Developing creative methodologies: using lyric writing as a method to capture young peoples’ experiences of the Youth Offending Services during the Covid19 pandemic

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Abstract (250 words)

Purpose
The Covid19 lockdowns (2020-2021) disrupted all aspects of usual functioning of the Criminal Justice System, the outcomes and impact of which are largely still unknown. The pandemic has affected individuals across the wider society, this includes a negatively impact on the social circumstances of children and young people involved within Youth Offending Services (YOS) (Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Probation, 2020; Criminal Justice Joint Inspectorates, 2021). This population frequently represent those from marginalised circumstances and are rarely given the opportunity to participate meaningfully in the services they are involved in.

Design/methodology/approach
This paper outlines a creative methodology and method used to uncover the experiences and perceptions of young people undergoing an order within a YOS during the Covid19 lockdowns. The arts-based approach entailed a novel and creative method using a lyric artist to engage with young people through a virtual platform, supporting them to create lyrics about their experiences of the YOS during this time.
Findings
The artist developed a successful rapport with young people based on familiarity with, and passion for, music. He promoted their strengths, improving their confidence which was perceived to elicit more in-depth perspectives that might not have otherwise been obtained using more traditional methods. As such, the method and methodology outlined developed the young people’s social and communicative skills whilst producing meaningful feedback that can contribute to the YOS recovery plan and thus future of the service.

Originality
This paper reports on a novel arts-based research methodology, implemented to capture meaningful data from participants during the Covid19 pandemic.
Art-based activities and the Criminal Justice system

Creative, art-based activities and projects have an established and complex history of work within the Criminal Justice System (Cox and Gelsthorpe, 2012). However, the arts, and particularly music-based projects, have been recognised for the associated benefits that they provide to individuals in the Criminal Justice System (Caulfield, 2012; Cox and Gelsthorpe, 2008; Henley, Caulfield, Wilson and Wilkinson, 2012; Wilkinson and Caulfield, 2017). Specifically, in the prison environment, the arts have been linked with a “humanising experience” (Allen, Shaw and Hall, 2004) providing a platform to develop key skills (Wilkinson and Caulfield, 2017) that in the long-term lead to better educational achievements and improved self-confidence, social skills and personal development, seemingly increasing self-esteem, communication skills, and self-worth (Cox and Gelsthorpe, 2008; Miles and Clarke, 2006). There is also evidence to suggest, that art-based activities help to support individuals with managing anger and aggression (Blacker, Watson and Beech, 2008; Wilkinson and Caulfield, 2017), and for prisoners, potentially helps working towards a non-offending future (Bilby, Caulfield and Ridley, 2013; Cox and Gelsthorpe, 2008). Arts and spiritual interventions, as opposed to interventions based on psychology, training or education, provide an “alternative terrain” or pathway through the Criminal Justice System (Parkes and Bilby, 2010; Caulfield, Wilkinson and Wilson, 2016).

The governing bodies of the Criminal Justice System in England and Wales have acknowledged the need to address responsiveness and diversity issues (Ministry of Justice, 2013; National Offender Management Services, 2012) and there has been greater consideration and recognition for the use and role of art-based activities in this setting (Ministry of Justice, 2010) especially when working with individuals with certain needs, such as low literacy levels, that may otherwise be reluctance to engage with the system or interventions (Caulfield, Wilkinson & Wilson 2016). Plant and Dixon (2019), in the National Criminal Justice Art Alliance report, make the case that art-based activities in the Criminal Justice System can help with individuals redefining themselves, engagement in the system, self-management and communication with others, increasing the likelihood of individuals engaging with other opportunities, positive experiences and opportunities for individuals to reconnect with family and friends.
The Arts and Youth Offending Service

The Youth Justice System (YJS) is concerned with those aged 10-17 years. Youth Offending Services (YOS) are multiagency, community-based and statutory teams that work with children and young people with the aim of diverting them away from crime. Children and young people involved with the YOS are frequently considered to be ‘vulnerable’ and drawn from a range of disadvantaged backgrounds with a range of ‘important, interdependent, and interrelated needs’ (YJB, 2020a: 2). Practitioners working within the YOS regularly assess their needs to focus on interventions to promote the best outcomes for children and young people. This is a complex role that requires the involvement of a range of services (Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Probation, 2020).

In these settings, children and young peoples’ voices are frequently marginalised. Art-based research with this population has sought to explore their relations, understanding, and lived experiences. Dodsley and Gray (2021) engaged young people about their emotional responses to crime through drama-based sessions and focus groups. The research has highlighted criminological issues of labelling, social construction of crime, political economy, gender and crime and provided a space for participants to articulate damaging representations of themselves within modern cultures. Music-based activities have been used with children and young people in lots of domains and services with success, for example, those who are homeless (Kelly, 2017), hard-to-reach (Millar et al., 2020) and involved within the Youth Justice System (Smithson and Jones, 2021), with noted benefits to health and wellbeing of those who participate (Daykin et al., 2017).

The health and wellbeing issues often experienced by those in the Youth Justice System are said to stem from poverty and disadvantage, which in turn links with offending and reoffending behaviour (Daykin et al., 2017). Participatory music programmes foster social reintegration, support mental health and wellbeing, equipping children and young people with life skills, competencies, and emotional resilience. Caulfield et al., (2020) have documented the benefits that art-based activities have for children and young people who are in contact with YOS. They found that those involved in music-based activities were more likely to attend YOS appointments, along with statistically significant improvements in self-reported wellbeing and music ability. It is more widely evidenced that participation in
art-based activities increases confidence and social skills in those individuals connected with the Criminal Justice System (Anderson et al., 2011; Baker and Homan, 2007; Bilby et al., 2013; Bruce, 2015; Cheliotis and Jordanoska, 2016; Cox and Gelsthorpe, 2008; Van Maanen, 2010). The evidence supporting the benefits is mainly with adult prisoners, whilst the evidence supporting the benefits for children and young people in the criminal justice system is still emerging.

The YJB (2020b) acknowledged the operational challenges of delivery and provision during the pandemic. Whilst the operation of services continued, practitioners had to move to working from home, limiting face-to-face contact to only those deemed to be ‘highest risk’. This impacted upon communication with children and young people during the lockdown periods which brought about further challenges and significant disruption for the YOS. Offices remained open for emergency assistance only, judgements of which were made on individuals risks and needs (Criminal Justice Joint Inspectorates, 2021). Changes to support networks and isolation exacerbated existing difficulties and welfare problems for those involved within YOS’ (Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Probation, 2020; Criminal Justice Joint Inspectorates, 2021).

Method and Methodology

The overall research project sought to understand the implications of the Covid-19 pandemic for practitioners and young people involved with the YOS, to inform the current and future developments of the service. Therefore, this study was underpinned by three core aims:

- First, to generate knowledge about how YOS have adapted to the required changes and the impact that the new ways of working have had upon communication and relationships between practitioners and young people
- Second, to offer distinctive and timely insights into new ways of working and the implications of the changes during the pandemic upon young people and their sentences
- Third, to draw conclusions and to offer recommendations to inform the development of coordinated best practice which can assist services and inform future policy.
This research has value for the YOT who are required to submit recovery plans to the Youth Justice Board (2020c) about their responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic and to the young people who participated. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child Article 12 and Children’s Act 1989 outline the importance of children and young peoples’ participation and views upon key aspects of their lives. This approach has subsequently been adopted in policy and academic literature. Becko (2014: 3) argues that youth participation includes a diverse range of approaches including but not limited to “youth consultation - asking young people what they think about activity, policy or issues but not necessarily involving them in making changes” and “youth voice -giving young people a say on activities, services and policy”. To achieve the research aims with a participatory focus, it was felt that engaging young people through a creative, arts-based participatory method, would allow for greater expression of experiences from this population from a bottom up rather than top-down perspective that might not otherwise be obtained through more traditional methods such as interviews.

Traditional methods of engaging participants and collecting valuable data has huge limitations when used with ‘hard to reach groups’ and disadvantaged young people (Boneyski et al., 2014). Livingstone et al., (2014: 286), argue that participatory approaches to research ‘shift the objective of doing research “on youth” to doing research “with youth”. For young people involved in the YOS who struggle with aspects of communication, creative methods “that draw on inventive and imaginative processes” (Veale, 2005: 254) can improve their skills along with their confidence and self-esteem (Daykin et al., 2017; Millar et al., 2020). Creative methods can be more inviting and accessible for marginalised populations to employ a dialogue that resonates with their experiences (Millar et al., 2020). The use of lyric based methods was chosen as it was assumed young people may have a relationship with music allowing them to make a connection to the research, and become more confident expressing themselves (Kelly, 2017).

Van der Vaart et al., (2018) further supports creative and art-based research methodologies and argues that they are valuable because they generate deep insight into lived experiences and views. Such an approach “has significant potential for the enactment of social change in youth justice settings” (Smithson and Gray, 2021: 6). Furthermore, creative, participatory,
and art-based methodologies offer opportunities and ways to ‘give back’ to a community or group, allowing them to develop and achieve, as well as potentially motivating a community or group of individuals. The Youth Justice Board (2018) advocate a child first approach and have a participatory strategy (Youth Justice Board, 2016) which outlines the importance of ensuring that young people’s voices are heard, respected and seriously listened to. Smithson and Gray (2021) however, argue that this has not been sufficiently adopted in research and youth justice practice should be collaborative. This requires an approach to research that begins from the position of the young people rather than the researcher.

Policy centred on children and young people frequently lacks consideration of those it intends to support. Assumptions based on what officials presume is required to ‘fill gaps’ in service provision is not always the most beneficial. Groundwater-Smith et al., (2015: 62) maintain ‘reporting children and young people’s voices often involve adults making some judgements about interpretations’. This is supported by Reason (1994: 10) who argues “we can only understand our world as a whole if we are part of it; as soon as we attempt to stand outside, we divide and separate”. Research projects are often developed without incorporating and respecting the views of participants. They follow an agenda that assumes by simply ‘participating’, the voices of children and young people have been captured effectively. It would be inadequate to simply assume that in offering young people a voice to instigate change, their participation will be forthcoming. The trust of children and young people take time to build (Greenwood and Levin, 1998) and can be damaged by our tendency as researchers to profess we are the experts. Therefore, this research involved a creative, participatory approach to data collection.

As online technologies have developed, including the internet and greater bandwidth, new online provisions and technologies, have allowed for virtual platforms to support methodological developments for data collection (Stewart and Shamdasani, 2017).

**Design**

The methods adopted were developed to draw on the young people’s direct experiences of the Covid19 pandemic whilst completing an order with the YOS. Participatory approaches to
research, recognise the need to accommodate different learning styles, as well as promoting engagement. The research team collaborated with a second YOS, based in a different county, to capture young people of different demographics. This allowed for the recruitment of more participants. Subsequent changes to the research, as outlined here, received ethical approval in advance.

The project adopted an innovative lyric writing session, facilitated by a creative artist, and hosted on a virtual platform (Microsoft Teams). On a voluntary basis, the young people were invited to take part in the session. The artist was briefed by the research team about the aims of the project, and they designed an activity to focus and enhance the lyric writing session. This method was developed to promote an approach that would accurately capture the young peoples experiences, perceptions and thoughts whilst completing their order, during the Covid19 pandemic. Additional funding from the University of Chester QR fund 2020/21 was sought and approved to support dissemination by providing the young people with the chance to record and produce their lyrics into an audio track.

**Participants**

There are 157 YOS teams across local authorities (Smithson et al., 2021), however, they are fragmented (Criminal Justice Joint Inspectorates, 2021). This study spanned across two YOS within different counties and therefore sought to understand the experiences of two demographically different areas in line with the research aims.

Participants were recruited via the two YOS that had agreed to participate in this study. Ethical approval (as outlined below) was granted for recruitment of participants aged 15 and over, although both services involve younger individuals. All participants were currently serving an order with the YOS at the time that they were recruited to participate in the lyric writing sessions. The young people were able to read about the study and discuss the study with their YOS worker or a member of the research team prior to deciding whether to take part. Initially, young people were recruited via a gatekeeper within the YOS who shared the participant information sheet and consent form with them by email. However, this approach to recruitment was limited, as we did not recruit as many young people as anticipated, and therefore the methods of recruitment were revised. Gatekeepers continued to inform young people about stage one of the project and directed the young
people to a Microsoft Form site which provided them with a short Survey. The link to this form was shared by text/WhatsApp and outlined the participant information and obtained consent more efficiently. The form also provided the opportunity to collate additional data about their perceptions and experiences of YOS before inviting them to the lyrics writing session should they wish to participate. Importantly, it could be accessed via their mobile phones – a means by which they could otherwise engage with their YOS worker and order.

**Ethics**

Ethical approval was received by the University of Chester Institute of Policing. The application was revised on two occasions, firstly, to allow for the inclusion of those aged from 15 rather than 16 years as it was felt by the original YOS that this may increase participation. Despite this amendment, there were still challenges presented in recruiting young people and the opportunity arose to recruit from an additional YOS. This allowed us to widen the parameters of the research to include a broader representation of demographics. The artist and the research team completed DBS checks prior to the research beginning.

The sessions themselves had to be virtual due to social distancing measures. These sessions were held in a private Microsoft Teams meeting between the young person, the artist and a member of the research team who was present in the background at all sessions. Whilst the young person was aware of the research team member’s presence, they remained muted with camera off to avoid any distraction. After discussing the second stage of the research with a member of the research team and providing consent, the young people were informed that the session would not be recorded but they would be requested to share their anonymised lyrics at the end of the session with a member of the research team. Fieldwork notes were also captured by a member of the research team present on the call and are cited to demonstrate techniques used by the artist to engage with participants. The young people were given a £20 E-voucher as a thank you for their participation.

**Materials and Process**
Microsoft Forms Survey

Participant information sheets and consent forms (initially shared via email but later through a Microsoft Forms) included contact information for the research team should the young people have any questions. This survey was set up to gather the initial views of the young people about their experience of engaging with the YOS during the Covid19 pandemic and social distancing requirements. The Microsoft Form was developed and saved in accordance with measures to maintain anonymity and confidentiality. Once completed, the young people were invited to share contact information, e.g., mobile phone number or email address, with the researchers if they were interested in participating in the project.

Virtual lyric writing session

The lyric writing sessions were between one and two hours in duration and co-delivered by the artist and young people. When the young people entered the space, there was no preset structure to the sessions. The format of the session was prompted by the information the young person shared with the artist within informal rapport building conversation. This ensured sessions were led on an individual basis by the young people, featuring aspects of their lives important to them, thus promoting a bottom-up rather than top-down perspective (Popplewell and Hayman, 2012). To facilitate the lyric writing, the artist used an open reflection activity to capture how the young people viewed themselves and how they think others perceive them, followed by a word generation exercise and then devising the lyrics.

The artist was closer in age to participants than the research team and spent time getting to know the young people before moving into the main session (typically around 30 minutes). The artist instantly built a rapport by asking questions that were not too probing and established areas of shared interest or identity, for example, music, names, family background etc., and in doing so, the young people were responsive and interacted with the artist on a more personal than professional level. The research took place across two YOS’, one was close in locality to the artist and so familiarity was established more quickly in these sessions due to common geographical references. This was also typically because the artist had links with the YOS in this location and some of the young people had previously attended a music studio to work on music with the artist’s manager.
The trust and rapport building was important, allowing the young people to take ownership of the conversation and participation in activities. The artist was empathetic and would also share information about himself such as where he grew up or his family. As such, he adopted a role-model stance (Creaney, 2020). The artist engaged the young people by using slang and was familiar with slang terms used by young people such as “peng”. The level of familiarity created more of a peer like level interaction, removing an authoritative stance, unlike other typical relationships that the young people experience in their lives (e.g., YOS workers and professionals). This removed the hierarchies of power, allowing the artist to be ‘on a level’ with young people. Despite the researchers experience with this population, social differences, and power imbalances frequently evident in research may have inhibited the responses. By engaging them with an activity they were passionate about, the young people were able to express themselves and lead the narrative in a way that was meaningful to them. In addition to engaging young people, this demonstrated a desire to respect and capture their social reality, personality, and identity (Drummond, 2018). Taking time to learn about the young people, their likes, interests, and experiences whilst relaying his own, broke down systematic hierarchies often present within research and criminal justice settings (Smithson and Gray, 2021).

The artist asked the young people about their music preferences, this was frequently a common ground as it already formed part of their day to day lives (Smithson and Jones, 2021). With all the young people, the artist recognised and was aware of their music interests discussing artists and genres that they were interested in. At times he would search for music they recommended on YouTube and listen to it – having a shared experience of the music and demonstrating a willingness to listen to and learn from the young people. The conversation flowed freely and allowed the artist to introduce the research to the young people by highlighting their approach to lyric writing. The young people connected with this by being open and honest about personal experiences in their lyrics. The following part of the session involved the artist asking the young people about their experiences of YOS, such as how often they had appointments and how they found them. In these interactions, the young people often resorted to short, one-word answers. Reverting to the dialogue at the beginning of the meeting, the artist would probe them in a jovial and relaxed manner with more open questions. At this point, as the rapport was
established, the young people would elaborate on their responses. When the artist moved the session onto the lyric writing he reminded the young people that he was interested in their perspectives and feelings. He encouraged them to articulate their experiences:

Fieldwork notes: ‘It’s just talking about your life, you know, talking about yourself, but if you can, talk about your experience with the YOT, how they’ve helped you, just an honest point of view about how they’ve helped you in what way, if they’ve helped you’.

Where the young people showed hesitation or uncertainty, the artist guided them through the lyric writing process by continuing to ask them questions about themselves. The artist also mentioned he was dyslexic apologising for the time it took him to write, another common ground often established between him and the young people. The rapport built through this exercise allowed the artist, in some cases, to recognised some of the frustrations of the young people:

Artist: ‘You’re smiling because I think it looks that you’ve got some good ideas’.
CYP4: ‘I’ve got loads for the outside, but for the inside I’ve got nothing […] If you go back to high school, I can give you loads of stereotypes people gave me’.

Taking the approach of being empathic and encouraging towards the young people encouraged an authentic relationship between them (Creaney, 2020) and moved away from processes of stigma this population are frequently subject to (Deakin, Fox and Matos, 2020). This better facilitated the co-produced data. The young people were not asked to share anything personal within this session but at times would share personal information about drug use, offences and family circumstances. The artist did not endorse negative behaviours, nor condemn them. Instead, he sought to reassure and inspire them, highlighting positive aspects in their skills and passions, often also drawing on his experiences of working with individuals in prisons:
Fieldwork notes: ‘There’s guys like you; they go through what you’re going through, but they’re banged up, that’s why I encourage you to continue with your music, it helps you release your stress and that, do you find it helps you when you do music?’

Some young people relayed their experiences of prison to him, an example of how the empathy had been developed between them through the sessions. Having knowledge of the criminal justice system allowed the artist to identify with the young people and be supportive to encourage positive change (Creaney, 2020). The artist recognised their strengths (Kelly, 2017), for example, resilience which was then framed within the lyrics. This is important as young people within the youth justice system are frequently subject to negative, rather than positive labelling (Deakin, Fox and Matos, 2020; Dodsley and Gray 2021).

At times, the young people struggled to identify words and phrases when lyric writing, and there were pauses as they sought to identify an appropriate word. The artist encouraged them by focusing on aspects of their dialogue. For example, if the young people used a particular word or phrase to define their experience, they would support them to find another word that rhymed with it and then work back to devise the line of the lyrics it closed. By making these suggestions, based on their previous discussions, it ensured that the lyrics developed, were authentic to those participating. The artist adopted the slang and language the young people used to ensure the lyrics were authentic to them (Daykin et al., 2017; Caulfield et al., 2020). Throughout, the artist was encouraging, giving them confidence in their writing. They were keen to hear what the young people had written and supported them by stating how talented they were. As the young people produced their lyrics, they were then given the opportunity to choose a beat and practice performing their words.

By this point in the sessions, the artist had gained an understanding of the young peoples’ experiences of lyrics writing. As such, they made a judgement about how to support them through the process. At times they would play a backing track to guide them but due to internet connections, this was sometimes affected, requiring young people to find one using YouTube to assist. Some young people were keen to simply write, and they provided a quiet space to enable them to do so, at times writing lyrics whilst waiting, again engaging with a
shared experience. The artist encouraged the young people by recognising their strengths for identifying their feelings of writing lyrics, this “cultivated young peoples’] self-belief, helping to shape new positive personal and social identities” (Creaney, 2020: 31).

The artist positioned themselves as an advisory figure, to guide them through the process that they ultimately delivered. When one of the young people demonstrated flair for lyric writing, the artist informed them that they were ‘one of the best they had heard’ and was more talented than them at that age. The artist acknowledged their skills and experience and also encouraged ownership in the lyric writing:

*Artist:* ‘I am going to challenge you, I know you’re used to spitting bars bro but we’re going to write 16 bar lines... just an honest point of view about how [YOT have] helped you in what way, if they’ve helped you. I’m going to leave this sheet up as you write the bars to encourage you but it’s for you to write your story’.

The sessions built upon the young peoples’ skills and the artist was vital in building their confidence in lyric writing (Smithson and Jones, 2021). The artist encouraged the young people with their skill and aspiration and built upon this by advising how to write in third person and develop their style. At the end of the session, the young people were asked to share their anonymised lyrics with the research team. They relayed what they had written to the artist who praised their talents using encouraging sounds or colloquial phrases: ‘that’s cold!’ and asked them to repeat it. This process allowed the young people to also recognise their strengths and promote positive growth (Kelly, 2017) which demonstrate the value of arts and music-based approaches with this population.

It was clear that some felt a real sense of achievement by the end of the session, for example, within 20 minutes of one session ending, the young person emailed across the entire song he had written. This was reflected in communications with their YOS workers also:

*Fieldwork notes:* [CYP6 has] had a bit of trouble at school, resulting in a short-term exclusion. In light of how well [CYP] opened up to [artist], I’d really like to see this through if at all possible.

*Manager upon seeking to schedule a future session:* [CYP] a good rapper but is really struggling to write something that’s not promoting offending behaviour so I’m hoping a session or two with [artist] will really help.
To ensure the research had a meaningful outcome (Caulfield et al., 2020) for the young people engaged within it, the opportunity to record their work is being explored.

**Analysis approach**

Goodwin (1994) argues that the interpretation of information in research is dependent on the lens used, and if used incorrectly, it can disempower participants (Radhermacher and Sonn, 2007). It was important that the researchers’ lens was not solely used in the project to maintain collaboration. The analysis of data occurred in two stages. The first stage, in an attempt to empower young people, involved the young people reflecting on and analysing the lyrics they had produced. They would read and reaffirm what had been produced, adding meaning and context to the artist when necessary. This ensured that the information produced was authentic to the young people, avoiding inferences and assumptions being made by the researchers. The second stage of analysis was conducted by the researchers. This was important to ‘make sense’ of the data produced by young people, supporting Groundwater-Smith et al.’s. (2015) observation that the involvement of young people in the analysis is not always preferable or productive. It is important to note that analysis is based on the research teams’ interpretation of the young peoples’ lyrics, the artist was consulted to clarify meaning for some of the slang terminology used (see examples of lyrics in the findings section below).

Throughout this research, the young people were granted opportunities to reflect and discuss their lives in ways they had not considered previously. Through a co-produced, participatory approach, the young people participated meaningfully and had the opportunity to construct knowledge that was representative of their experiences. Participatory principles have inspired this work from the outset and the importance of addressing the power imbalance in traditional research processes as well as ensuring the data gathered was authentic to the lives of young people, was important. This research has demonstrated a degree of fluidity in research with young people suggesting participation and emancipation in research as a guideline within which to frame research with young people rather than research on young
people. Therefore, the emancipatory and participatory approach to the research and the involvement of young people from the bottom-up rather than top-down, was achieved.

**Findings / project reflections**

The research approach gave young people a voice in the services that they were involved in and their day to day lives. By engaging them using music and lyric writing, the research could generate deeper and more authentic responses from the young people that might have otherwise been obtained within a more formal setting of interview with a researcher or YOS workers. This is important, as such an approach seeks to reduce the stigmatising power imbalances keenly felt by young people throughout their lives, not least when involved in statutory services (Deakin, Fox and Matos, 2020; Smithson and Jones, 2021).

Selection of lyrics produced by the young people who took part in the project:

- **Cyp7**: Trust me i’m a rising star roll in a [Mercedes] benz with me and my dog.
- **Cyp12**: I’m only a teen that’s trying to chase his dreams, They label me a bad [...] But I get referred to the youth team.
- **Cyp10**: I know i’m tapped (re YOS), But this is the life I live its mad.
- **Cyp6**: My life is movie, If i told you the shit that i been through [...] I wanna change but i feel like i can’t because of my past .

Within the sessions, the distance from the YOT, due to the independence and commonality with the artist, meant young people expressed their perceptions of the service:

- **Cyp10**: I know i’m tapped (re YOS), But this is the life I live its mad.

The lyrics written by the young people demonstrate how the use of arts-based methods allowed them to engage with a positive activity, particularly given their challenging backgrounds:

- **Cyp6**: My life is movie, If i told you the shit that i been through [...] I wanna change but i feel like i can’t because of my past .

There was evidence that they continued to struggle with past identities, but the experience allowed them to consider more positive futures:

- **Cyp5**: I remember the days i was always down i couldn’t pick up the phone and call no one everybody acting very long now you got me singing this song.
Cyp8: First and foremost I want to thank YOT, if it wasn’t for studio I wouldn’t be doing much, I had a rough life.

Cyp9: YOT gave man some studio time, if it wasn’t for that id be in some unusual sides.

It was evident that YOT and subsequent lyric writing research were also considered to be a welcome experience for some young people:

Cyp11: I’m trying to be a real cash earner, Now making music shout out to my yot worker.

Research limitations

Whilst the limitations of participatory research have been highlighted elsewhere, due to the validity of research and resource issues (Kim, 2016), the flexibility of this approach was felt to elicit richer data from the young people whilst also demonstrating to them the value of their perspectives. It has previously been reported that almost half of young people within YOS were found not to have access to digital services or an internet connection, severely disrupting their ability to engage with schooling and the YOS (Criminal Justice Joint Inspectorates, 2021). Regrettably, this issue would have had implications for this research project, impacting upon their opportunity and accessibility to participate in the research during the strictest periods of lockdown. Each YOS could provide data for young people who had suitable devices and when restrictions allowed, gatekeepers facilitated access for young people to complete the session at local authority facilities. Similar to previous studies, at times there were issues with young people not attending sessions, the project team sought to maintain contact with them and provide further opportunities to attend sessions (similarly to Smithson and Jones, 2021 study) this had some success.

Practical implications

This research highlights the value of using digital and participatory methods with young people for both accessibility and engagement (see Steward and Shamdasani, 2017; Costa, 2019). The transition to an online survey, whilst not to reduce the role of the gatekeepers, and allowed for a more direct and accessible means for young people to review participant information and provide their consent. The addition of questions about their experiences,
through this weblink once young people had provided consent the form, allowed for more data collection including from those who did not necessarily wish to be involved with stage two. The research allowed young people to use their voice more so than more traditional methods. The approach taken within this research allowed for young peoples’ meaningful participation and influence upon the future of services that they are involved in (Smithson and Jones, 2021). Using creative and participatory methods ensured that the perspectives of the young people participating in the research were central to the knowledge production (Harding, 2020). The methodology engaged with young people in a way that reduced power imbalances (Harding, 2020) and produced data that ensured their narratives became dominant (Crockett Thomas et al., 2021).

During the covid-19 pandemic there were concerns about the loss of services that could be provided for young people (Harris and Goodfellow, 2021; Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Probation, 2020; Criminal Justice Joint Inspectorates, 2021). Whilst this research sought to explore the implications of this, in doing so it enabled young people to engage with an activity that might have had numerous social and emotional benefits and as such, provide a coping mechanism (Kelly, 2017) during this challenging time. It also allowed for an additional experience within the YOS which may have promoted young peoples’ engagement within (Caulfield et al., 2020) at a time where services were limited. Utilising an artist who could identify with the young people to a greater extent than the research team also created a distinction from the YOS.

By identifying with the young people, their interests and lived experiences, the artist developed a rapport with participants which generated greater insights than would have otherwise been obtained by traditional methods (Van der Vaart et al., 2018). The research approach advocated for a child first approach (YJB, 2018) that focused upon their right to be heard and provide views that would be heard in the services they are involved in. Youth consultation and youth voice (Becko, 2014) was achieved by breaking down power imbalances to generate a sense of an equal and invested relationship (Smithson and Gray, 2021). The artist promoted their confidence in lyric writing allowing them to drive the narrative and whilst providing guidance about how to translate their perspectives into lyrics (Daykin et al., 2017; Millar et al., 2020). By using this approach and building understanding of each young persons’ individual skills and strengths, the artist captured the experiences of
participants who might otherwise be deterred from services due to low literacy levels (Caulfield, Wilkinson, and Wilson, 2016).

Wider literature has highlighted the potential for participatory methods used between children and young people and criminal justice agencies might generate positive contact and improve relations (Payne, Hobson, and Lynch, 2020), this research furthers these findings and the value in these approaches which are often overlooked. In addition to building social skills of the young people (Cox and Gelsthorpe, 2008; Miles and Clarke, 2006), the research has broader social implications for participants. This was a key feature of the motivation for the research method employed. The researchers intended for the research to capture young peoples’ experiences but also provide a positive opportunity for them also. Given those aged under 18 years, particularly within the criminal justice system, find their voices are absent from the policies that affect them, actively disseminating the research in this way seeks to empower participants (Heath et al., 2009). Additional funding received from the University of Chester QR funding provides the opportunity, where possible, for young people (should they wish) to record and share their music as part of the broader dissemination strategy.
References


Appendix 1 – the ‘real me’ activity

Write what people think of you on the outside and the real you on the inside.

NAME

The real me

Stereotypes (What people think)

Stereotypes (What people think)