

## **Is volunteering for everyone? Volunteering opportunities for young ex-offenders**

### **Structured abstract**

*Purpose:* The purpose of the study was to explore volunteering opportunities for young adults with criminal records ('young ex-offenders').

*Design:* The study was conducted primarily in one London borough. It involved mapping volunteering opportunities for young ex-offenders and conducting in-depth interviews with young ex-offenders and practitioners from volunteer-involving organisations and resettlement organisations.

*Findings:* Several perceived benefits of volunteering for young ex-offenders were identified; particularly in relation to 'softer' outcomes such as building confidence, learning new skills and developing a routine. Perceived challenges focused on whether or not organisations were able to provide volunteers with adequate levels of support; concerns about levels of engagement among volunteers and confusion over safeguarding procedures, particularly in relation to the obtaining of Disclosure and Barring Checks.

*Value:* This paper offers practical insight into the scope of volunteering for young ex-offenders which may be of use to volunteer-involving organisations and resettlement organisations interested in providing such opportunities to young ex-offenders.

**Key words:** volunteering, young adults, ex-offenders, resettlement, safeguarding, inclusivity, Disclosure and Barring Service.

**Article classification:** Research Paper

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## **Introduction**

This paper presents the findings of a study, conducted by the Institute for Criminal Policy Research (ICPR) and Institute for Volunteering Research (IVR), which explored volunteering opportunities for young adults with criminal records. For the purposes of the study, 'young adults with criminal records' (hereafter 'young ex-offenders') have been defined as those aged between 18 and 25 years<sup>1</sup> who have at least one previous caution or conviction. The study aimed to assess the extent to which volunteering opportunities are available to young ex-offenders; the benefits and challenges of volunteering for young ex-offenders; and the role that volunteering can have in contributing to the resettlement of young ex-offenders in the wider community.

The study was conducted primarily in one London borough and involved mapping volunteering opportunities for young ex-offenders and conducting in-depth interviews with young ex-offenders and practitioners from volunteer-involving organisations (VIOs) and resettlement organisations. The perceived benefits of involving young ex-offenders in volunteering focused on what could be called 'softer', yet highly valued, outcomes such as developing a routine, increasing self-esteem and learning new skills; the role of volunteering as a route to employment was also highlighted by participants, albeit less frequently. Several important challenges surrounding volunteering among young ex-offenders were raised by research participants; including concerns relating to the adequate provision of support for young ex-offenders involved in volunteering; concerns about re-offending and concerns about the overall engagement of young ex-offenders in volunteering opportunities. However, perhaps the most significant barrier to ex-offender volunteering was the uncertainty on the part of VIOs about the Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) requirements for volunteers with criminal records and how best to implement appropriate safeguarding procedures. The paper concludes by highlighting ways in which good practice in relation to volunteering among young ex-offenders can be supported.

## **Background**

In order to fully understand the overarching purpose of the research, it is necessary first to explore the interweaving policy issues and research evidence surrounding volunteering and the resettlement of young ex-offenders and to briefly outline existing initiatives involving this group of people.<sup>2</sup>

### *Policy context*

The most recent findings of the Community Life Survey show that in 2014/15 42 per cent of respondents had volunteered formally, defined as 'giving unpaid help through groups, clubs or organisations', at least once in the last year. 59 per cent of respondents had volunteered 'informally' – that is by 'giving unpaid help as an individual to people who are not relatives' – at least once in the last year (Cabinet Office, 2015). On the basis of the benefits offered by volunteering to the individual volunteer (such as developing skills or improving employment prospects), the recipient and the wider community at large (such as improving the local area or the lives of residents within the community), volunteering has been promoted in recent years by both the Coalition and preceding Labour governments (Jacobson et al., 2014). In 2011, the publication of the *Giving White Paper* saw the government pledge to make civic engagement easier and more compelling by investing £40 million in volunteering and social action over a two year period (Cabinet Office, 2011). Such developments fell within the wider promotion of the 'Big Society' at the onset of the Coalition government (Cabinet Office, 2010). It has been argued that the coalition leaders' impetus behind the 'Big Society' waned during their tenure (Macmillan, 2013; Centre for Social Justice, 2013; Jacobson et al. 2014); however the 'Big Society' did feature in the 2015 Conservative Party Manifesto which included a pledge to grant three days' paid 'volunteering leave' per year for those working large companies or the public sector.<sup>3</sup>

Volunteering and community involvement among young people, specifically, has been promoted by the government in programmes such as the National Citizens Service (which places 15-17 year olds in social action projects)<sup>4</sup> and through social action projects funded by the Youth Social Action Fund (Cabinet Office and HM Treasury, 2015; see also, Kirkman et al., 2015). The most recent findings from the Community Life Survey show that 47 per cent of 16-25 year old respondents had participated in formal volunteering at least once in the last year; while 35 per cent of this age group had participated in formal volunteering at least once a month in the same time period.<sup>5</sup>

There has been more government emphasis in recent years on volunteering and its links to employability, particularly in light of provisions set out by the Work Programme, which was launched in 2011 with the aim of supporting those at risk of long-term unemployment to find work (Department for Work and Pensions, 2012) and the Youth Contract which aims to get 18-24 years olds into work through the use

of apprenticeships and voluntary work experience placements (Department for Work and Pensions, 2014). Since 1 March 2012, prison leavers who make an advance claim for Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) within five weeks of release whilst in custody, and those who claim JSA within thirteen weeks of release, are mandated to the Work Programme (Department for Work and Pensions, 2012).

The promotion of volunteering among young ex-offenders sits within broader resettlement policy developments aimed at young ex-offenders and their reintegration within the wider community. In recent years, peer mentoring – in which individuals who themselves have an offending background provide support to offenders – has had an increasingly prominent place on the policy agenda. In 2012 Chris Grayling outlined a government commitment to ensuring that all prisoners leaving custody received through-the-gate support through the provision of a mentor (albeit not necessarily a 'peer mentor').<sup>6</sup> This was followed by the provision of government funding to develop a 'Just mentoring' Volunteering and Mentoring Hub, led by organisations including the Mentoring and Befriending Foundation, the Prince's Trust and the St Giles Trust, to improve access to information about and access to mentoring for offenders.<sup>7</sup> Also of relevance to the scope for ex-offenders to take up volunteering opportunities is the reform to the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974. The Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012 allows more offences to become 'spent' (meaning they do not have to be disclosed for most purposes, such as when applying for employment) and reduces the time it takes for many offences to become 'spent'.<sup>8</sup>

#### *Research evidence on desistance*

The potential role that volunteering could play in the resettlement of among young ex-offenders can be situated within the broader academic literature on desistance from crime. Desistance is regarded as a process which can be associated with factors such as maturational reform, the development of social ties and changes to internal self-narratives of desistance (cf. Maruna, 2001; Laub and Sampson, 2001; McNeill, 2009). Research evidence points to the importance of developing both human capital (such as the development of skills) and social capital (such as the development of social ties) in promoting desistance (McNeill, 2009); alongside building upon on the strengths of the individual offender (Maruna and LeBel, 2003).

Burnett and Maruna (2006) explained that volunteering can form a part of a strengths-based approach to desistance. They found that giving serving prisoners a

volunteering role can have 'a clear value in assisting resettlement and in supporting desistance from crime' (Burnett and Maruna, 2006: 92). Likewise Edgar et al (2011) found that involving serving prisoners in volunteering and active citizenship enabled prisoners to gain skills which would benefit them upon release; could have a beneficial impact upon self-identity, and, more broadly, could help to build the social capital of those who participated. With regard to volunteering among young adults, specifically, Uggen and Janikula (1999) found that young adults who participated in volunteering had lower levels of arrest rates than those who did not. They concluded that 'by entering and committing to prosocial volunteer service, young adults may alter lifelong trajectories of deviant behavior [sic]' (Uggen and Janikula, 1999: 355).

### *Existing initiatives*

Recent years have witnessed an increased prevalence of third sector-led initiatives aimed at promoting the effective resettlement of young ex-offenders and supporting young adults through transitions in the criminal justice system (CJS). The Transition to Adulthood (T2A) programme began in 2009 in order to improve the opportunities for young people in their transition to adulthood who are at risk of committing crime and/or involved in the CJS (see T2A, 2009); while the Beyond Youth Custody programme launched in 2012 with the aim of examining and promoting best practice in the resettlement of young people leaving custody.<sup>9</sup>

Further to this, there are a number of initiatives aimed specifically at providing volunteering opportunities to people with criminal records, including young adults. These have included programmes for serving prisoners such as the Samaritans Listener scheme which provides training for prisoners to provide support to fellow prisoners; and the Sue Ryder Prisoner Volunteer Programme which provides volunteering opportunities in its charity shops and offices for serving prisoners who are released on temporary licence.<sup>10</sup> As noted above, other initiatives have focused on mentoring opportunities for ex-offenders within the CJS, such as the peer-mentoring projects run by charities such as the St Giles Trust and the Prince's Trust which have enabled ex-offenders to provide through-the-gate support and other community-based peer-mentoring to young offenders or those at risk of offending.<sup>11</sup> However, only a minority of these existing initiatives have focused directly on enhancing provision of 'mainstream' volunteering opportunities for young ex-offenders – that is, volunteering opportunities in settings that are not part of the CJS. The scope for mainstream volunteering for young ex-offenders was something which this study sought to explore.

## **The study**

The research aim was to explore the scope for volunteering for young ex-offenders.

The study had four over-arching questions:

- To what extent do young ex-offenders have opportunities to undertake voluntary work?
- For young ex-offenders, how can involvement in volunteering contribute to their resettlement in their communities?
- For organisations which recruit volunteers, what are the barriers, challenges and benefits associated with involving young ex-offenders as volunteers?
- What part can volunteering play in promoting understanding and acceptance of young ex-offenders by their local communities?

The study was conducted between October 2012 and March 2014. It was decided at the outset that a case-study approach would be adopted which would focus primarily (but not exclusively) on one London borough. The research team began by charting the activities of national, regional and local VIOs in the borough through a combination of desk-based research and meetings with key stakeholders including volunteer centre staff and practitioners in larger national charities. Following this, in-depth interviews were carried out with members of the three main research constituencies: namely, young ex-offenders, representatives of VIOs and representatives of resettlement organisations. The project also held two workshops which were attended by representatives from each of the three groups.

In total, 14 young adults (nine males and five females) participated in an interview or focus group and 10 young adults (including 4 who had also been interviewed) participated in a workshop. All these participants had offending histories (which involved offences of varying levels of seriousness) and/or were from disadvantaged backgrounds and deemed 'at risk' of offending. A total of 21 representatives of 17 national or local resettlement initiatives and 31 representatives of 22 national or local VIOs participated in interviews and/or attended one of the project workshops. VIO and resettlement organisation respondents were identified through the initial desk-

based research and/or meetings or through snow-balling from those already interviewed; respondents were not limited to those whose organisations actively recruited young ex-offenders as volunteers.<sup>12</sup> The recruitment of young ex-offenders with some experience of volunteering proved difficult. The majority of young ex-offender participants were recruited from a volunteering project run by a local branch of a national resettlement organisation; others were recruited through charities with which members of the project team had an existing working relationship. It was due to the difficulties experienced in recruiting young adults with offending histories that the sample was extended to include young adults deemed to be 'at risk' of offending, as defined by the charitable agency from which they were recruited. The difficulty in finding young ex-offenders with experience of volunteering is significant and will be returned to below.

The remainder of the paper explores the perceived benefits and challenges associated with volunteering by young ex-offenders, as perceived by VIOs, resettlement organisations and young ex-offenders themselves.

## **Benefits**

The provision for, and undertaking of, volunteering among young ex-offenders was perceived as having inter-related benefits among both VIOs and young ex-offenders; many of which relate to concepts raised in the wider desistance literature such as building social capital, developing a sense of agency and 'making good' (cf. Maruna, 2001; Farrall, 2004; LeBel, et al., 2008; McNeill, 2009).

### *Benefits for volunteer-involving organisations*

Interviewees described several ways in which volunteering by young ex-offenders could be of benefit to VIOs. At the most fundamental level, VIO participants pointed to ways in which volunteering by young ex-offenders could help them to deliver services and assist with the running of their organisation in much the same way that volunteers from other backgrounds can be of assistance. Specifically, participants felt the young ex-offenders were able to help organisations engage with others from similar backgrounds:

'It helps us to engage better with young offenders, reach more of them and sustain those relationships - it helps us to be more credible with young offenders [and] in the CJS. It helps us to diversify our volunteer base.'

(National VIO workshop participant).

The 'diversification' that recruiting young ex-offenders can bring to VIOs was raised by a number of participants. Several felt that young ex-offenders were able to provide an alternative perspective by bringing experience, understanding and a 'level of empathy' that a volunteer without an offending background may be unable to provide. The wider benefits of increasing diversity within VIOs were also recognised; one participant who worked at a VIO with an existing ex-offender volunteer programme, felt that the visibility of the 'diversification' in comparison to its traditional volunteer base had impacted upon the wider community by bringing a 'new audience' to the organisation and widening the variety of potential applicants. Another participant thought that the recruitment of young ex-offenders could help VIOs to 'reach out' to other organisations with whom they had not previously worked. At a pragmatic level, a minority of respondents expressed the view that the recruitment of young ex-offenders could increase the credibility of organisations in the eyes of prospective funders.

A further benefit, raised by a number of participants from VIOs with experience of recruiting ex-offenders, was the level of commitment and high retention rate among ex-offender volunteers. This was deemed to reflect this group's perception that few opportunities were available to them, so they had to make the most of those they were given:

'[Ex-offenders] want to show that they have changed, want to make a difference, want to make a good impression; it means a lot to them – perhaps more [so] than other volunteers because you are giving them something greater.' (VIO representative)

A final potential benefit, mentioned by a small number of VIO participants, relates to the ways in which recruiting young ex-offenders accords with their organisational ethos of 'giving something back' to the community and, at a personal level, the sense of reward that recruiting volunteers from this group can offer individual staff members.

### *Benefits for young ex-offenders*

Both VIO and young ex-offender participants described various benefits of volunteering to young ex-offenders. Several participants spoke of the value that volunteering could have in increasing the employability of young ex-offenders by



providing them with new skills, training and experience. Carrying out a volunteering role was also deemed to be something that could help young ex-offenders to build their CV and a means by which they could obtain a reference for future employment. However, while volunteering was thought to increase the employability of young ex-offenders, participants very rarely spoke of a direct link between volunteering and the gaining of employment.

Instead, participants tended to speak of the benefits of volunteering in terms of 'softer' outcomes or more general improvements to the lives of young ex-offenders. One of the main themes emerging from the research was the way in which volunteering could provide a safe and supportive environment in which young adults could think about what they wanted to do. The role of volunteering in providing young ex-offenders with an 'opportunity' emerged frequently in interviews; this was perceived particularly in relation to young ex-offenders being 'given the chance to prove themselves' and to 'demonstrate trustworthiness':

'For someone with my criminal history, when I go into a [volunteer placement] ... I want people to understand that I am an ex-offender and that I am really trying and be willing to give me a chance'. (Young female ex-offender volunteer)

The ways in which volunteering can provide a structure and routine to young ex-offenders was repeatedly referred to by research participants; whilst a seemingly straightforward and inherent function of volunteering, this was deemed to be of utmost importance. Several participants felt that it offered a sense of structure and independence that some young ex-offenders may be unfamiliar with; described by one VIO representative as 'giving [young ex-offenders] something to do whilst [they] are finding out how to do everything else'.

The supportive environment that volunteering can provide was a prominently emerging theme, both in terms of allowing young ex-offenders to move away from negative peer groups and in terms of the empathetic and understanding response that could be offered by VIOs. 'It [is] a way of trying out their passions in a safe environment where they are supported', said one VIO representative. The building of positive relationships between young ex-offenders, VIOs and other volunteers was another perceived advantage and corresponds with existing literature about desistance from crime. The role that volunteering can have in promoting other factors

commonly associated with desistance such as the increase of both human capital and social capital emerged strongly from the research (cf. McNeill, 2009). Several participants referred to the ways in which volunteering could provide young ex-offenders with increased self-confidence alongside a sense of ownership, purpose and reward:

‘They start to understand that they have something they can give to people that has a value.’ (VIO representative)

‘It’s not rocket science, giving people some responsibility and a sense of achievement helps improve their opinion of themselves.’ (VIO representative)

Taylor (2008) conducted research about the impact of volunteering on female ex-offenders and produced similar findings. Such findings included the beneficial impact that volunteering had in terms of giving female ex-offenders experience of a work environment and improving the skills and self-confidence of individual volunteers.

Volunteering as a means by which young ex-offenders are able to ‘give something back’, for example by making amends for the harm caused or by making a social contribution in recognition of the help received, was a common theme and corresponds the wider desistance literature (Maruna, 2001). For example one interviewee, who had subsequently volunteered at the resettlement agency that had provided her with support, reflected:

‘My reasons for volunteering here were quite personal. It’s not like “I need work experience”, it was more like “I want to give something back”.’ (Young female ex-offender)

#### *Wider benefits*

A final perceived benefit of providing volunteering opportunities to young ex-offenders is the impact this could have in creating an inclusive environment in which to promote the effective reintegration of young ex-offenders in their wider communities. Participants highlighted that volunteering by young ex-offenders could help to change community perceptions of this group by reducing fear and challenging stereotypes – thereby helping young ex-offenders to feel part of the community and ultimately supporting desistance (cf., Lebel et al. 2008). This, in turn, brings benefits to wider communities if the result is less fear and, ultimately, less crime.

## Challenges

Despite the various benefits outlined above, research participants from VIOs, resettlement organisations and young ex-offenders themselves, also perceived a variety of challenges in relation to volunteering by young ex-offenders.

### *Risk, vetting and safeguarding*

Perhaps unsurprisingly, representatives of a number of VIOs raised concerns about the possible risks involved in recruiting ex-offenders as volunteers. Anxieties, somewhat inevitably, tended to centre on issues of potential re-offending by ex-offender volunteers. It is of note, however, that such concerns often did not mean that these organisations were unwilling to recruit young ex-offenders as volunteers. Our findings show that VIOs adopted an array of strategies in relation to safeguarding; however the issues of safeguarding and risk assessment, particularly the procedures for obtaining DBS checks, appeared to be a significant challenge to recruiting ex-offenders as volunteers. For example, one VIO representative remarked:

‘I don’t quite know how I make sure everyone’s safe, everyone’s happy, everyone’s comfortable; what you [should] disclose and [what you should not] disclose.’ (VIO representative)

In 2012 the Criminal Records Bureau and Independent Safeguarding Authority merged to form the Disclosure and Barring Service. Generally speaking, DBS checks are required for individuals who work, or volunteer, with children and/or vulnerable adults. There are various eligibility requirements that need to be met in order for a DBS check to be granted; the level of check required depends upon the nature of the work involved.<sup>13</sup> The various procedures surrounding DBS eligibility and requirements evidently caused a sense of confusion and anxiety within VIOs.

In particular, there was uncertainty about the circumstances in which potential volunteers were required to submit a DBS check and subsequently about how to proceed if a volunteer was found to possess a criminal record. Several participants from VIOs and resettlement agencies felt that some organisations adopted a ‘risk averse’ approach towards DBSs, which sometimes resulted in organisations requesting that all volunteers be DBS checked, regardless of the role they would be

required to fulfill, the nature of their previous offending or the length of time since their last offence. Representatives from VIOs also expressed a sense of frustration in relation to official guidance about DBS eligibility requirements; such guidance was deemed by some to be both vague and overwhelming.

Perhaps the most crucial aspect of concerns about risk was the perception that some organisations could put too much emphasis on ‘covering’ themselves by having a ‘blanket’ policy in relation to the obtaining of DBS checks, which could be at the expense of implementing effective and well-considered safeguarding procedures. A number of VIO respondents stressed that implementing effective safeguarding procedures is as, if not more, important than implementing policies relating to DBS requirements. This corresponds with advice provided by Volunteering England (now part of the National Council for Voluntary Organisations), which states that effective safeguarding goes ‘far wider’ than obtaining a DBS check.<sup>14</sup> Interviewees spoke of a variety of ways in which volunteers undergo effective risk assessment and safeguarding procedures. Notable examples included ensuring that volunteers are adequately supervised; obtaining references prior to recruitment; and, upon early disclosure of convictions, the provision of advice by the VIO to the applicant as to whether or not to continue with the application.

It appears that there is a need for a ‘nuanced approach’ (as advocated by one VIO representative) to safeguarding and DBS requirements; VIOs adopted a variety of strategies to tackle these issues. Some organisations said that they would not accept anyone with a history of violent or sexual offending (and, in a minority of cases, offending involving theft – if the role involved handling money); others adopted a ‘case-by-case’ strategy to the recruitment of volunteers from offending backgrounds. Organisations that tended to have fewer concerns about DBS checks – or did not require them at all – were those that did not involve any one-to-one work with vulnerable groups or those where the volunteer was continually supervised. A substantial minority of organisations had a ‘blanket’ policy towards obtaining DBS checks, usually because the role involved working with vulnerable groups; however even amongst these organisations, some said that they did accept volunteers with criminal convictions or were prepared to make judgements on a case-by-case basis.

A distinct yet related issue, which was arguably raised more often than the potential risk posed by recruiting a young ex-offender, was the ability of volunteering organisations to provide the appropriate level of support to young ex-offender

volunteers. Several interviewees from VIOs and resettlement organisations acknowledged the possible high level of support needs among young ex-offenders. These included needs in relation to resettlement in the wider community and the impact that other aspects of their life (such as housing and employment needs or the presence of negative peer influences) could have on the volunteering role. This led to concerns among some VIOs that they would not be able to provide the required level of support, particularly in the current economic climate. Similarly several interviewees from resettlement organisations were fearful of the potential issues arising if a VIO recruited a young ex-offender without appreciating, or being able to provide, the level of practical and social support that may be required. This was described by a VIO representative who had experience of recruiting an ex-offender volunteer:

‘It’s really useful having [the volunteer ex-offender] in one way because he gives credence to, first of all working with people from that background and equally he has gravitas with the young people there. The difficulty is that the level of supervision that is required for him is much higher than with other [volunteers] because he’s still got the links to the local gangs...he’s on a much tighter rein than anyone else.’

Questions were also raised about the ability of organisations to adequately integrate ex-offenders within the organisation. Several workshop participants discussed their experience of volunteering by ex-offenders being treated as a distinct strand of work within a VIO, which meant that ex-offender volunteers were not fully integrated into the team. Others discussed the question of whether or not to disclose a volunteer’s criminal record between members of staff and volunteers within an organisation: ‘The receptionist – does she really need to know that I’ve got a criminal record?’, wondered one young female workshop participant; while one VIO representative discussed the balance that needs to be struck between a potential obligation to inform staff of a volunteer’s criminal history, particularly if it involved a violent offence, and the importance of giving the volunteer ‘a chance’. Overall, it was felt by some that a ‘culture change’ could be required in order to ensure that young ex-offenders, or volunteering projects involving young ex-offenders, are adequately integrated into organisations.

### *Engagement and readiness*

A key challenge, which was raised by both VIOs and resettlement organisations – and evidenced in our struggle to identify young ex-offender volunteers to interview – is the difficulty of engaging young ex-offenders in volunteering opportunities. This is perhaps not surprising given that ex-offenders regarded as an under-represented within the volunteer population (IVR, 2004). Few organisations involved in the study engaged with young ex-offender volunteers as a distinct group. Several VIO and resettlement staff interviewed raised concerns about ‘buy in’ to volunteering opportunities among young ex-offenders - many of whom were thought to be (understandably) primarily concerned with obtaining paid work.<sup>15</sup> It was felt by some that young ex-offenders could perceive volunteering to be a ‘mugs’ game’; particularly if they had previously been given false expectations as to the impact of volunteering on obtaining employment. For example, the following VIO representative stated that:

‘The more mature [ex-offenders] seem to be a bit more understanding [of the potential value of volunteering] but the young people are more [like] “I’m out of prison, I’m free, I need to go out there and earn money.”’

A related issue is the negative perceptions that young people may have about volunteering; for example due to initiatives such as the Work Programme or where they had experience of being required to undertake unpaid work as part of a community sentence. One representative from a resettlement organisation stated that ‘because of the Work Programme, [young people] have tied up working for free with being made a fool of’. This view was echoed by a young male ex-offender who participated in one of our focus groups:

‘I think there’s a whole industry developing for this type of volunteering and internships, apprenticeships ... It’s exploiting people and making people think that “I can make you work for me for free because you don’t have a better option, because you’re on benefits or have a criminal record”’.

Some of the VIO and resettlement organisation representatives felt that young ex-offenders may not be ‘ready’ to volunteer or may lack the level maturity required to understand the potential benefits that volunteering can bring. Several of the young ex-offender participants did not express a desire to actively seek out volunteering opportunities – the majority had started volunteering upon being approached by a

resettlement agency while attending appointments at their local Youth Offending Service. Some said that they were only likely to consider volunteering if they were invited to do so. As would be expected, the specific volunteer role they would be required to fulfill was important to many interviewees, particularly in the sense that it would need to be meaningful and of benefit to them in the future. Several young ex-offender participants expressed an interest in volunteering in the music industry or in roles that involved working with people from a similar background to themselves; administrative roles, on the other hand, were less desirable – particularly among those who had existing experience of such roles:

‘I’ve done volunteering in an accounting firm - that was like the worst, worst thing I could have done. Just sat there putting receipts into the computer.’  
(Young male ex-offender)

Similarly, representatives from VIO and resettlement organisations noted the importance of managing the expectations of young ex-offenders about the perceived benefits of volunteering – in terms of the availability of places on volunteer programmes of interest; the requirements of the role; and the likelihood that it would lead directly or indirectly to paid employment.<sup>16</sup>

### *Practical issues*

Finally, various practical challenges emerged in relation to volunteering by young ex-offenders. For VIOs and resettlement organisations, there were often issues in relation to partnership working: resettlement organisations could be unsure about how to refer young ex-offenders to VIOs and, correspondingly, VIOs were unsure about how to engage with statutory agencies if they had an interest in proactively recruiting young ex-offenders. Transport to volunteering placements and the provision of expenses to young ex-offenders could pose problems; while maintaining the enthusiasm of potential volunteers during the (sometimes lengthy) wait for DBS checks to be processed also presented difficulties. There also appeared to be some confusion about the amount of time that young ex-offenders claiming Job Seekers Allowance would be allowed to devote to volunteering. Likewise, IVR (2004) highlighted a number of similar practical barriers to volunteering for ex-offenders.

## Supporting good practice

By way of conclusion, this paper will suggest means by which volunteering provision for young ex-offenders can be supported. The above discussion points to several aspects of good practice in this regard:

1. *Providing suitable placements:* it appears that there is a need for proactive recruitment by VIOs interested in providing volunteering opportunities to young ex-offenders; and, as part of this, VIOs should ensure that they are able to offer flexible and meaningful opportunities to potential volunteers. Young ex-offenders interested in obtaining a volunteer placement are likely to benefit from the support of resettlement organisations in identifying suitable VIOs that are able to meet their needs. It is essential that resettlement organisations consider the value of the potential volunteering opportunity to the individual and avoid 'one size fits all approach' in relation to advocating volunteering to young ex-offenders. In line with this, it may be useful to consider how the benefits of a volunteer placement could be enhanced by other opportunities, such as training, apprenticeships or education programmes. One interviewee from a statutory resettlement agency described how the provision of volunteering as one aspect of a wider development programme could help young ex-offenders who had become jaded and cynical to 'dream in colour again'.
2. *The provision of adequate support:* It is of utmost importance that VIOs which recruit young ex-offenders are able both to provide adequate levels of support – which is tailored to the needs of individual volunteers – and that VIOs themselves are supported in this aim by resettlement organisations. Examples of the type of support that may be required include going at the pace of the young adult; confidence building; and help with the practical aspects of volunteering, such as completing paperwork.
3. *Strong partnership working:* In line with the above two points it is, therefore, necessary to ensure that strong working relationships are fostered between VIOs and resettlement organisations; the latter include statutory organisations such as the youth offending service and voluntary organisations.
4. *Adopting a nuanced approach to safeguarding:* It may be unhelpful to operate a 'blanket' policy of obtaining a DBS check for all volunteers, and more



appropriate to look at which individual volunteer roles necessitate a DBS check. Regardless of whether or not a DBS check is obtained, it is essential that VIOs implement considered and thorough safeguarding procedures when recruiting young ex-offenders; these procedures should cover all aspects of volunteering and address the needs of all volunteers within the organisation.

5. *Promoting inclusivity and understanding:* A key theme emerging from the research is the role that volunteering can play in promoting inclusivity and reintegration. In many cases, this can only be achieved where VIOs undergo some degree of cultural shift to ensure that ex-offenders, or projects involving ex-offenders, are adequately integrated within the organisations. This may help to challenge negative perceptions and 'risk-averse' attitudes in relation to ex-offenders. Correspondingly, providing meaningful and tailored volunteering opportunities may help to broaden young ex-offenders' views on the nature of volunteering and the type of opportunities available.
6. *Providing tangible benefits:* The importance of providing and demonstrating the tangible benefits of volunteering to young ex-offenders cannot be overstated; it is essential that the contribution of volunteers is acknowledged and that the role promotes personal development. Some of the participants in this study felt that this could be achieved by providing a clear progression route from volunteering to paid employment; others felt that this could be achieved through the development of skills, through rewarding achievements (either verbally or through the provision of small incentives) or through the provision of training opportunities. VIOs and resettlement organisations should also be aware of, and seek to enhance where possible, the 'softer' outcomes of volunteering for young ex-offenders, including improved self-esteem, confidence and self-motivation.

In order to promote volunteering, support good practice and address barriers to volunteering for young ex-offenders, a series of briefings have been produced by ICPR and IVR. There are three separate briefings aimed at young adults, VIOs and resettlement organisations.<sup>17</sup>

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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> This broadly corresponds with the definition of young adults provided by the Transition to Adulthood (T2A) who recognise that 'young adulthood, like early adolescence is by its nature difficult to define, as it depends on individual maturity, not simply physical age' (T2A, 2009:12).

<sup>2</sup> See also ICPR and IVR (2015).

<sup>3</sup> See:

[http://issuu.com/conservativeparty/docs/ge\\_manifesto\\_low\\_res\\_bdecb3a47a0faf?e=16696947/12362115](http://issuu.com/conservativeparty/docs/ge_manifesto_low_res_bdecb3a47a0faf?e=16696947/12362115) [accessed 16/07/2015]

<sup>4</sup> See: <http://www.ncsyes.co.uk/about> [accessed 24/07/2015].

<sup>5</sup> See: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/community-life-survey-2014-to-2015-data> [accessed 24/07/15].

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/rehabilitation-revolution-the-next-steps> [accessed 08/12/14].

<sup>7</sup> See: <http://www.mandbf.org/our-projects/noms-volunteering-and-mentoring-project> [accessed 16/07/15]]

<sup>8</sup> For further detail see: <http://hub.unlock.org.uk/knowledgebase/detailedguideroa/> [accessed 16/07/15]

<sup>9</sup> This has involved the production of a variety of research reports and briefings. See: <http://www.beyondyouthcustody.net/resources/publications/> [accessed 25/08/15].

<sup>10</sup> See Jeffe (2012) and Finnegan and Stewart (2012), respectively, for evaluations of these programmes.

<sup>11</sup> See Boyce et al. (2009) and Hunter and Kirby (2012) for evaluations of such programmes.

<sup>12</sup> In addition to this, 33 VIOs participated in a short survey distributed on our behalf by the local volunteer-centre which was designed to assist the mapping exercise and act as an additional method to recruit participants for interview.

<sup>13</sup> See: <https://www.gov.uk/disclosure-barring-service-check/overview> [accessed 26/02/2015]

<sup>14</sup> See: <http://www.volunteering.org.uk/component/gpb/protectionandsafeguarding> [accessed 16/07/15]

<sup>15</sup> Likewise, Taylor (2008) found that female ex-offenders with experience of volunteering could feel 'exploited' by the unpaid nature of the role.

<sup>16</sup> See Paine et al. (2013) for an examination of the relationship between volunteering and employability.

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<sup>17</sup> These can be accessed from <http://icpr.org.uk/publications-team/volunteering,-peer-mentoring-and-the-criminal-justice-system.aspx> [accessed 24/07/2015].