A Wipers mentor working with young adults may begin meeting with them whilst they are still under supervision of youth justice services, to prepare them for their move to adult services and the changes that happen throughout this process.



Youth justice services are supportive of young people, but once they turn 18, probation is totally different and staff don't have time to support specific needs and vulnerabilities. Those with special educational needs and disabilities that haven't been picked up – which is quite a large proportion of racially minoritised children – get really left behind.”

Sammy Odoi, Wipers founder

Having a consistent figure guiding them as they traverse changing systems, professionals and organisations is crucial for ensuring that young people aren't left to navigate this monumental transition alone. Mentors act as the 'glue' that links different services.



There are lots of different services that the young people interact with – and not all of them are steady and stable; but our mentoring has always been consistent. Young people need at least one steady professional.”

Sammy Odoi, Wipers founder

Being Black-led, Wipers can provide compassionate and experienced mentors whose life experiences resemble those of the young people that they connect with. This allows young people to develop relationships with mentors that are meaningful, authentic, and empathetic.



All of the team members for the VCS organisations that work at the Hub have lived experience of being members of a marginalised group, and a lot of them also have experience of the criminal justice system.”

Sammy Odoi, Wipers founder



Promoting racial justice is everyone's responsibility

While the VCS clearly has a crucial role to play in supporting racially minoritised young people as they transition to adulthood in the criminal justice system, the onus cannot and must not all fall on the VCS to reduce racial disparities. It is the responsibility of every statutory agency and every practitioner to understand what quality support looks like for this group of young people, and to work to improve policy and practice to achieve this and regain trust.

Experts were clear YOTs and Probation must not act as if a referral to a Black mentor, for example, is the box ticked for their duty to promote racial justice, outsourcing the solution while overlooking many other factors like: how risk assessments and pre sentence reports are conducted, how young people are advocated for, and access to statutory safeguarding, mental health, speech language and communication, and SEND support. Statutory services can adopt approaches focused on pro-social identity like that of Swindon Youth Justice Service.¹⁰⁸

There must be accountability and acknowledgement of racism at an individual, institutional and systemic level.¹⁰⁹ Senior managers must create a culture from top to bottom in which conversations about race and identity are normalised,¹¹⁰ and staff feel protected to speak out about racial disparities, challenge decisions and escalate concerns.



It's about caseworkers having the confidence to talk about racism... and being supported by an organisation where it's absolutely stipulated that is the expectation and requirement... It's about making sure the organisation put in place the frameworks and support for the staff to make sure they can have those conversations."

HM Inspector

Practitioners need wholesale training in diversity, cultural competency and anti-racism,¹¹¹ not just 'bias' training. Phrases like 'cultural competence' should not be signed up to and used without setting out clear definitions of what it actually means in practice and how staff are being supported. Recruitment schemes should seek to improve the diversity of the criminal justice workforce, and hire those with lived experience of adverse childhood experiences and the justice system.

Reforms to Probation are necessary to ensure services are better equipped to respond to young people's needs, learning from the more developmentally-appropriate approach of YOTs. Probation seconded positions must be filled, investing in shared knowledge, skills and people. A focus is needed around trauma-informed, relationship-based and reflective practice, and training must be in place to support this shift. The role of Advocates for this age group should be considered. Sharing information between YOT and Probation about childhood experiences must be improved, rethinking assessment systems to allow this to happen.

Experts highlighted the need for Probation workers that specialise in working with young people, pointing to the improved approach piloted at the **Newham Youth to Adult Hub**,¹¹² and positive examples of specialist teams or roles concentrating on 18-25-year-olds,¹¹³ with reduced caseloads and enhanced training.

Better facilitating the involvement of the VCS in supporting young people will only have the impact it needs to have if at the same time these improvements are made to the way statutory services work with racially minoritised young people. As well as turning to the VCS for providing support, YOTs and Probation should look to the VCS to learn from their example.



Youth to Adult Hub – CASE STUDY

A new approach to supporting young adults on probation

The [Youth to Adult Hub](#) in Newham, London is a first-of-its-kind probation centre that supports young adults aged 18-25 under probation supervision, some of whom are transitioning from the youth to adult justice system.¹¹⁴

Working co-located alongside Probation Officers are a range of statutory and voluntary sector organisations. This includes an in-house psychologist and mentors, speech and language therapy, services tailored to young adults that guide them through housing and substance misuse, and specialist organisations providing meaningful activities and working with particular groups such as young women.

The commissioning process takes a localised approach, which means that the expertise of grassroots and often Black-led organisations is deployed to make sure that young people receive specialist support from those with first-hand understanding of their experiences.

The Hub's wrap-around and age-specific approach to service provision means that young adults are provided with a degree of consistency and continuity of care often lost to young people as they transition from YOTs to Probation. The enhanced services available at the Hub means the Probation secondee at the local YOT can introduce the young person to their new set of services, joining hands and sharing information, rather than preparing them for what is often a cliff edge in support.

A new way of responding to young people who breach their orders is being piloted, taking a more flexible and understanding approach.

These differences, and the passion in the workforce for working with this age group, means the Hub provides young people with support more akin to a YOT, with hopes this is fostering better engagement and outcomes for young people.





The voluntary and community sector and criminal justice system working together

Despite the invaluable work and expertise of the VCS, particularly organisations rooted in Black and racially minoritised communities, services are often not readily available alongside YOTs and Probation.¹¹⁵ Links between the criminal justice system and these organisations are poor, culturally appropriate services are rarely commissioned, and there have been long delays in steps to rectify this.¹¹⁶ Barriers must be addressed for the VCS to work optimally to improve the experiences of racially minoritised young people: the VCS must be treated not solely as an afterthought or add-on to statutory services, but as a critical component working alongside the criminal justice system.

Collaboration

To optimise support and opportunities for racially minoritised young people transitioning into adulthood, the VCS and statutory services must effectively collaborate.¹¹⁷ However, there are challenges to strengthening this collaboration.

Professionals working with or within the VCS – particularly ‘by and for’ community groups and organisations – highlight that their work is often undervalued and underutilised,¹¹⁸ with referrals being delayed or missed. This echoes HMI Probation findings that practitioners aren’t always aware of services and are not routinely using them.¹¹⁹



Even when there were contracts that had been established and services were available, the referrals weren’t necessarily coming through. There are barriers in understanding the significance of the work that can be done by these other organisations, appreciating that it can be as valuable as any other statutory work that’s being done.”

HM Inspector

Experts explained that another obstacle to voluntary sector service referrals is the stigma attached to certain provisions, and the fear that this stigma could have implications for the young person's self-image, pathway out of the justice system, or work with statutory services.



There are concerns that if you refer, for example, to an organisation that does very good work but specialises in 'youth violence', the young person may be labelled as a gang member. Risk assessments may then generate a higher risk rating, which may have consequences for risk management work in YOTs and Probation. Many young people referred to these groups are those of global majority whereas the white counterparts may be referred to youth services that do not generate the same level of concern."

YOT practitioner

Co-ordination between services may also be hindered by a lack of understanding of statutory frameworks and procedures amongst the VCS.¹²⁰ For example, to provide the most effective support, VCS workers should understand technical information about youth justice service assessments, or local authority Education, Health and Care plans, particularly during the transition phase where valuable information about a young person's needs can get lost between services.¹²¹ Having this understanding could strengthen the holistic potential of guidance provided by the VCS, and increase co-operation between services.



There needs to be more... people with lived experience, working alongside people who understand the system, as a mentor, to be able to say, 'OK, I'll guide you and do the formalities. You go and stand by what you believe and make a difference.'"

Young person

Improved communication between the VCS and statutory services, better training about statutory provision for VCS workers – and vice versa – could facilitate a more effective, joined-up approach. This is critical to ensuring key processes and procedures when transitioning into adulthood are adhered to, and that young people don't lose out on vital provision.

Funding and commissioning

Experts working in and around the VCS highlighted persistent barriers within the criminal justice funding and commissioning system. These barriers exclude smaller, specialised community organisations in place of larger organisations that don't necessarily have the localised cultural expertise needed to be best suited for the job.

Challenges in attracting funding

The VCS has faced significant challenges in recent years and is not properly valued by the government.¹²² Organisations are supporting increasing numbers of increasingly vulnerable people, while costs increase.¹²³ They are often going above and beyond their funded work and subsidising shortfalls.¹²⁴ For example, experts reported organisations continuing work with young people post-18 when they are only funded to work with children. The smaller the organisation is, the more concerns they are facing around financial sustainability.¹²⁵

Bidding for funding and contracts was described by experts as draining, perpetual and demoralising. Experts described how complicated, convoluted and time consuming commissioning processes are, distracting from their work,¹²⁶ and meaning larger organisations can secure funding due to having a much larger workforce and resources, while small organisations don't have the capacity to engage and compete.¹²⁷





Unless you've got a business development department, you can't win things."

Service delivery lead, Voluntary organisation

'One-size-fits-all', less specialised service provision was highlighted as being attractive to funders given the potential to reach larger numbers of young people, allowing for generalist organisations to receive contracts instead of smaller, specialist ones.



The commissioning and tendering process devalues specialist skills; smaller organisations with specialist skills can't offer the same 'bums on seats' value for money as larger organisations, [which] devalues specialist skills: those organisations embedded in that community with the lived experiences."

Academic and ex-YOT practitioner

Organisations may also be forced to divert their focus from services that workers felt could genuinely benefit young people caught up in crime (such as addressing racial trauma) to other services that cater to the narrow preferences of commissioners, which experts suggested can be driven by politics and have racialised undertones (such as 'gang' interventions).

Experts also perceived the awarding of funding to be London-centric in nature, posing a significant challenge to VCS organisations from other parts of the UK, given that a network of organisations already recognised and in contact with the government or London-based funding bodies¹²⁸ may be more likely to be favoured in the funding process.

Organisations face pressures around evidencing impact and academic evaluation processes, which the securing of funding is becoming increasingly dependent on to prove an organisation's value.¹²⁹ The already financially compromised VCS must find the resources for specific forms of evaluation to compete and win bids, which smaller organisations may not be able to do. Funders and commissioners look for certain types of evidence which skews the kinds of interventions that attract funding: often quantitative rather than qualitative, valuing figures like reoffending rates and overall numbers 'treated', rather than use of softer outcomes – such as the building of social and civic capital¹³⁰ - that may be critical to desistance but harder to measure.



There is a world of evidence out there for youngsters to say, I've gone to this organisation, they have stopped me from taking drugs, stabbing people... it's out there. It's not accepted. If you go to many of the funders, or many of the contractors, they don't want that evidence. What they do want is, they set up these portals, this system, of providing particular types of evidence: outputs, inputs, ratios and all the rest of it, in order to detract from the good work that's going on."

Senior lecturer in childhood and youth studies

Consequences for 'by and for' specialist organisations

Experts reflected how power imbalances tip the winning of contracts in favour of larger, less specialised, often white-led organisations who dominate contracting processes, undermining the work of grassroots organisations that could most benefit racially minoritised young people.



The model is a colonial model, and the model has been a colonial model for the last 20 years. You get one leader... who speaks for the masses – and the masses are disenfranchised. And that one leader is in bed with the master for their own ends. They get a bit of scraps, and it doesn't trickle down."

Youth worker and Senior lecturer

Third-sector provision that is tailored to the needs of racially minoritised individuals has been particularly hard-hit by the recent, more hostile funding environment.¹³¹ **According to HMI Probation the loss of youth and community services has reduced access to 'informal support provided by trusted adults within the community' and is having a 'highly significant' impact on Black and mixed heritage boys coming into contact with the justice system.**¹³²

Experts raised concerns that the dearth of funding for specialist 'by and for' organisations has created an overstretched, underpaid and exhausted workforce, and stunted development and professional opportunities. A lack of appreciation for the unique and integral work that community sector organisations conduct, the expertise it requires and that arise from lived expertise, is felt throughout the sector and is perceived as being a cause of this underinvestment. It is exacerbated by unhelpful societal attitudes towards grassroots initiatives, particularly those rooted in Black and racially minoritised communities, that they don't require financial support since their work ethos is often generalised as altruism. This lack of respect and recognition for the skilled work taking place results in sector-wide demoralisation, with many experienced workers leaving the workforce.



You always hear this word ‘community’ and ‘you should volunteer for your community’. I never really hear that saying used for the white community. So there has been a lack of resourcing, of skill enhancement, CPD around some of this work. So a lot of the work being done in Black communities is by people doing it because they care – they might have had training before but that has fallen off because they’re doing it for free. There is no support behind them.”

Director, Community organisation



The people who work with all these young people... all the good people... I think they’ve all been blown away! All the good people I used to work with, the people who trained me, they’ve left the building. They’re not interested anymore. So who’s doing that work? Who’s doing the training?”

Youth worker and Senior lecturer

When larger, non-localised organisations win grants and contracts over local grassroots and specialist organisations, there is a loss of authentic community engagement. Experts report these organisations struggle to reach the young people they are funded to support as they lack the lived experience and community understanding. They may claim funding and be parachuted in only to replicate work already being done locally by smaller organisations, wasting resources. Reportedly, these larger organisations may even then subcontract the smaller organisations to support the work when engagement with young people lapses:



Suddenly you’ll get an organisation that wants to come in that has no experience in this kind of work, come in and take over the area of work, then usually come back and say can we sub-contract you to do the work [for less money] – that’s very frustrating.”

Director, Community organisation



Facilitating better VCS involvement

For racially minoritised young people to receive specialist, engaging support to streamline their transition into adulthood, the government, funders and commissioners must review their relationship with the VCS and reform commissioning processes.

The social value of ‘by and for’ specialist organisations and anti-racist, localised initiatives best placed to meet their needs must be specifically understood and targeted by funders.¹³³ Research should be commissioned to better evidence this, building on work that has been done to map support systems.¹³⁴ The value of the work of youth workers and experts by lived experience must be properly recognised and rewarded, allowing skills enhancement.

To ensure that this specialist provision is accessible and sustained, long-term grant funding must be made available to voluntary organisations – particularly those led by racially minoritised individuals and communities,¹³⁵ with distinct funding streams for women and girls to ensure their complex needs are no longer sidelined.¹³⁶ For funding to be most effectively and equitably distributed, it should be flexible and unrestricted:¹³⁷ this would help community organisations to provide the most impactful, most specialist work with vulnerable young people.



They should be forward thinking and give them a pot of money, nothing to do with where we’re at now, but we’re gonna give you to work with these children and young people in a creative way that’s got nothing to do with crime.”

Youth worker and Senior lecturer

The voluntary sector must be embedded into the support provided to racially minoritised young people under supervision of YOTs and Probation from the beginning, as integral parts of strategy, service design and delivery.



Improving commissioning

Reforms are needed to the commissioning and procurement process to facilitate grassroots VCS involvement, breaking down barriers to smaller organisations applying for and securing funding. Some ways this could be achieved include:



Simplifying application processes so they are less time consuming, easier to understand, and more flexible to organisation's needs. Organisations should be consulted with and offered guidance to ensure the process is accessible.



Longer contracts should be issued to reduce the constant cycle of bidding for contracts, setting up services, proving value, and working under a cloud of uncertainty about the project's future.



Evaluation processes and criteria should be amended to reduce the burden and ensure various positive outcomes can be captured. Specialist 'by and for' organisations should be supported by those commissioning them to evidence impact, developing their capacity for this vital work.

Probation must recognise the unique needs and challenges faced by young adults and provide dedicated commissioned services for young people. The value of provision that is specialist for this age group as well as for racially minoritised people must be understood and prioritised.

YOT and Probation managers should take a localised approach to commissioning, such as that taken at the Newham Youth to Adult Hub, appreciating the value of local knowledge.



The Hub has benefitted hugely from its partnerships with smaller grassroots organisations that come from and work with the local community. This filters through into their workforce – a lot of the workers have grown up in the area and can talk to young people in a way that is relatable.”

MOPAC programme lead

The co-located multi-disciplinary approach at the Newham pilot should also be learnt from. As should their alignment between youth and adult services for young people transitioning: their commissioned mentors have a specific offer for young people transitioning, working with a young person when they are in the local YOT and continuing this work with them on Probation.¹³⁸

Where VCS organisations work across the 16-25 age range, aligning commissioning between YOTs and Probation would ensure consistency across the transition.

The government has confirmed its ambition to better facilitate the involvement of ‘by and for’ specialist organisations in the criminal justice system,¹³⁹ and the launch of the Probation grants portal, funded through the Regional Outcomes and Innovation Fund (ROIF), is a positive step. However there have been delays in awarding grants, reductions in funds, and there are reportedly still complexities and issues in reaching the right VCS organisations.

More flexible approaches to contracting are being developed by some Probation regions; the Youth Endowment Fund is specifically distributing funding to the VCS led ‘by and for’ racially minoritised communities.¹⁴⁰ while the Clinks Race and Justice Network aims to support these organisations to engage with the criminal justice system. Good practice where it exists needs to be highlighted, learnt from and rolled out.

Commenting on bidding for a recent government contract that set specific standards around staff and Board diversity and representation, one voluntary organisation leader said:



That [criterion] was really good, and we hope that continues, and that specific funding goes to Black-led VCS organisations that have the skills and staff to do the work. It’s not just how you do the work, it’s who does it. We are benefitting from this happening more, but there’s still work to do.”

Founder, Community organisation



Conclusion

Systemic disparities and failures in support mean racially minoritised young people in the criminal justice system may be navigating the destabilising transition to adulthood from a point of greater disadvantage and unmet need, and with less engagement in rapidly diminishing, progressively more punitive services. This not only exacerbates the impacts of the drop off in support and shift in responsibilities experienced by all young people at 18, but has implications for the support that must be provided to redress this.

The onus of preventing disparities and inequalities from spiralling at this critical stage falls on statutory services. However, the approach and expertise of particularly grassroots, 'by and for' specialist community organisations makes the VCS ideally placed to combat inadequacies in statutory support, foster better engagement and improve outcomes. Facilitating the involvement of the VCS alongside the criminal justice system would help ensure age-appropriate, culturally relevant, strengths-based support is available to meet the needs of racially minoritised young people in transition and stop racial disparity in its tracks.

Recognition of the crucial role that organisations led 'by and for' racially minoritised communities play in supporting young people away from the criminal justice system has improved, yet the sector is facing huge challenges. There remain significant barriers to ensuring the specialist organisations most suited to the task are able to be involved. Concerted effort is needed to break down these barriers, in order to smooth the transition to adulthood, address racial injustice in the criminal justice system and secure brighter futures for racially minoritised young people.



Recommendations



Ensuring the specialist VCS can provide wraparound support to young people in the criminal justice system

Youth Justice Board to include a requirement to report on partnerships with the VCS in Youth Justice Plan guidance for YOTs.

Ministry of Justice and HMPPS to conduct and publish analysis on the extent of VCS involvement across the youth and adult criminal justice system, including particular focus on:

- Provision currently available by localised, specialist organisations led ‘by and for’ Black and racially minoritised communities.
- How Turnaround Scheme funding is being spent by YOTs, considering ringfencing scheme funding for VCS commissioning.
- Which services are currently available that are specifically suited to racially minoritised young people on Probation.
- The extent to which the HMPPS Innovations Grant Scheme is awarding funding to ‘by and for’ specialist organisations.
- Assessing the value of VCS provision and subsequently the need to increase funding for youth services, allowing for more services to be available and investment in workforce development.
- Assessing the value and potential for alignment between YOT and Probation commissioning of services, to provide continuous support to a young person as both a child in a YOT and young adult on Probation.

Ministry of Justice and HMPPS to reform VCS funding allocation:

- Conduct a review of commissioning and procurement in YOTs and Probation in order to identify which criteria and processes are systemic barriers to grants and contracts being awarded to small organisations.
- Support regional Probation Directors and YOT Managers to reform commissioning processes to make them simplified and adjustable, reducing excessive compliance requirements, and allowing longer term contracts and more flexible approaches to achieving outcomes.
- Support regional Probation Directors and YOT Managers to systematically map local VCS provision, where this has not already taken place, and improve information sharing with YOT and Probation practitioners about what VCS services are available for referral. Make these databases available to stakeholders.

- Put in place support for smaller organisations to engage in commissioning processes.
- Improve evaluation processes to better capture the value provided by specialist organisations led 'by and for' Black and racially minoritised communities.

HMI Probation upcoming thematic inspection on young adults on probation to examine the extent of VCS involvement in supporting racially minoritised young people.



Improving the way YOTs and Probation work with racially minoritised young people

Ministry of Justice to publish a one-year-on update on its action plan¹⁴¹ in response to the HMI Probation thematic on the experiences of Black and mixed heritage boys in the youth justice system.

YJB to support YOTs to adopt approaches focused on pro-social identity like that at Swindon Youth Justice Services.

YJB requirement for YOTs to report on work to address racial disparities in Youth Justice Plan guidance to include:

- How well workers are talking to children about racism and structural barriers.
- A strategy for improving outcomes.
- Setting out data that identifies areas of disproportionality and the action being taken to address them.
- Partnerships targets around meeting the needs of racially minoritised children.
- What training around diversity, cultural competency and anti-racism is in place.
- What frameworks and support are in place for workers to challenge racially prejudiced practice.

Ministry of Justice to fund the continuation of the Newham Youth to Adult Hub and commit to rolling out the approach nationwide based on the outcome of evaluation reports. Support PCCs to take a convening, developing and funding role when necessary, as MOPAC has in Newham, to ensure Probation for young adults includes:

- Multi-disciplinary, co-located approach with services tailored to young adult's needs.
- Staff with lower caseloads, trauma-informed training, who are passionate about working with young people.
- A relationship-based, more humanistic approach, including a more flexible approach to breach.

- Localised commissioning of grassroots organisations who have local links and know the area.
- Mentoring support that starts work with children in YOTs who will transition into Probation and continues this support during and after transition.
- Probation secondees to connect youth and adult professionals, ensuring information is shared and relationships are developed prior to transition taking place.

HMI Probation upcoming thematic inspection on young adults on probation to:

- Consider and compare the approach of Newham Youth to Adult Hub with other Probation divisions in England and Wales.
- Examine information sharing processes between YOT and Probation, particularly how well assessment frameworks allow for the sharing of information about childhood trauma and needs.

HMPPS to establish and provide quality training for Probation practitioners around working with young people, diversity, cultural competency, and anti-racism.

Acknowledgements and further information

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For more information about the [project](#) or this briefing, or if you are interested in arranging a meeting, please contact AYJ Policy Manager, Millie Harris: millie.harris@ayj.org.uk

Further reading:

Reports:

- [Evidence Review: Young people in transition in the criminal justice system](#)

Blogs:

- [Working with young people transitioning to adulthood: AYJ in conversation with Sammy Odoi, Wipers Youth CIC](#)
- [Youth to Adult Hub: a new approach to supporting young adults on probation in Newham](#)
- [AYJ in conversation with Leroy Logan](#)

References

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