



# ‘They Really Should Start Listening to You’: The Benefits and Challenges of Co-Producing a Participatory Framework of Youth Justice Practice

**“We are of the opinion that rather than involving children and young people in the process of identifying and then negotiating the barriers to reform, there must instead be a pursuit of co-produced wholesale system re-design, with the view to developing youth justice practice that is inherently void of barriers to participation, and consequently young-person centric” (p. 322).**

## 1. What is the research about?

The Participatory Youth Practice project set out to develop a set of principles that address the lack of youth participation in the justice system, engaging youth to promote systems that use the ‘child first, offender second’ (CFOS) model established by the United Nations. Researchers wanted to establish principles that prioritize and acknowledge a child/young person and their rights, as well as allow for them to participate in the decision-making processes involved in youth justice.

The Participatory Youth Practice project was created in response to increased traction of the CFOS model in England and Wales, with the goal of advancing the CFOS model and creating a wholesale system re-design that focuses on the view of developing youth justice practices that are void of barriers to participation.

## 2. Where did the research take place?

The research took place in North West England, and in collaboration with 10 regional youth services.

## 3. Who is this research about?

This research is about **youth involved in the justice system**. Twenty-eight young men between the ages of 15- and 18-years-old were included in this study. All participants had a history of involvement with the youth justice system, 1/3 were ethnic minorities, and 2/3 had adverse childhood experiences (or ACEs, such as significant loss, abuse, and neglect and/or experiences in care). No young women were involved in the project due to the low numbers of young women involved in youth justice in the region.

## 4. How was the research done?

Researchers collected data from participants through **a series of workshops**. Initial **one-on-one interviews** were conducted between researchers and each participant to establish how the young men wanted to develop the workshop series. Topics such as their family backgrounds, experiences in the youth justice system, and how they felt the justice system could work to better understand their needs and experiences were discussed. The young men all agreed that sports, such as football and boxing, and creative activities, such as urban art and grime lyric writing, would be best suited for them to engage in workshops with researchers.

Based on the feedback from these interviews, a series of **one-day workshops** were developed. They consisted of the recommended activities, run in groups; this format allowed for collective knowledge sharing, improved communication skills, and improved critical awareness of social issues, including interactions with police, mental health, and substance use. For example, the boxing workshop allowed for discussions of respect, discipline, confidence, and trust; the grime lyric workshop brought up frustrations over young people’s lack of voice; and the urban arts workshop brought up topics of identity, second chances, and reasons behind offending behaviours.

These **discussions were transcribed** and these transcriptions, as well as the **outputs from the workshops** (lyrics, art pieces, flip chart exercises, and artworks), were **analyzed** and **coded**.

## 5. What are the key findings?

Frequent themes arose through the analysis of the workshop content. The young men were found to:

- Feel like they have **little say in their lives**.
- **Desire recognition from others** about their experienced hardships.
- Express **a desire to change their lives but a lack of social capital** to do so.
- **Feel misunderstood** by others.
- Feel they were **not given a second chance**.
- **Have weaknesses and strengths that are equally devalued**.
- **Disagree about the penalties** with which they were charged.

Based on these findings, and the commitment of the 10 collaborative youth justice services to implement these practices, **six Participatory Youth Practice principles were developed**:

### i) Let them participate.

Understand young people's lack of opportunity and allow them to contribute to the justice system's response to their offending behaviours.

### ii) Always unpack why.

Pay attention to the reasons and underlying factors behind the young person's offense.

### iii) Acknowledge limited life chances.

Acknowledge that not all youth have the freedom or capacity to make the 'right' choices and that opportunities for second chances are very limited for those involved with the youth justice system.

### iv) Help problem solve.

Identify the factors that contribute to the young person's offending and provide support in solving/navigating the issue(s).

### v) Developing ambitions.

Establish suitable alternatives that are positive and stop the offending behaviours.

### vi) Afford them a fresh start.

Acknowledge the young person's desire for leading a 'normal life' and their attempts for a fresh start, while providing them with the tools they need to integrate themselves back into society and away from reengaging in offending behaviours.

## 6. Why does it matter for youth work?

Implementing the Participatory Youth Practice principles not only responds to youth justice systems that are primarily adult-orientated, but also **centres young people's desires and needs** in order for them to effectively understand and address their offending behaviours and the underlying factors. By allowing more consideration and participation from young people, youth justice practitioners **can implement more effective practices that cater to their unique needs and circumstances**, leading to better and more just youth outcomes.



Gray, P., Jones, A., & Smithson, H. (2020). 'They really should start listening to you': The benefits and challenges of co-producing a participatory framework of youth justice practice. *Youth Justice*, 3, 321-327.