

## Theory and practice of co-production and co-creation in Youth Justice

This special issue of *Safer Communities*, guest edited by Sean Creaney, Samantha Burns and Anne-Marie Day, dives into the theory and practice of co-production and participatory approaches in Youth Justice. This opportunity has been very timely, given the recent focus on the Child First ‘collaboration’ principle being applied into practice as part of the Youth Justice Board’s Child First approach in England and Wales (Burns and Creaney, 2023). Child First as a guiding principle has now moved to the fore in practice strategies across England and Wales. This approach is also beginning to influence discussions around evidence-based reform in Australia. Challenges to established ways of thinking are underway there, with calls to transform responses to children who come into conflict with the law, co-production being explored as a way to facilitate meaningful participation and foster a positive youth justice ethos (Day, et al., 2023; Johns, et al., 2022).

### Operationalising the principle of *co-production* in youth justice

Any commitment to operationalising the principle of *co-production* (equal partners and co-creators) in a youth justice setting is hampered by an institutional culture which fixates undue focus on risk management and the use of harm reduction techniques allegedly in line with the principles of a public protection agenda (Johns, et al., 2022; Social Care Institute of Excellence, 2015; Day, 2022). Accordingly, building connections, establishing trusted partnerships, and sustaining reciprocal relationships between children (the powerless) and adult youth justice professionals (the powerholders) as defined by co-production, involves great challenges. To illustrate, when there is a disproportionate focus on children’s past behaviour and an overly conscious effort to detect and monitor current indicators of concern about the (subjective) harms they pose to society, this can restrict ‘the possibilities for reciprocity, mutuality, genuine or equal partnerships’ (Johns, et al., 2022:129; Creaney and Smith, 2023; Day, et al., 2023). As a result, there are often huge power imbalances between professionals and children in this context.

These power imbalances can often force children to suppress their feelings, withhold a perspective and consequently refrain from engaging and collaborating with adult professionals (Creaney and Burns, 2023). This halts progress towards a co-produced agenda,

or an approach designed to be relational and collaborative. Children may perceive the professional as an authority figure who primarily instructs as opposed to a facilitator involved in a shared decision-making process (Smithson and Jones, 2021). Moreover, some professionals may feel ambivalent about relinquishing their authoritative status as ‘knowers’ or ‘experts’ (Johns, et al., 2022). Readdressing power imbalances by ‘handing over the stick’ (Cook and Kothari, 2001:2) can be complex, especially when we consider that, ‘those who have power normally want to [retain] it; historically, it has had to be wrested by the powerless rather than proffered by the powerful’ (Arnstein, 1969:222). Approaches to practice that challenge and transform these power imbalances are key to implementing co-production in youth justice. It is useful for children to express themselves through creative methods of engagement, such as arts-based initiatives. Using creative methods of engagement may open up the space for them to meaningfully participate and can assist in forging safe and trusting connections with justice-involved children in a calm and welcoming environment facilitated by professionals who are alert and responsive to their needs and wishes (Stephenson and Dix, 2017). This special issue covers a range of contributions, including literature review, viewpoint and research papers, all connecting with the themes of relationships, power and creativity within co-production and participatory approaches in Youth Justice.

## **The papers in this issue**

Andi Brierley’s viewpoint paper on how experiential peers can cultivate a participation culture in youth justice explores the use and value of lived experience in youth justice and illustrates the unique perspective that lived experience professionals can bring to discussions on co-production. Brierley posits that these individuals can provide insight into the personal challenges of being subject to justice services and instil belief that change is possible. Experiential peers can offer empathy through drawing on personal experiences of overcoming adversity. Whilst optimistic about the prospect of innovative peer led practices being developed, Brierley cautions that some stakeholders may not feel confident that this approach is able to cultivate desistance in justice-involved children.

As Brierley indicates, an absence of a participatory culture or ethos can make it difficult to progress agendas that aim to strengthen the voices of lived experienced professionals. Crucially, as Johns, et al., (2022:136) have made clear, ‘Producing knowledge together requires seeing each other, recognising and relating to one another as equal’. However, as

Brierley notes, resource constraints and a lack of value placed on lived experience can stymie these practices and development of equal partnerships from being effectively formulated.

In their paper, Francis Hargreaves, Paula Carroll, Grace Robinson, Sean Creaney and Andrew O'Connor highlight the need to ensure the football charity sector and its partners design and deliver interventions that are in the child's best interests, constructive, non-criminalizing and collaborative. This paper outlines the purpose and key features of the Liverpool Football Club Foundation's County Lines programme. This programme, the authors assert, aims to empower children and young people to make positive behaviour choices, by creating a calm and safe environment and so provide opportunities to discuss the harms of County Lines and how to access support. The principle of collaboration is used to inform the development of interventions facilitated by the football charity and its partners. Alongside this there is a commitment to embrace the qualities of trust and openness, considered critical for building effective relationships with young people.

The benefits and challenges of working collaboratively with children and young people is covered in a paper by Andrew Day, Catia Malvaso, Luke Butcher, Joanne O'Connor and Katherine McLachlan. This conceptual article reviews what is currently known about co-production in youth justice, discussing forms of participation, including the extent to which these approaches to practice can improve justice for and with children. In doing so they raise important questions about ways to co-create interventions and engage children in the design and delivery of a co-produced trauma informed practice in the field of youth justice. The authors also outline the key features of Trauma Informed Practice and detail its potential as a framework and underpinning philosophy to guide shared decision making between adult professionals and children. As the authors assert, it is important to recognise trauma and be aware of its potential ongoing impact on the child's life, affecting their ability to meaningfully participate in processes.

Children's ability to meaningfully participate in youth justice processes is contingent on creative methods of engagement. Research on the application of arts and music practices in a youth justice context remains relatively underdeveloped. However, artistic approaches, including rhythmically applied poetry and musical interventions have gained traction in the criminological sphere in recent times (Smithson and Jones, 2021; Caulfield, et al., 2020). The research paper by Laura Caulfield and Bozena Sojka explores arts and music practices with

children on the cusp of entering the justice system, presenting findings on the impact of a music programme on the educational engagement and well-being of children. The authors state that the range of music-making activities offered within the programme generated positive impacts. This included increasing levels of confidence, nurturing social skills, and generally helping children to relax, feel calmer, safer and more optimistic. There is a focus on nurturing young people's strengths and being responsive to their interests, a precondition of effective participatory practice.

For co-production and co-creation in youth justice to be implemented in a way that challenges the institutional culture and responses of adult youth justice professionals, thinking of children's participation as 'transformative' can be useful (Teamey and Hinton 2014). Samantha Burns' research paper on partnerships with justice involved children in Hong Kong explores the extent to which co-production can be drawn upon as a conceptual framework and adopted by professionals to challenge and transform their youth service. The theory and practice of co-production in Hong Kong is minimal, if not absent across youth justice settings. Nevertheless, social workers are promoting participation and partnership work, recognising the value of building connections with justice involved children.

Burns' paper is the first to provide a rich and insightful account of the challenges faced co-creating transformative participation with children to foreground their voices in decision making, providing greater learning for how co-production can be applied in practice across the world. Burns outlines some practical recommendations for social workers in Hong Kong to improve practice, which includes training around the concept of co-production. While it may be difficult to enable a complete culture-shift or motivate all professionals to reconsider responses to justice-involved children and 'think differently about youth justice', training can help professionals to reflect upon and critically understand their role within processes and gives opportunity to discover techniques to enhance children's meaningful participation in programme design. This and the other contributions show that co-production and co-creation are still somewhat in their infancy within the youth justice context, with much to be further explored if children's participation rights are to be upheld in meaningful and longstanding ways.

## **Guest editors**

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### **About the Guest Editors**

**Dr Sean Creaney** is a Criminologist and Senior Lecturer in the School of Law, Criminology and Policing at Edge Hill University. His research interests include Child First Justice, typologies, theories, models of participation and co-production and experiential peer support and mentorship in Youth Justice. Sean is a founding Advisory Board member of social justice charity Peer Power, an empathy led charity focussed on healing trauma and creating individual and system change. In 2021, Sean was a research consultant on a Youth Justice Board commissioned project that audited and explored the practice of participatory approaches and co-creation across Youth Justice Services.

Dr Sean Creaney was recently confirmed as an Associate of the Children and Young People's Centre for Justice (CYCJ), acting as a champion for the Centre and contributing to practice, research and knowledge exchange activities over a two-year term. The appointment to the scheme, created to broaden and transform Scotland's youth justice knowledge base, was made in recognition of Dr Creaney's work improving justice for children and young people.

**Dr Samantha Burns** is a Lecturer in Criminology within the Department of Sociology at Durham University. Her research interests have focused on children and young people's participation and co-production in the youth justice system, fuelled from both academic learning and work experience. Samantha has worked in a variety of dynamic and engaging roles across education and youth work in both statutory and voluntary organisations over the last 10 years.

Samantha completed her PhD in 2020 within the department of Social and Behavioural Sciences at City University in Hong Kong, and since being back in the UK has been working collaboratively on a range of research projects exploring services and interventions to improve outcomes for children, young people, and families informing policy in health, social care, education, and criminal justice sectors. Alongside her current role at Durham University, Samantha is currently Deputy Chair of the National Association of Youth Justice (NAYJ), an advisory board member for Peer Power Youth, and member of the Risk Work in Young Lives network.

**Dr Anne-Marie Day** is a Criminology Lecturer at Keele University. She has conducted research on children in care's experiences of the youth justice system, and more recently this has been focused on the custodial estate. Anne-Marie also has many years' experience as a practitioner and policy maker within criminal justice. She is a qualified Probation Officer, and has worked in the community, courts and prison. Anne-Marie has also worked as a youth justice manager and for the Youth Justice Board as a Senior Policy Adviser. Currently, Anne-Marie is also a board member on the Alliance for Youth Justice.

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