

**Practicing lived experience leadership with love:  
Photovoice reflections of a community-led crime prevention project**

*Gillian Buck, Kemi Ryan, Natasha Ryan.*

**Abstract**

Lived experience leadership is part of a broader international trend toward service user involvement in public services yet little is known about services developed and delivered by people with lived experience of the criminal justice system. Our innovative study, coproduced by two formerly imprisoned community practitioners and an academic researcher, aims to amplify the voices of people delivering and using a lived experience-led crime prevention project. Using Photovoice methods, in which people use cameras to document their realities and advocate for change, we explore the potential of lived experience leadership to drive individual and social change. Some of the compelling images produced by the group are showcased, revealing how in contexts of suffering, social exclusion, and negative expectations, forms of inclusive, loving, hopeful community praxis can be impactful. We conclude that allegiances between community practitioners and social workers could begin to disrupt harmful and oppressive structures and create locally led, hope-filled service provision. To broker such allied practices, we include a self-audit for social and community workers, inviting reflections focused on this ambitious goal.

**Key words:** crime prevention; lived experience; participatory research; peer support; Photovoice.

**Teaser text**

People with lived experience of social services deliver forms of social work all over the world. Yet, there is little research into services delivered by people with lived experience of criminal justice. In this study, two formerly imprisoned community activists and a researcher worked together to hear the voices of people within a

crime prevention project led by people with lived experience of criminal justice. Using photographic methods, we explore the potential of lived experience leadership to drive individual and social change. Some of the images produced are showcased, revealing how in contexts of suffering, social exclusion, and negative expectations, forms of hopeful, loving, inclusive, community work can be beneficial. We conclude that if community and social workers join forces, they could start to disrupt inequalities that harm people and create hope-filled services. To encourage this, we pose questions, encouraging workers toward this goal.

## **Introduction**

This article reflects upon the work of *Reformed*, a peer-led crime prevention project based in Toxteth, Liverpool. The organisation's leaders decided to use the organisation's name, but individual participants will remain anonymous. Liverpool is the second most deprived local authority in England (Ministry of housing, communities and local government, 2019) and Toxteth has historically been stigmatised in the media, its residents denied a voice in their own story (Butler, 2020). *Reformed* have strong links in the community and have been recognised for making a positive contribution to Black and ethnic minority communities across the region. They wanted to disseminate their community-led approach, using research methods that amplify the voices of community members. We used photographic methods (Milne and Muir, 2019), underpinned by participatory action research (Ledwith, 2016) to gain insight from people using and delivering the service.

*Reformed* is a community interest (non-profit) company in England and Wales. They are 'peer-led' in that their two leaders draw on lived experiences of social exclusion and imprisonment to inform their work. Established in 2009, they initially provided outreach and mentoring to young people involved with police and social services, assisted by a small team of staff and volunteers who supported young people and families and brokered connections with other services. In recent years, the founders

of *Reformed* have moved into teaching in higher education settings, with a goal of creating change within social services and criminal justice. Drawing on grass roots experience, they educate future practitioners from a lived experience perspective, including why people can be drawn into criminality and the barriers that exist as people try to leave crime behind. Their teaching challenges stereotypes and negative perceptions in an attempt to build hope and aspiration. Their website explains:

Through personal first-hand experience evolving from service users to service providers we have identified the lack of understanding and lack of human approach provided by professional services who work with vulnerable and at-risk communities. This has allowed us to create a unique and holistic approach... transitioning those who come into contact with our service into positive pathways, whilst working collaboratively with social agencies.

The project was born out of the discrimination and sparse opportunities that the founders experienced upon release from prison. In England and Wales, only 17% of prison leavers gain employment within a year of release (MOJ, 2018) and half of UK employers surveyed ( $n = 1849$ ) would not employ someone with a criminal conviction (YouGov, 2016). Considerable racial inequality also persists, with young, Black former prisoners lagging behind their White counterparts in education, employment, and residential independence (Harris and Harding, 2019). In the absence of other opportunities, the founders of *Reformed* established their organisation to tackle violence, exploitation and criminalisation in their community; issues that had impacted them as young women.

Children exposed to neighbourhood violence experience higher rates of premature death, restricted development, poorer mental health and higher rates of incarceration (Beck et al., 2012). Preventative safeguarding is needed to reduce such trauma and inequality (Wilkinson, 2019). *Reformed* started life as a crime prevention

organisation, supporting young people, but adapted their approach over time, recognising that 'what comes with crime prevention is a whole lot of other issues'. Their work has included providing financial advocacy for mothers living in poverty, feeding local children, offering a place for older people to socialise, working with families, facilitating counselling for people who are traumatised and offering alternatives such as voluntary work if people do not want to process their trauma but are seeking positive purpose.

### *Lived experience, peer support and desistance from crime*

The lived experience-led approach taken by *Reformed* is part of a broader movement in health and social care. People with lived experiences have helped develop practice in at least the United Kingdom, North America, Australia, New Zealand (Voronka 2017), Ethiopia (Souraya et al., 2021) and Indonesia (Iryawan et al., 2022). One of the fastest-growing forms of citizen-led support in Europe and North America is peer-led mutual aid, run by people with direct lived experiences of the same social situations (Munn-Giddings and Borkman, 2017). Indeed, peer support has 'exploded around the globe' in recent decades (Davidson et al. 2012: 123). The movement toward experience-informed services originated in disability activism in the 1990s when the term *Nothing About Us Without Us* (Charlton, 1998) emerged as an antidote to the dependency and powerlessness that characterised disability oppression. Lived experience capital has since been mobilised by a range of marginalised groups, including criminalised individuals, who facilitate peer mentoring, service user councils and policy lobbying internationally (Buck, 2020).

LeBel, Ritchie and Maruna (2015) mapped a theoretical history of 'wounded healers' in criminal justice, noting that recipients gain valuable knowledge and skills from people who have 'been there' and that criminalised helpers benefit from 'generative' opportunities to overcome stigma and reconcile for past crimes. Being a peer supporter is a way of increasing social capital and reconstructing personal narratives

while gaining skills, which can act as a catalyst towards desistance from crime (Hinde and White, 2019). The study of desistance (or leaving crime behind) itself emerged out of a critique of the professionally driven 'medical model' of corrections. To explore desistance was to study those who change 'without the assistance of correctional interventions' (Maruna et al., 2011: 11), as desisters' own resources and networks can be more effective than professional staff (McNeill and Maruna, 2007). Desistance research suggests we might be better off if we allowed people with convictions 'to *guide us* [... rather than continuing] to insist that our solutions are their salvation' (Porporino, 2010: 80, emphasis in original).

In prison settings, peer support can help prisoners to gain purpose and meaning, stimulating personal transformation and protecting against the negativity associated with imprisonment (Perrin and Blagden, 2014). In community justice settings, peer mentoring enables people to find community, solidarity and a space for unacknowledged perspectives. At times it includes politicisation, or consciousness-raising, wherein peer supporters advocate for understanding and acceptance and strive to improve the criminal justice system from within (Buck, 2020). Despite the prevalence and potential of peer led initiatives, research has not been commensurate (Buck, Tomczak and Quinn, 2022; Duvnjak Stewart, Young, and Turvey, 2021). This is an oversight given that these developments could help the social sector to recognise and harness the insights of experts by experience, who are well placed to be leaders of change (Sandhu, 2017). Experts by experience could also 'breathe new life into classroom or research enterprise, making criminology [and social work] more relevant, up to date and (indeed) defensible as an academic area of study' (Maruna 2017: 16).

### *Community social work*

In addition to being lived experience-led, *Reformed* is a community-based provision. In many European countries community work has migrated from the state to the

voluntary sector, where its development has been critiqued as 'littered with high hopes, modest achievements and messy failures' (Stepney, 2017: 228). More optimistically, Tomczak and Buck (2019) traced how the penal voluntary sector can bring about radical (and modest) changes, improving individual experiences, raising consciousness and/or critically examining the state to promote the welfare of subordinate classes. Some examples of community-based work with criminalised people include Circles of Support and Accountability, which provide volunteer community sponsorship or 'radical inclusion' following imprisonment for a sexual offence. Ordinary community members 'welcome people back to the fold' and provide monitoring to ensure community safety (Fox, 2016). Beyond individualised approaches, some organisations work to influence system change. For example, the *Prison Reform Trust* and the *Howard League for Penal Reform* both aim to reduce unnecessary imprisonment and promote community solutions that address the underlying causes of crime (Tomczak and Buck, 2019).

Community social work is based on the needs of communities and the empowerment of members (Mini and Sathyamurthi, 2017). It relies upon partnerships between services and citizens and is focused on strengths. A community can be geographical, and/or based on common characteristics and communities grow and change over time (Mini and Sathyamurthi, 2017). In the context of austerity, communities are increasingly relied upon to enhance or replace state intervention (Malloch, 2020). Grass-roots organisations in which people receive support from those who have gone through similar issues have potential for community support and action, but often struggle for funding and recognition (Malloch, 2020). Social workers can be important allies to community work that has developed independently (Das et al., 2016). The role of the community social worker 'is to mobilize clients to work together to effect change within their environment' (Knight and Gitterman, 2018: 4). Community social work ranges from community

building to service provision and activism and is influenced by historical social movements pressing for social justice, equality and empowerment (Das et al., 2016).

Whilst many social work texts reference community social work, examples of community-led social work, wherein communities lead on defining and addressing problems, are less prevalent. Where they exist however, community led initiatives can offer effective innovation for addressing problems (Wolfer, 2014). Buck, Lawrence and Ragonese (2017: 1753), for example, highlighted the value of community led responses to child sexual exploitation. When people affected by (sexual) violence are empowered to act as local advisers their insight can help to create strong bonds with people needing support and their advice is deemed more credible, as it is based upon personal knowledge of risks and realistic strategies.

In this paper, we seek to understand how lived experience-led crime prevention is experienced. In terms of structure, we first outline our methods, which included community photography and focus groups. We then detail our findings, illustrating how *Reformed* provided safety, love, community, hope and rippling effects. Our empirical focus is on one non-profit organisation, but our conclusions are relevant across voluntary and social services seeking to meet human needs.

## **Methodology**

*Reformed* receive excellent direct feedback from community members but wanted some external research evidence of their impact. We therefore co-designed a study. As most research about marginalised people is done by those who are not marginalised (Brown and Strega, 2015) we included those with most experience as co-investigators. Our design aligns with 'participatory action research' (PAR), which assumes that people impacted by a topic should be co-researchers (Valenzuela, 2016: 149). There has been a lack of research on lived experience-led services and more 'is needed from the perspectives of those who have experienced incarceration to better

inform this topic' (Duvnjak et al., 2021: 13). PAR is collaborative and critical, aiming to connect academic knowledge making with ways to co-create meaning (Chevalier and Buckles, 2019: 1) so that practice can be improved (McCutcheon and Jung, 1990: 148). When well executed, action research blurs distinctions between researcher and participants, creating a democratic inquiry (Marshall and Rossman, 2011: 23).

Co-creating knowledge through collective learning aims to build capacity (Ledwith, 2016). University–community partnerships can be important in the struggle for social change enabling 'communities [to] avail themselves of the knowledge, expertise, and material resources housed in a university' (Knight and Gitterman, 2018: 13). We add that it is important for university partners not to see themselves as experts in these partnerships – but involved in an *exchange* of knowledge, expertise and resources. We selected research methods that would include people in crafting their own story and shift the research lens from a 'deficit view' of communities as disadvantaged, to learn from 'the array of cultural knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed by socially marginalized groups that often go unrecognized and unacknowledged' (Yosso, 2005: 69).

Photovoice is a research method in which people use cameras to document their realities, critically reflect, and advocate for change (Milne and Muir, 2019).

Photographs can offer 'an effective, participatory means of sharing expertise and knowledge' (Wang and Burris, 1997: 369) particularly for seldom heard groups (Milne and Muir, 2019). This study received approval from the university ethics committee. Co-researchers planned the ethical application together, guided by Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) good practice for social research (2020); seeking to maximise benefits, integrity and transparency and minimise harm. Participants were 'hand-picked' based on their knowledge of the issue (Denscombe, 2014: 41), i.e., staff members (n=4) and adult beneficiaries of the *Reformed* service (n=11) were invited to take part. The informed and voluntary consent of participants



was sought by the academic researcher who had no existing relationship with participants. The research project was verbally explained to potential participants by co-researchers who were clear that refusal to take part – or later withdraw – would not affect current working relationships. In response, 1 researcher, 4 staff members and 4 people who have used the service (9 in total) volunteered to take part.

The research process (from Wendel et al., 2019) involved:

1. Co-researchers met to co-produce a photography 'up-skilling' event.
2. Co-researchers facilitated 'up-skilling' events with participants discussing research purpose, image composition and photography ethics and safety.
3. Participant group (n=9) took photographs inspired by prompts: *Why is Reformed needed? and What does the work of Reformed mean to you?*
4. Participants each selected 4-5 images to discuss in online focus groups (using images offering the best insight into the work of *Reformed*).
5. In focus groups, each participant narrated their chosen photos and discussed others' photos. Common themes were identified as a group.
6. Co-researchers wrote a report for the social work teaching partnership and presented findings to a national Criminology Conference
7. Public exhibitions in Warrington and Liverpool took place in 2022.

Up-skilling events discussed risks associated with photographs which breach privacy or identify serious harms (e.g., images of weapons). Participants were asked to not take any identifying images (including children, faces or personal addresses) and to consider ethical forms of composition. We also discussed the (small) risk that participants could be verbally or physically attacked whilst taking photographs or have their cameras/phones stolen from them. To minimise these risks, participants were asked to consider safe times, locations and co-work with others. Finally, there was a small risk that participants could be distressed by their own or others' imagery, or by the resulting discussions. All participants were offered ongoing

support by *Reformed* and were provided with free, confidential helplines should they wish to seek further (anonymous) support.

All data was managed in line with EU General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR). Identifiable data was stored on a password protected computer. Research participants retained ownership of photographs they produced. They were invited to consent to share their (selected) photographs for exhibitions, articles and other outputs, but retained ownership for other purposes (Fitzgibbon and Stengel, 2018). Focus group discussions were digitally recorded using a voice recorder and transcribed and stored securely by the lead researcher.

#### *Data analysis*

Qualitative data analysis was collaborative between participants and researchers (Freedman et al., 2014). In focus groups, members discussed interpretations of their own photographs, then common themes or patterns across the images, for example, participants reflected on how 'light in darkness' represented hope for the future. When writing the report, researchers used 'hope' as a theme title. Data were additionally analysed using 'reflexive thematic analysis' (Braun and Clarke, 2021), which involves open, organic coding and iterative theme development. The lead researcher coded single faceted features in focus group transcripts and images (e.g., lifesaving; togetherness). These codes were grouped into themes (e.g., safety). Written interpretations were emailed to co-authors, who wrote remarks or made suggestions in follow up meetings. Whilst data analysis was collaborative, it did privilege the (academic) researcher, who had the most training and experience in empirical work. To minimise this power imbalance, themes were 'member checked' with photographers at a public exhibition so that their subjective realities could be represented as adequately as possible (Rubin and Babbie, 2012, p. 232). Co-researchers also collectively planned responses to peer reviewer comments in preparing this journal article.

## Findings

Taken together, the narrated images produced show how in limiting contexts of criminalisation, social exclusion, and low expectations, forms of hopeful, loving community praxis can be life changing. *Reformed* employ core approaches of building positive relationships, listening to community members, and taking tailored social action. This includes outreach and practical support to young people and families, financial advice, and food and resource distribution for people living in poverty. We now focus on five themes traced in discussion groups: Safety, Love, Community, Hope and Rippling effects.

### *Safety*



*Figure 1. Life Jacket. Reformed is a life jacket. It's been a lifeline through many difficult times for me and the people we work with; something to hold onto in the darkest and most wonderful of times, keeps you floating when things do seem a little bit dark (staff member).*



*Figure 2. Unmade bed.* I could never get out of bed. That was where I was constantly – if it wasn't for *Reformed*, I wouldn't have got out of there. I still have days now where if (staff name) didn't ring me, I'd stay in bed. But now I'm slowly getting there. That's my comfort place, I was there for weeks on end, I wouldn't do nothing, (she) would come and give me a kick up the bum, she puts up with my moods, my moaning, and my screaming, but she's there as a person. There's nothing out there for anyone with mental health. If I didn't have them doing this for me, I'd still be there now (community member).

One of the things most valued by people working with *Reformed* was having somewhere to go in the worst of times, including when unwell, hungry or experiencing crime and inequality. Staff recognised this, and it informed their descriptions of their work as a 'lifeline/ something to hold/ a guide'. The motivation for doing this work was to offer a service to people who feel on the margins or that no-one else will help. The founders saw this as important because they understand what it is like to feel unworthy of support:

We were in the 'hard-to-reach' box when we got released from prison and I was the easiest person to reach, I was begging everyone to help me! So, I couldn't understand. We put people in these boxes, *she's hard to reach because of the colour, she's hard to reach because of the length of sentence...* but actually it stops interaction with organisations (*Reformed* founder).

This reflection suggests that *not* labelling people as 'hard to reach' is vital, as is designing services *with* those who have lived experience of feelings excluded, so that

services do not entrench this exclusion. It also appears that the ‘wicked’ social problems described here, which have no easy solutions (Ritchey, 2013), require collaborative problem solving. The UK government has recognised that it cannot solve social problems alone and has called for the voluntary sector’s help in ameliorating ‘a range of burning injustices and entrenched social challenges’ including criminal justice and social care (HM Government, 2018: 18).

### *Love*



*Figure 3. Love.* We don’t just support and help through difficult times, changing mindset and life, we do it with love. What makes us different from most organisations – people go home to where love belongs, our love starts in the office and continues at home (staff member).



*Figure 4. Baby Scan.* *Reformed* is my baby. From the beginning it’s been our baby. We have grown it with good morals and good ways. We try to instil good things in it as you would a child (founder and staff member).

The *Reformed* project has been nurtured ‘like a child’ and people felt that staff treated them with love, care and high expectations despite their flaws or struggles. One man spoke of staff seeing past his mistakes to his potential. A woman spoke of depression following a bereavement and how *Reformed* called her regularly to listen and

encourage her. Another woman had her experience of menopause acknowledged. She said: 'They understand where my aggression may be coming from. Social services never question causes, be it menopause, death... the woman just gets left behind'. One of the founders stated:

*Reformed* comes with love. Many services can't provide love, it can be misinterpreted as sexual deviation, but love is not dirty. A lot of *Reformed* service users have not been loved but exploited... They are looking for kindness. Not intimate love, but genuine support. People feel our kindness and love and they trust us.

Acknowledging love is not common in criminal justice or social work settings. Petterson (2008) argues that this 'distrust of emotions' is rooted in Western moral thinking, which associates emotion with the body, sexuality and women, considering them inferior to reason, self-control and masculinity. *Reformed* reject this hierarchy, their practice is more aligned with a history of Black feminist and communal relational philosophies (from Audre Lorde, 1978, to bell hooks, 2016, to Mugumbate and Chereni, 2019), who all recognise love as creative power and care and connection as routes to human excellence. DeValve's (2015) *A Different Justice*, outlines love as a useful concept for criminal justice, arguing that the criminal justice system offers little chance of rehabilitation, but in the tradition of peace-making criminology, love can offer humanitarian solutions. Godden (2017) similarly argues that love is marginalised in professional social work, yet it can transform systems of injustice such as capitalism, patriarchy, and racism. Drawing upon the work of bell hooks, Godden argues that 'the love ethic' in social work is a model of relationship-oriented activism encompassing dialogue, nonviolence, interconnectedness between people and between people and nature, reflexivity, shared power, and solidarity. These features were central to the *Reformed* approach.

## Community



*Figure 5 Slide Park.* This represents community, we bring the community together, we bring young people and old people, disabled people, Black, White, Chinese people, people who feel that they don't fit into society, people who do. We all live in this community, and we all fit (staff member).



*Figure 6. Plant.* I liked the fact that the root was out, and the light shone above the leaves. *Reformed* works with your roots to help you create and develop, rather than changing your roots. Your roots are still allowed to show, and you develop from them roots when you are part of their service (staff member and former service user).

Community is vital to the work of *Reformed*. People spoke of their roots being valued and positive visions of community being created. Connections to social networks (e.g., friends, extended families, community groups) and places, so often overlooked in individualised interventions, were central to their work. *Reformed* 'bring the community together, young, old, disabled, Black, White, Chinese people, those who feel that they don't fit in society, those who do' (staff member). There is support for all community members, regardless of their original focus on young people.

*Reformed* recognise that what comes with crime prevention is a range of other issues

and have adapted to respond to these, providing for example, financial advocacy, food, places for people experiencing loneliness to socialise, counselling, and alternatives such as voluntary work. This diversity was valued by recipients. Their community space represented safety. One service user stated: 'They keep you feeling safe from police brutality and a society that sees Black people as infiltrators, even though we were first people on the earth'. Yosso (2005: 77) notes that 'aspirations are developed within social and familial contexts... that offer specific navigational goals to challenge (resist) oppressive conditions.' In practical terms, *Reformed* understood that conflict and trauma do not just affect individuals, but their families and neighbourhoods, so this is where the work took place. 'Community' was also broadened. People spoke of being shown 'a whole wide world', where they can achieve goals. *Reformed* reject labels such as 'disadvantaged or hard to reach' and communicate to people that they have value and potential. They encourage healing, belonging and aspiration because these things were often denied to them.

### *Hope*



*Figure 7. Lamppost and Tree. The light, there's no direction in your life then you go to Reformed and things become clearer. You can see the potential in everyone. I have felt so down and in a really dark, scary place. I have been in so much pain and you are the light guiding me through (community member).*





Figure 8. Lamppost in Car Park. There is always light in a dark place, light at the end of a dark place. This symbolises when in a dark place, never give up, there is always light at the end of the road (community member).

Hope was a clear theme in the imagery presented, often represented as light emerging from the dark or positivity filtering negativity. The people *Reformed* work with were all already in touch with social workers and probation officers but felt that these professionals were not hopeful for them or gave up on them. When workers at *Reformed* had hope, it strengthened people and enabled them to see themselves in new ways. This phenomenon has been noted before. Maruna's work (2001: 96), revealed a 'looking glass recovery' process wherein at first (criminalised people) have no belief in themselves, but someone else believes in them and makes them realise that they do have personal value. Hope and hopefulness help people realise possibilities and build motivation, yet workers need to work persist and maintain hope through lapses and relapses (McNeill and Weaver, 2010). The workers at *Reformed* were intimately connected to the importance of hope because they had lived through its potential and the harms caused by its absence. As Rufus May, a clinical psychologist and former mental health patient, explains: 'workers... don't see the ones like me who got away. Therefore, they have very little concept of recovery from mental health problems' (in Basset and Repper, 2005: 16–17). In contrast, it is well recognised in substance misuse settings that 'visible' recovery champions help people to believe that recovery is possible and desirable (Kidd, 2011:

174). 'Visibility' of people who have survived social exclusion and marginalisation is therefore crucial to help providers and users of services to believe in and hope for change.

### *Rippling effects*



*Figure 9. Fire.* This represents what you lit in me around anti-racism. You lighted an awareness that our criminal justice system is racist and there are lots of discriminations. I want to be an ally in fighting that (co-researcher).



*Figure 10. Child in Shoe.* Our children will one day walk in our shoes. Your holistic approach to working with families educates and breaks any negative cycles (community member).

It was clear from images and discussions that *Reformed* (seek to) influence change beyond individual and community support. The staff team had aspirations for people and society beyond meeting immediate needs. At an individual level this

involved navigation; inviting people to think about the direction they wanted to travel in and guiding them on routes toward these goals. At the social level, this involved advocating for a fairer society in which young people are not endlessly criminalised and stigmatised for past mistakes or experiences of exploitation, and where people from minoritised populations are treated with respect and fairness. Tomczak and Buck (2019) mapped four approaches adopted by the penal voluntary sector, including: (functionalist) fixers who aim to improve individuals; (interpretivist) enablers, who hear people's interpretations to encourage personal growth; (humanist) thought changers who campaign to raise broader consciousness; and (structuralist) distribution changers who seek fairer distribution of resources. Elements of all these orientations were present in the activity of *Reformed*. They worked directly with people to hear concerns and encourage individual growth and change, they also campaigned with educators and local professional networks to challenge the racism and marginalisation impacting people's lives. At times they actively worked to redistribute resources including community facilities and food – although they were structurally limited in these activities by reliance on time-limited grant funding and philanthropy. To fully realise the transformative possibilities of community organisations like *Reformed*, there is a need for more awareness of the important work they do – something we hope this study has contributed to – and for other organisational and individual allies to support their efforts. Collective work on 'wicked problems' could focus on disrupting harmful and oppressive structures and identify opportunities for locally led, hope-filled service provision.

### **Reflective questions for Social Work practitioners**

The founders of *Reformed* experienced a lack of understanding upon release from prison, which drove them to develop a different kind of service, one which acknowledged barriers and adopted a 'human approach'. They also wanted to share learning with other workers who support excluded groups. The following questions

draw out elements from our five themes (safety, love, community, hope, rippling effects) and acknowledge the value of lived experience leadership. They are designed for social workers in statutory or voluntary sectors to use as a 'self-audit' and starting point toward the ambitious goal of building collective, hope-filled service provision.

- Do you (or could you) include people with lived experiences of social problems in the design, delivery, and evaluation of your services?
- How does your organisation reach out to people in the worst of times? Do you meet essential needs? Or signpost to organisations that can?
- How is your practice loving? (Do you value people and their imperfections and care for yourselves and team members?)
- How do you recognise potential in individuals, families and communicate hope to them?
- How is your work focused on place and its relation to self? Do you value and nurture the environments and communities that people live in?
- How does your work promote a sense of community and belonging?
- Do you reflect on power in your work and challenge imbalances including forms of discrimination and presumed hopelessness?
- How do relationships end? At what point do you/ your organisation give up on people and can this be changed?
- Do you work in partnership with grass roots/ community organisations to address need and advocate for people?
- Do you advocate on behalf of grass roots/ community organisations to ensure their sustainability?
- Are there networks you are part of (or could nurture) which bring together public services and community/grass roots organisations to tackle structural deficits such as poverty and racism?

## **Acknowledging limitations**

Whilst our study gained valuable visual and spoken data offering a depth of insight into this one community-led project, the small sample is not representative of the diverse range of peer-led community work. The study design was also negatively impacted by Covid-19. Our up-skilling events and focus groups all took place online via video meeting platforms due to national lockdown restrictions. This meant that only people with access to a camera phone and relatively stable internet connection could take part, limiting the range of potential participants. Future studies could provide people with cameras and meet face-to-face to reduce technical and access barriers. Finally, our approach was largely appreciative, exploring the strengths of the initiative, but there are known risks facing helpers with lived experience of incarceration, including overidentification with the person being helped, and the risk of countertransference (Duvnjak et al., 2021: 14). Criminalised workers also face ongoing exclusions within practice contexts that can feel hostile (Buck, Tomczak and Quinn, 2022). There is therefore a need for research to explore the possible problems that can be faced and develop strategies to minimise these.

## **Conclusion and recommendations**

People who have experienced social exclusion – including imprisonment and criminalisation – have unique knowledge and survival strategies, but the social sector often fails to recognise (former) service-users as potential leaders of change (Sandhu, 2017). This study used participatory research methods to gain insight into one community-led approach to crime prevention. The images produced are all available (in colour) at Cheshire and Merseyside Social Work Teaching Partnership (2022). Each is unique and beautiful, but there are common themes within this diversity, including safety, love, community, hope, and rippling effects. *Reformed* presented as *safe* because they provided somewhere to go in the worst of times when all other doors had been closed. This feature emerged because the founders understood what it was like to be underestimated or shut out of services. *Reformed*

operated with *love* by listening deeply, having high expectations and seeing past people's mistakes or struggles. A 'love ethic' in social work could include such relationship-oriented activism encompassing dialogue, interconnectedness, and shared power (Godden, 2017). *Community* was of central importance. People spoke of their roots being valued and positive visions of community created. There was support for all community members given that conflict and trauma do not just affect individuals, but also their families and neighbourhoods, so this is where the work took place. *Hope* enabled strong, trusting relationships, especially as many people using the service had past experiences of professionals who were not hopeful or gave up on them. The founders of *Reformed* had lived through the absence of hope and its harms, so became living examples of what resilience and survival could look like. These themes include several protective elements that have been linked to desistance from crime. For example, hope offers an alternative view of the self to counter feeling hopeless or 'doomed' to a life of crime and punishment (Maruna, 2001). Community offers an important counterweight to isolation (Fox, 2016) and social support mitigates stigmatisation (Stone, 2016).

Finally, images revealed a number of *rippling effects* beyond individualised support. These included awareness-raising and advocacy on behalf of criminalised and minoritised people. This broader consciousness raising and push for a fairer distribution of resources often goes unnoticed in the work of community/ voluntary sector organisations but has transformative possibilities. To realise these, we encourage organisations and individuals to collaborate around shared goals (e.g., reducing poverty/ challenging racism). In these ways social workers in a variety of settings can join together to disrupt oppressive structures and create local, hope-filled service provision.

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