Ex-offender perceptions of how young people may be drawn into criminality
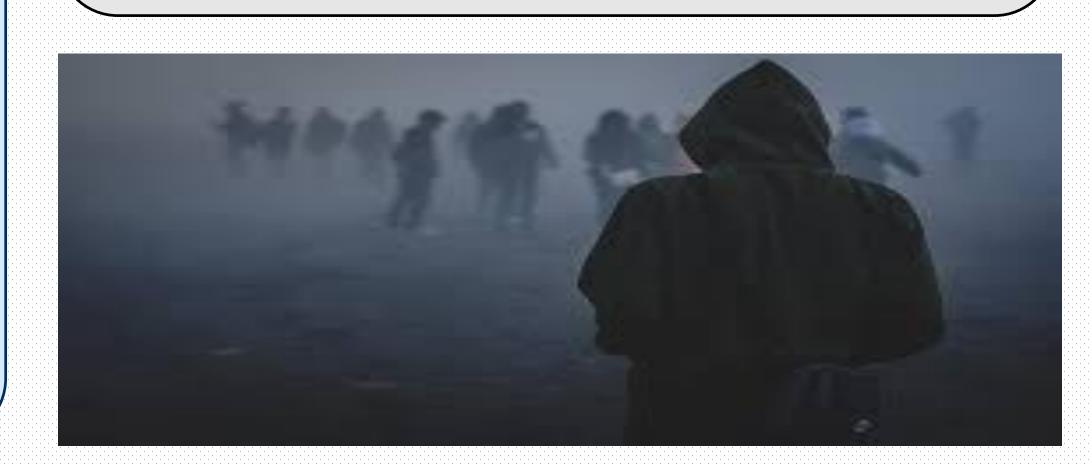
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Background

- A recent surge in youth crime creates a need for clearer understanding as to why criminal behaviour is becoming more prevalent in certain social community groups (e.g. young, BAME males). For example, Allen (2020) reports that London recently recorded the highest rate of offences involving a knife per 100,000 population.

- Literature claims a link between the emergence of UK drill music (Fatsis, 2019), whereas others have attributed increased criminality, in areas with the largest financial cuts to youth services (YMCA, 2018). County Lines have also been reported as contributing to the higher rates of crime found among young people, particularly those from socio-economic disadvantaged families. It has also been suggested that this criminality reflects a 'life course' process in which family, school and peer factors combine to increase susceptibility to crime (Swain, 2004).

- A plausible explanation for this was posited by Cloward and Ohlin (1960) who stated that individuals reach success through affiliations with criminals, particularly where there is an illegitimate opportunity structure present. This supports Sutherland's (1992) Theory of Differential Association, where criminal activity is learnt through social interactions and that criminal values are internalised if they are considered to be the only way to succeed.

- Subsequently, the aim of the study was to gain more of an understanding as to why young people may be drawn into criminality, from the perspective of those with personal experience.

Method

- Purposive sampling recruited five participants based on their self-reported experience of criminal activity at a young age. All were male, BAME, between 18 - 24 years and from the South East of England.

- This study utilised Braun and Clarkes' (2006) method of Thematic Analysis in order to obtain enriched data of participant's lived experiences of crime related behaviour and pathways into criminality.

- Previous literature (Swain, 2004, Damm et al., 2012 and Gentry et al., 2016) indicated factors of education, social life and social economic status related to youth offending, thus shaping the formation of the interview schedule.

- Data was collated through semi-structured interviews lasting approx. 45 minutes.

- Close attention was made to ethical issues surrounding anonymity and confidentiality, as these were felt to be an area of concern that may influence honesty and disclosure from the participants.

Results

Four pervasive superordinate themes were identified as contributing to engagement in youth criminality: (1) Education, (2) Power and Status, (3) Inefficiencies in Youth Services and (4) Attachment Issues.

A further theme emerged relating to participant's beliefs on how criminality could have been prevented.

Themes	Examples
Theme 1: Education	"because I didn't focus in school and get good grades, I had nothing to fall back on… I didn't really know what to do."
Theme 2: Power and Status	"I sort of wanted to be known as the strongest in my year, and wanted to make sure everyone knew not to mess with me"
Theme 3: Youth Service Inefficiencies	"sometimes they were understaffed so they couldn't run the clubs for safety and staffing reasons"
Theme 4: Attachment issues (social)	"there was a group of them, and I wanted to be like them because they seemed cool, and one of them was where I was from, so I finally thought I belonged"
Theme 4: Attachment issues (family)	"I remember my youngest brother got into a fight… so me and my other brother jumped in and beat the other guy up"
Theme 5: Prevention Strategies (Improving teacher/student relationship)	"they just sort of wanted to teach the lesson and that's it and that's what made it hard. I think they should get to know students more"
Theme 5: Prevention Strategies (awareness)	"If I knew what I know now when I was younger, I wouldn't have gone to university and would have just stuck to work"

Conclusion

Findings support previous research, that higher crime rates amongst young people reflect a life course process in which adverse family, school and peer factors combine to increase susceptibility to crime. This acknowledges the important interplay of various factors when observing young people's engagement into criminality.

The emergence of possible protective factors/preventive measures suggests areas in which 'knowledge and awareness', as well as 'improved relationships with significant role models' (such as the teacher-student relationship) could aid the reduction of criminal behaviour in vulnerable youth groups.

Limitations

All participants resided in one area of the UK, thus, themes may not be generalisable to those from other areas where the overall climate of education, employment, youth services etc. may differ.

The task was to elicit accurate reports of past occurrences, however participant's responses may have been influenced by the presence of the researcher, as well as participants accurate retrieval of past memories and interpretations.

References

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