Policy, purpose and pragmatism:

dilemmas for voluntary and community organisations working with black young people affected by crime

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About the author

Helen Mills is research associate at the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies
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Centre for Crime and Justice Studies
King's College London
Strand
London,
WC2R 2LS

Tel: 020 7848 1688
Fax: 020 7848 1689
www.crimeandjustice.org.uk

Executive summary

This report sets out to investigate the experiences of voluntary and community organisations (VCOs) that predominantly work with black young people affected by crime. It does so in a context in which such VCOs are identified as having an important contribution to make in addressing the over-representation of black young people in the criminal justice system.

Its findings are based on an analysis of semi-structured interviews with 26 people undertaking voluntary and community work predominantly with black young people affected by crime. Following an outline of the current policy context for VCOs predominantly working with black young people affected by crime, providers' accounts are discussed in relation to three main issues:

● The explicit role of ethnicity in voluntary and community work

● Providers' presentation of the outcomes and benefits of their approach

● Providers' attitudes to resourcing their work and the implications of their funding environment.

Policy context

VCOs have to contend with an uncertain and ambiguous policy environment for their work. A closer look at the recommendations of the HAC report, Young Black People and the Criminal Justice System (2007), reveals that while the role of the VCS is emphasised there are important omissions: what is the VCS being called upon to contribute and what is the basis for this endorsement? The call for VCOs to address black young people's over-representation is also interesting in the context of the growing prospect of statutory commissioning, the implications of which are the subject of considerable debate. In addition, clear tensions are evident between the government encouraging VCOs to address the unclarified 'specific needs' of black young people in criminal justice strategies and the move to restrict local government funding of VCOs that identify their work with a particular ethnic group.

Voluntary and community providers' ethos and approach

The explicit role of ethnicity in VCS provision
With a few notable exceptions, voluntary and community providers did not consider ethnicity to be an appropriate definer of their role, approach or practices. Such a definition was considered to be stigmatising both for the VCO and for the young people they worked with. The accounts of providers who had been carrying out voluntary and community based work for over ten years suggest that there has been a significant shift in the explicit role of ethnicity in voluntary and community work over the past decade. It is suggested that some VCOs no longer overtly discuss ethnicity in their work as a result of the perceived challenges and marginalisation faced by those that define themselves as having something to offer black young people in particular.

Providers' presentation of the outcomes and benefits of their approach
It is difficult to capture precisely the approach of VCOs working with young people because providers described their practices informally. What providers did describe was their desire to achieve outcomes for individual young people through changing their beliefs and self-perceptions. While providers wanted to make subjective changes for young people, some felt that their efforts

were constrained by a lack of funds to provide services to effect wider environmental/structural change. Providers advocated the benefits of their approach on the grounds of the relevance of their holistic, relationship-based way of interacting with young people, often described in contrast to that of the statutory sector, and the value of their local experience.

Voluntary and community providers' attitudes to resourcing their work and the implications of their funding environment

The VCOs were characterised by their overall financial insecurity and the instability this created for their work. Funding sources for VCOs were typically wide and shallow. As a consequence of adapting their work to a variety of funding opportunities, VCOs typically widened out their activities over time, which added to the ambiguity surrounding their practices. In seeking sustainability for their work, some providers found themselves having to make significant compromises relating to how they presented their role and their acceptance of funds which provided limited opportunities to meet young people's needs. Providers' experiences suggest that there is a distance between rhetoric about innovative practices and the reality of the provision typically enabled by their funding environment. A sense of tokenism is ascribed to providers' experiences with statutory organisations, with some feeling used for their access and credibility with young people. Experienced providers raised concerns about the distance the statutory commissioning framework may create between voluntary and community providers and the young people accessing VCOs.

Conclusions

The report concludes by drawing attention to the tensions and ambiguities in voluntary and community work with black young people affected by crime that are obscured by current public dialogue about their work, specifically:

- The lack of clarity regarding the relevance of ethnicity in interventions with young people

- Providers' tendency to be vague about practices

- Funding exchanges which enable limited, generic service provision

- The manipulation of VCOs' aims and objectives by the current policy and funding environment.

Several questions are raised concerning the current challenges facing the VCOs predominantly working with black young people affected by crime:

Will statutory contracts compromise the closeness to young people that providers consider a key benefit of their work? Do closer partnerships with statutory bodies call for new structural arrangements and safeguards for VCOs? Given the challenges regarding evidencing voluntary and community based work and the identified difficulties to developing and protecting quality VCS practices, how can sensitive, robust collaborations between the VCS and the research community be encouraged?

Contents

Introduction

The principal aim of this report is to enhance understanding about voluntary and community organisations (VCOs) that predominately work with black young people affected by crime.

The interest of the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies (CCJS) in these organisations arose from a series of roundtable events held jointly with the Institute for Criminal Policy Research (ICPR) at King's College London in 2007. These seminars considered the implications of the Home Affairs Committee report *Young Black People and the Criminal Justice System* (HAC, 2007:67-69) with over 80 academics and practitioners from areas including youth justice, policing, youth and community work and education. Participants expressed enthusiasm about the Committee's recommendations, which emphasised the role of the voluntary and community sector (VCS) in addressing the over-representation of black young people in the criminal justice system (ibid: 67-69).

A point of consensus arising from these events was the perception that innovative and interesting work is taking place in the VCS with black young people affected by crime, but that very little is known about the organisations undertaking this work. This research aims to contribute to addressing this gap in knowledge through an analysis of interviews with the founders or managers of 16 VCOs that predominately work with black young people affected by crime in England.

As the next chapter outlines, this report also comes at a significant time for statutory policy and planning in relation to the role of the VCS in criminal justice in general, with heightened statutory interest in forming closer partnerships with the VCS. It is the intention here to focus on the current scenario facing VCOs working with black young people affected by crime by documenting voluntary and community providers' views and experiences of undertaking work in this area, in particular:

● The role of ethnicity in their work

● The outcomes and benefits of their work

● The funding environment for their organisations.

In this report the term 'VCOs predominantly working with black young people affected by crime' refers to charitable organisations (not necessarily registered charities) that:

● Predominately work with young people aged between approximately 15 and 25 years old who are black or black British according to census classifications. This includes black African, black Caribbean, mixed black and other black backgrounds

● Aim to address offending or victimisation issues in their work, including organisations working with young people perceived to be 'at risk' of offending or victimisation.

This umbrella term has been used because it reflects the broad nature of interest in voluntary and community approaches to working with young black people affected by crime, which was the impetus for this research. However, when using such a term, it is important to make clear that this report refers to a wide variety of VCOs in terms of ethos, values and approaches, and a diversity of views and experiences. Critiques of the way black young people are discussed in academic, media and policy settings draw attention to the ways in which ethnicity is ascribed to individuals and activities while, in reality, its meaning is more complex, contested and often problematic (Gunter, 2003; Maylor, 2009; Chakraborti, Garland and Spalek, 2004). By using the term 'VCOs predominantly working with black young people affected by crime' we are not suggesting that VCOs working with black young people affected by crime belong to a homogenous category, nor are we suggesting that all black young people have a particular set of needs. Given the suggested powerful discourse linking black young people and offending – which, as Gunter (2003) points out, means that the

term 'black young people' is often a coded reference to dangerous urban black young men as a particular criminal problem – it is important to make this very clear.

Methodology

In total, 26 people involved in running 16 VCOs that predominantly work with black young people affected by crime in England were interviewed.

Two urban local authority areas in England in which a manageable number of VCOs relevant to this research could be identified were initially selected. VCOs of interest were principally identified by consulting with 'knowledgeable' individuals in the field, including those from:

- The Police Service, the Probation Service and the local authority

- Umbrella VCOs that support black VCOs or VCOs in the criminal justice sector

- Academics who had carried out research in this subject area

- Attendees at the aforementioned CCJS/ICPR roundtable events and CCJS members

- VCOs who had been interviewed as part of this research.

In addition, searches were undertaken of several web-based charity databases, including Guidestar, the Charity Commission, and local charity databases.

The interviews were semi-structured and carried out face-to-face. [1] They explored interviewees' views and experiences of being involved in voluntary and community work, particularly their approach to working with young people, how they perceived what they were doing, and the current context for their work. Interviews were between 30 minutes and two hours in length, with most lasting just over an hour, and took place between July and August 2008. All interviewees gave written consent to their interview being used in this research. [2] The interviews were recorded using audio-recording equipment and transcribed by a transcription service. The transcripts were then managed using NVIVO qualitative analysis software to code and organise the data into identified themes.

The interviewees and the VCOs they represent are not identified in this report. Quotes are identified by the numbers 1 to 16, referring to the 16 VCOs involved in the research. Any significant details which could identify an interviewee or their organisation have been altered or anonymised.

Characteristics of VCOs involved in the research

The VCOs interviewed were based in four cities in England. They range hugely, from those that:

- Have been established for over 13 years to those operating for less than a year

- Have over 15 employees in addition to volunteers to those with no paid staff and a handful of volunteers

- Engage with 70–80 young people a day during a summer activities programme to those engaging with less than 20 young people at a time.

Most were run largely on a volunteer basis with a strong neighbourhood focus, and had been operating for less than five years. The common activities the VCOs offered young people were:

- Programmed group activities (including therapeutic support, youth clubs, residentials, sport and music activities)

- One-to-one mentoring (including at a young person's home, at the project, or more informally through street work)

- Educational provision and accredited courses

- Referrals to education, employment or training opportunities

- Organising youth-led or awareness raising events

- Acting as an advocate for individual young people with other organisations, particularly the police.

All the interviewees were involved in running these VCOs. A founder or co-founder of all but two of the VCOs that participated in this research was interviewed.[3] All the interviewees were black. The organisations that interviewees represented had been established on the basis of a belief that young people had unmet needs or that there were concerning issues to be addressed. These were recognised by founder(s)' experiences as:

- A young person, particularly one experiencing problems or facing discrimination in adolescence

- Concerned local resident(s) who wanted to do something

- Practitioner(s) within a statutory setting, frustrated by perceived limitations on addressing needs

- A member of a Christian church community.

This method intended to gather interview data to subject to qualitative analysis. As such this report is based on a small number of interviewees who are not intended to be a representative sample of the diverse range of VCOs that are working with black young people affected by crime. Having one researcher conduct, analyse and produce a report based on 26 interviewees' accounts has the advantage of establishing familiarity with the data, and enabling useful comparisons and themes to be identified (Crouch and McKenzie, 2006).

The interviewees included in this research were largely identified through people with local knowledge about which VCOs were active or had a strong profile in working with black young people affected by crime. This had the advantage of including VCOs that were small and informal in their approach rather than simply focusing on interviewing a small number of 'usual suspects' VCOs that have a national profile and are regularly consulted about black young people. Some of those interviewed spoke of the large number of requests they received locally, and in some cases nationally, to talk about their work with journalists, policy consultants and researchers. Others had not been interviewed about their work at all.

We hope that the interests of this research and the anonymity offered to interviewees have enabled those interviewed to reflect on the challenges and problems they have experienced as well as the positive effects and benefits of their work. It was explained to interviewees that the researchers hoped to learn from their experiences as people involved in voluntary and community work and that the interview was not an attempt to evaluate or judge the merits of individual organisations. It seems likely that providers' responses are biased towards presenting a good impression of their organisation, particularly their responses to questions which probed their approach and outcomes. However, the frank comments from interviewees, including those about their limitations, suggest that at least some interviewees felt able to discuss their work openly.

3 On three occasions volunteers or trustees at the VCO were interviewed alongside a co-founder and the interview was adapted to a group interview.

Policy context

This chapter explores the current policy context for VCOs predominantly working with black young people affected by crime. Three key areas are highlighted:

- Official responses to addressing the over-representation of black young people in the criminal justice system

- The prospect of closer partnerships with statutory agencies

- Targeted funding for voluntary and community activities on the basis of ethnicity.

These three areas do not fit easily together; indeed, they reveal aspects of governmental policy that seem contradictory. Taken together they suggest an uncertain and contradictory policy context for VCOs working with black young people affected by crime.

Official responses to addressing the over-representation of black young people in the criminal justice system

In 2006 a Home Affairs Committee (HAC) announced their intentions to undertake an inquiry into the over-representation of black young people in the criminal justice system.[4] The recommendations made to government based on this inquiry endorsed the VCS as having a vital role to play in addressing the over-representation of black young people in the criminal justice system, and claimed:

> Community and voluntary sector groups are already providing *many solutions* to young black people's over-representation in the criminal justice system.
> (HAC, 2007: 66; emphasis added)

On this basis, the Committee made a series of recommendations to improve the sustainability of VCOs through improved funding and more robust evaluation of their activities (ibid: 67-69). On close inspection, the claims made about the VCS contribution are vague. These recommendations recognise long-held, well-established issues for the VCS. However, the report is not specific about the role the VCS should play in addressing the over-representation of black young people in the criminal justice system, nor is it specific about the nature of voluntary and community practices alluded to in the above statement. The Committee's conviction that the VCS has a vital role to play in *addressing* the over-representation of black young people in the criminal justice system is also intriguing given that the Committee does not commit to a particular analysis of the *causes* of this over-representation. Rather, the Committee only goes so far as summarising various common (and contentious) perceptions about why black young people are over-represented in the criminal justice system.[5]

It is not surprising that the Committee's reporting is somewhat nebulous given the nature of inquiry which produced these recommendations. The Committee engaged in a wide range of issues regarding black young people's over-representation in the criminal justice system. It did so in a relatively short period of time, producing its recommendations a little over a year from the announcement of their inquiry. Its findings were largely based on gathering written and oral evidence and visiting statutory and voluntary groups. Indeed the only explanation offered in the report for how the Committee reached their conclusions about community and voluntary groups is the legitimacy and trust several VCS providers who gave evidence to the Committee said they had with local communities and young people, often in contrast to that which existed with statutory organisations (ibid). The report's claims about the VCS perhaps reflect an identified tendency

4 The Committee defined these as young people with a cultural background associated with the census category 'Black or Black British' (HAC, 2007: 7)

5 The Committee outlines the following factors as influencing black young people's over-representation in the criminal justice system: socio-economic disadvantage; family conflict and culture; a lack of 'positive' role models for black young people in society; and historic and ongoing discrimination against black young people, including in the education and criminal justice system (ibid: 29–53).

of official reports to idealise the contribution of the VCS without recourse to clear evidence (Richardson, 2008: 61-66; Corcoran, 2008a).

The government accepted the HAC recommendation that the VCS had an important role to play in addressing the over-representation of black young people in the criminal justice system (although it is hard to imagine a government response which would reject this principle). The first annual government report on progress achieved towards the accepted recommendations made in the HAC report [6] lists several mechanisms and programmes to fund VCOs activities. These funding strategies are shaped by two core themes:

● Improving VCOs' capacity and effectiveness to deliver services with targeted funding 'for BME communities and their organisations' (HM Government, 2008: 39)

● Funding small VCOs working with marginalised communities on the basis that:

Specialist support will help these frontline groups (working with excluded and marginalised communities including BME groups) to *represent* their community's voice and deliver services that meet their *specific needs*.
(ibid; emphasis added)

Hence, in the context of addressing black young people's over-representation in the criminal justice system, the government's approach appears to seek to support local VCOs that provide specialist support to young black people affected by crime on the grounds that black young people have unnamed specific needs and that VCOs' have greater legitimacy to work in marginalised communities.

The prospect of closer partnerships with statutory agencies

Government strategies related to VCOs working with black young people affected by crime are intertwined with wider developments regarding the relationship between statutory agencies and the VCS. The VCS is increasingly being called upon to meet government criminal justice policy objectives and deliver services. [7] The Ministry of Justice (MoJ) and the National Offender Management Service (NOMS) recently outlined their intentions towards engaging with the third sector [8] over the next three years to achieve the overall target of reducing re-offending (MoJ/NOMS, 2008: 29). The key method for engaging with the VCS is statutory sector commissioning of services through a competitive process based on best value. Whilst this sets the framework for VCS engagement in general, there is a specific focus on ensuring that Black and minority ethnic (BME) VCOs are engaged in the process. BME VCOs are highlighted as a category of particular interest in the VCS due to their greater presence in some minority communities than the statutory sector (MoJ/NOMS, 2008). However, the typical small size of BME VCOs and their lack of stable funding and support are considered barriers to their engagement in this framework. There is therefore a specific focus on developing infrastructural support and building the capacity of BME VCOs to participate in statutory partnership arrangements.

The implications of these new arrangements for the VCS have been the subject of considerable debate. Much of the concern of umbrella voluntary and community groups has focused on the threat that commissioning may pose to the independence of voluntary and community work and its ability to challenge statutory organisations. [9] The charity Clinks, in association with Nacro and the National Body of Black Prisons Support Groups, recently launched the Race For Justice campaign, promoting the role of BME VCOs in tackling the over-representation of BME people in the criminal justice system to government (Clinks, 2008). The campaign's recommendations suggest that the coalition welcomes the emphasis on the black VCS as a partner in addressing the over-representation of black young people in the criminal justice system *on condition that* the black VCS gets a fair deal in terms of commissioning and funding, and is involved in setting the agendas for this work (ibid).

The calls for a fair deal for the black VCS and the statutory sector's desire for closer partnerships with the VCS in minority communities are made against a historic backdrop of strained relations between the two sectors. Previous government strategies for funding VCOs in black communities

6 The government formally responded to the HAC recommendations in October 2007 (HM Government, 2007). Its response included a commitment to annually publishing operating proposals and governmental frameworks for delivering cross-government commitments, the first of which was published in December 2008 (HM Government, 2008: 1).

7 See Corcoran (2008b) for a discussion of the voluntary sector's inclusion in traditional statutory sector criminal justice arenas.

8 The third sector is defined as non-governmental organisations which are value-driven and which principally reinvest their surpluses to further social, environmental or cultural objectives. VCOs make up one category in the third sector, alongside social enterprises, co-operatives and mutuals (MoJ/NOMS, 2008: 15).

9 See Directory of Social Change (2008) for an outline of this argument.

have been heavily criticised (see John, 1982; Howson, 2007). Howson argues that an injection of government funding in black VCOs in the 1980s has cast a shadow over the black VCS in two ways. First, the funding encouraged black VCOs to compete with each other for resources and legitimacy, and funded organisations to 'maintain control over their communities', so ending a burgeoning political black movement in the UK (Howson, 2007: 12). Second, funds were provided to small black VCOs, some with no experience of managing budgets, that were unable to fully account for the money they had received. Howson suggests that such organisations were effectively set up to fail but that the legacy of this era has stigmatised the black VCS with the perception that it is less able to manage budgets and to be transparent about its finances (ibid).

Similarly, Corcoran suggests that there are particular sensitivities around small VCOs in minority communities entering statutory partnerships (Corcoran, 2008a). She considers that such organisations are often formed in places neglected by or hostile to statutory intervention (ibid). Given that the autonomy of such VCOs and their legitimacy with the community and young people are cited as key benefits, any moves to incorporate these organisations into statutory agendas need to be carefully negotiated so that these relationships are not compromised.

Finally existing safeguards to protect the VCS from statutory manipulation have been called into question. The Compact – a framework of good practice principles for the state and VCS relationship – was launched in 1998 [10] . In 2001, a BME code was added to the Compact to provide a structure for investing and building capacity in BME VCOs in recognition of their exclusion from engaging in traditional structures of the VCS (Compact, 2001: 3). However, more than a decade on, it is claimed that few VCOs even know of the Compact's existence (Clinks, 2008: 11). Moreover, the Compact has been criticised for not being legally binding, thus failing to have the necessary teeth to protect the VCS from statutory exploitation (Dacombe, Souto Otero and Whitworth, 2007: 81).

Targeted funding for voluntary and community activities on the basis of ethnicity

The encouragement of specialist voluntary and community support for black young people affected by crime has run alongside seemingly contradictory developments in local statutory funding for voluntary and community work. In the same period as the HAC report on young black people and the criminal justice system, the Commission on Integration and Cohesion (CIC) published its recommendations to government: 'practical proposals for building cohesion and integration at a local level' (CIC, 2007: 8). A policy concern with building cohesion arose in response to the civil disturbances in several northern towns in England in 2001. A government-commissioned report into these events considered that a high level of segregation between Asian and white communities was a key inflammatory factor in the disturbances (Cantle, 2002). Following this report, developing community cohesion has been a key aspect of both national race-relations policy and guidance issued to local government. [11] The CIC's recommendations included that local authorities should make single-group funding (funding for VCOs on the basis of providing a service to people of one ethnicity, religion or culture) the exception rather than the norm.

The proposal received strong criticism from some voluntary and community umbrella organisations, which considered that this blanket move would fail to take account of the unequal social context faced by minority communities and would decimate a sector of small VCOs providing specialist services on this basis (see, for example, National Association for Voluntary and Community Action (NAVCA), 2007; London Voluntary Service Council (LVSC), 2008). Given the support expressed for small VCOs addressing the specific needs of black young people affected by crime in the government's response to the HAC report, the government's response to the CIC's recommendation to make single-group funding the exception rather than the norm is surprising:

> All agencies […] should operate inclusive allocations and letting policies. Unless there is a clear business and equalities case, single group funding *should not* be promoted.
> (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2008: 52; emphasis added)

There is an obvious tension between the government's classification of the VCS by ethnicity in criminal justice strategies and its encouragement of the VCS to address the (unspecified) specific

needs of black communities and the move to restrict local statutory funding for VCOs that identify their work with a particular ethnic group. The LVSC argues that the ambiguous nature of this response may enable local authorities to 'hide behind cohesion arguments to cut specialist service provision' (LVSC, 2008: 6). Is this response simply a contradictory policy position to that proposed in criminal justice policy initiatives? Or is the over-representation of black young people in the criminal justice system considered to provide a basis for targeted VCS support, and if so, on what basis can VCOs make strategic arguments for their work addressing this aim?

VCOs predominantly working with black young people affected by crime have to contend with an ambiguous and uncertain contemporary policy environment for their work. It is ambiguous because the role of the VCS to address the over-representation of black young people in the criminal justice system is emphasised without clarification or recourse to clear evidence about what it is being called on to contribute. At the same time it is recommended that local authority single-group funding is not promoted. It is unclear how these two policy positions are reconciled. It is uncertain because statutory contracts and commissioning constitute a new regime for the VCS with important, and as yet unknown, consequences, particularly in relation to the autonomy of VCOs. This unpredictability is not an issue unique to VCOs working with black young people affected by crime. However, it has been suggested that VCOs working with this demographic group are likely to face particular sensitivities in relation to protecting their autonomy.

Chapter 2

Voluntary and community providers' ethos and approach

This chapter is in two main parts. The first part relates to the concept of ethnicity. Ethnicity was a key frame of reference for this research. VCOs were invited to interview because it was suggested that their work was of particular relevance to black young people affected by crime. However, during the fieldwork for this research, it became clear that providers did not define their work in terms of ethnicity. Providers' views about the explicit role of ethnicity in their work are discussed and for those providers with a longer history in the VCS, the perceived changes in opportunity for VCOs who identify their work with ethnicity. The second section considers providers' accounts of the outcomes and benefits of their work.

'[Ethnicity?] It's really nothing to talk about to be honest with you': the explicit role of ethnicity in VCS provision

> I think one of the things that [the organisation] does and does well is it *delivers culturally sensitive services* to a variety of groups within the BME community, and I think that's the biggest difference really. [… The organisation] is about *black people helping black people*, and doing it in a meaningful way really, and I think that's the biggest difference from where I am […] The fact that we're a *black organisation*.
> (VCO 9; emphasis added)

The above provider's description of their organisation appears to be in keeping with the government's response to the HAC report, that black VCOs have a role in addressing specific needs with black communities. Significantly, these claims were exceptional amongst the VCOs interviewed. Only the above organisation expressed its role in such terms. Providers tended to situate their work in relation to tackling disadvantage, addressing needs or providing a voice for young people. For many, these wider frameworks of purpose subsumed issues relating to the ethnicity of young people:

> Also, we wouldn't say that we were a black organisation either; we're just an organisation out there that *engages young people and to tackle certain issues*.
> (VCO 13)

> *I work across the board.* To me, people want help from *all ethnicities and all backgrounds*, so I don't only just work with black youth, I work with white, Asian, *anyone really who need[s] the help and support.*
> (VCO 14)

> *We didn't want to give any boundaries to the work that we do, we wanted to be able to work wherever and with whomever […] Anywhere where people feel there's a need.*
> (VCO 8)

> We don't single one race out, we don't do that, we work with young people *on the whole*. So if you're black, you're white, you're Chinese, you're Asian, you're Somalian, whatever, we will work with you. Because it's the simple fact that we're *youth-led* so if you look at our team there's a whole heap of colours. We're not saying the [organisation is] for blacks.
> (VCO 6)

> I remember we got stereotyped one time by a parent because obviously many black people go

there [to the project], you know. And it's kind of like it's not called black [organisation's name], it's young people who feel that, you know, we're open to […] *we're basically to help families on low income* […] our doors are *open to everybody*.
(VCO 10; emphasis added)

In providers' descriptions of their work, ethnicity was not operationally significant. Ethnicity did not affect who they worked with, how they worked or what they did. This was the case even for providers who had been motivated to set up the organisation because of the perceived disadvantages faced by black young people (media stereotyping of young black people as criminals and the educational underachievement of black boys were mentioned, for example). Indeed, providers rejected ethnicity as a label for their work. Ethnicity was considered stigmatising for their organisations as it limited the scope and relevance of their work. Providers were also concerned that identifying their work with ethnicity would stigmatise the young people they worked with as it defines black young people as a particular criminal problem:

And I think people need to get off the boat of the colour and then maybe, you know, they say because London is predominantly black, then of course the trouble that we have is going to be among the black. If you go to Northern Ireland, where it's mainly white caucasian, then the issues that they're having it's all white […] So society has got a lot to play in the way that they've allowed young people to think about themselves and I suppose categorise themselves so.
(VCO 1)

The government comes out and states certain things, like for example there's something going around called 'black on black' violence, I've never heard [of that before]. I don't know where that comes from, I don't know how people, if two white people were having a fight down the road, they certainly wouldn't report it as 'white on white' violence, so I don't understand where this […] comes from and how it gets to exist, but I think those are certain things which are here to drown us. But as an organisation, like I say, we're certainly not a black organisation because the ethnicities of everybody within the organisation are mixed, and I think it needs to be like that to tackle and engage young people from a wider perspective.
(VCO 13)

This is going to sound really strange but your staff team has to reflect the society that you're in. If it wasn't like that it might be quite different. Now our staff team, I have black, white, Asians, Christian, Muslim in my staff teams, and the reason why I do it like that is that no one can't really come and challenge me at anything to be honest with you.
(VCO 3)

'If we didn't move with the agenda, we'd have suffered like everybody else'

The experiences of a minority of interviewees who had established their VCO over ten years ago suggests there has been a significant shift over the last decade in the explicit role of ethnicity in voluntary and community practice with young people. They suggest that black-led VCOs and VCOs that define themselves as having something to offer black young people in particular (as described at the start of this section) have been displaced by VCOs working with young people in which ethnicity is not overtly discussed.

These providers had established their organisation to have a purpose and identity for supporting black young people. Black young people were considered to face particular discrimination, including discrimination within mainstream statutory organisations, as well as perceived disadvantages in achieving positive life outcomes generally. Promoting positive black identity was considered to provide resources for black young people to cope with these disadvantages:

I mean young black boys, for instance, have to fight against perception that society wants to enforce on them. And another thing – a lot of young boys tend to learn about themselves through deficiency, the way society, the media define them. The society define[s] them through deficiencies. They see them as, 'Oh well, you are a prison[er], you're a mugger. Oh, you know, you're a single parent father or you do this, you do that.' They are [not] going to see themselves

for progressive things, right, so we have to fight against that stereotype […] And what we're looking at, we're looking at the impact of the way 1) boys are reacting to the way society define them for their deficiency, 2) the way some parents did not prepare them to deal with how people would judge them as being black. You know, a lot of black parents done a lot of damage in the sense that they did not teach black boys about their history, and young people I know who learn about their history they become more humble, they become more respectable, they tend to understand people more, they tend to put things into context more, you know, but boys who don't know it I find are very angry.
(VCO 2)

This provision of black-led alternatives to mainstream services was described by those who had undertaken this work as having always been challenging, more so than the trials facing VCOs in general. In particular, providers described having fractious relations with local statutory agencies, which were problematic for the reputation and sustainability of their work. However, the late 1990s to early 2000s were pinpointed as the breeding ground for a shift in ideology and approach to their organisations. The community cohesion agenda, which developed in the early part of this century, was considered to have created an environment in which it was difficult for VCOs to sustain a focus on ethnicity-specific issues. For voluntary and community providers who had always faced challenges from statutory agencies, community cohesion was considered to have halted the progressive potential of VCOs confronting mainstream racism:

So there was a lot of kind of political and social injustice elements of the work we was doing, and I think that might be some of the reasons why this community cohesion agenda was pushed so strong, because around the time we set [the organisation] up, there were a lot of organisations that were around and emerging that were very what you call Afro-centric and I think, I don't think the British government wanted another civil rights movement. Because that's what easily could have developed, easily. But since the community cohesion agenda, a lot of those organisations don't really exist any more because they've just gone out of business because they was just too revolutionary and, you know, the statutory sector wouldn't touch them or they just weren't prepared to bend their politics.
(VCO 11)

The options providers of VCOs with an ethnicity-specific focus perceived they had were simple: stick with ethnicity-specific principles and organisational identity, struggle to find funding, then dissolve the organisation as no longer sustainable or morph the organisation into a generic organisation for young people and survive. Voluntary and community provision which had a particular ethnic identity was therefore considered by several well-established providers to have significant stigma attached to it. Hence, although these voluntary and community providers felt that black young people had specific needs in dealing with discrimination, their desire to address this became concealed within the presentation of their organisation as generic and open to all young people:

It's still important because a minute ago you said it's changed (from a VCO focused on black young people). It hasn't changed, it's just that we've had to move in order to kind of not be attacked as a racist organisation … It's still the same and we still have those underlying views and we still have an Afro-centric organisation. It's just that we don't go round preaching our politics or our beliefs. It's like our ideas and our programmes and our delivery have an Afro-centric theme to them, even when we're delivering to somebody who's European or somebody who's Asian or any other cultural group, but we still have Afro-centric themes that we, because it ease some of the misconception about culture-specific organisations […] So, you know, *we're still doing the work but we're not as overt with the cultural elements of it.*
(VCO 11)

We tend to have white and black people work here because, you know, it's important that you have a mixture of people who know what they're doing. And in terms of young black boys it's important you have people trained to work with young black boys. Because they come from a different historical issues. I mean, I reject that idea, you know, because they're British, everyone is the same. Yes, we know that but some people are treated differently. You know what I'm saying? So,

you know, we want us to work in a way that will support [young black boys] in order to deal with that […] And it's to be able to work with other men, whether they're white, Asian, or Chinese, for them to understand that they will work as a team together. It's crucial that those boys see themselves from an ethnic perspective doing well.
(VCO 2; emphasis added)

Providers' presentation of the outcomes of their approach

Throughout the interview, providers were constantly talking about their work by responding to various questions about what they did, who they worked with, or what difference they set out to make. These questions were attempts to identify VCS approaches to working with black young people affected by crime. However, interviewees' accounts defy easy classification in relation to any of these seemingly straightforward questions.

With one or two exceptions interviewees did not give, or did not stick to, precise definitions about what they did or who they worked with, and what they said did not necessarily fit together as a coherent approach. This isn't to suggest that these organisations do not have particular ways of working, or that they are not achieving changes for young people, but that these matters were not clearly articulated by the vast majority of interviewees. Rather, practice was often informally described by those interviewed and, as such, it was often not possible to capture precisely what work was taking place. Take the following interviewee's description of their organisation:

[The organisation] was set up due to my own life experience of being in a gang myself and what happened to me through childhood right up to adulthood, so it was basically set up to give a hand to young people that get mixed up in the criminal world. And not only just the criminal world but sometimes you don't understand what life is all about so they dabble in so many different things trying to find their feet, and if they're not dragged out in time then, you know, they can get deeper into it. So we provide mentoring. We provide role models. We provide counselling. We do one-to-one development plans. We set bite-size goals. Where it comes on the criminal side it's about gang exit strategies. So we help young people, more or less target those that have got influences within. I try not to use the word gang because the word gang seems to be used too loosely and if we really have an understanding of what a gang is we haven't really got that in [this city]. If you look in America we have [gangs]. So the group of young people that we work with, our young people that are involved in antisocial behaviour, some of them have gone to the extreme where they have killed, some have gone through prison life, you know, abuse, you name it, so the gang exit strategy is about identifying those that have an influence within the group rather than targeting the followers. Because the followers, as I said, it's hard for even the one with the most influence to come out of what they're in, so it's much harder for the follower. If we target those that have got influence they then target, the followers follow, basically, and it's just about identifying what they're into and really sitting them down and telling them that don't be fooled about what you're doing and that it's going to last forever, the options that you've got living this life is death, a mental institution or prison. Those are the three ways. So it's just giving them a chance of deciding which avenue they want to take. If they want to take one of them or they want to take the ultimate one which is life. It's biblical […] in a way. It's basically getting a young person to gain more of a life than they are at the moment, dying at 17, 14, you know, before they've really learned about what they're doing.
(VCO 1)

Such a kaleidoscopic account leaves its reader feeling light headed. In each new sentence the interviewee nearly always qualifies or takes a new direction from something said in the previous sentence.

Believing, realising and looking at life differently

Notwithstanding this lack of clarity and the great variety in what the organisations did, by focusing on providers' descriptions of contact with young people and on what they considered mattered about their work, a fairly clear picture emerges about what general changes providers hoped to bring about and the benefits of a VCO for young people.

Well a lot of the difference what I'm hoping to make with [young people] is for them to really *look at life* differently and not as it is at the moment.
(VCO 14)

What we are there for is to make them [young people] *realise* that there's more to life than to be hanging about the street […] I said [to a young person] 'Okay, in life what is your dream, what would you like to become?' He said, 'I want to become a lawyer or a solicitor'. And I said, 'What a beautiful dream you've got, but do you realise something?' I said, 'As soon as you have a criminal record your dream is shattered'. 'Oh really! Are you sure?!' That was the very words that came out of him. And that shows that some of these young people that they are into criminal activities without even having an understanding of the implications, and that is why it's good that we're working with them on a one-to-one basis.
(VCO 5)

Just loads of empowered young people believing in themselves, determination and motivation and *believing* that anything that they put their hand to or their mind to, that it can manifest, and them believing they're contributors to society, and that the work that they do today will have a positive impact on tomorrow.
(VCO 7; emphasis added)

Providers emphasised changing the way that young people saw themselves and their possible futures in their accounts of the changes they hoped to achieve for those they worked with. To simplify and generalise this common position among those interviewed, they hoped that the individual young people they worked with would be in a better position in relation to employment and education opportunities and would not be attracted to criminal activities as a result of changing their beliefs and self-perceptions. The following appear to be the common types of outcomes that young people could expect to achieve at the end of their contact with the VCOs interviewed. They would:

● Be in contact with education/employment/training opportunities or in contact with other support organisations

● Feel cared for

● Be empowered to cope with life/understand their experiences

● Have increased qualifications/skills through accredited courses delivered by the organisation

● Be inspired about their possible 'successful' future.

The focus on individual young people as the key to achieving change that underpins these aims was informed by providers' views about how change could be achieved, as well as by the perceived limits of funding for their work. Over half those interviewed described their work as Christian faith-based, either because their personal faith motivated them to establish the organisation or because the organisation's origins were within a church community. Thus, while these organisations are secular in terms of their engagement with young people, their missions are informed by Christian ideas about how change is achieved, particularly the investment made in individuals' beliefs and the view that individuals are able to choose between the right and wrong paths in life:

[Name of organisation] is a company that has a mission statement that says if you can change somebody's belief, you can change their behaviour, and that's as simple as it is. And where that came from is when I became a Christian, my beliefs changed, my thoughts changed, my behaviour changed, and my attitudes changed, and then my environment changed. And although I did just live over in, not far from here, I'm not a product of [the area]. Can anything good come out of [this area]? Yeah, I have. Why? Because my belief changed and my thought changed, and then that behaviour changed.
(VCO 12)

As the above quote also indicates, being on a positive personal journey was a common narrative amongst voluntary and community providers. These providers believed that they were credible proof of the capacity for individuals to change if they wanted to, and that they were an example to the young people they worked with that people can choose their future: [12]

> I've myself came from that kind of lifestyle. I was involved in, not in gang activity, but the drug trade and stuff like that, and I've been through everything that you can. I've been to jail, I've done everything, but I'm here to tell you that you can change, you can have a business, you can be married and have a success, like a nice family […] And I'm just really trying to encourage young people, and we all try and do it in our own different ways. Just to say, you know what, it doesn't matter what you've been through, you can make it, man.
> (VCO 16)

> We hope that with our own life experience and then for the fact that they [young people] can see that, okay, we were and I was where they are now and I'm now out of [committing crime] and I'm now running my own business and I can see a future for myself.
> (VCO 1)

An approach based on individual young people changing is something providers considered tangible and realistic. By focusing on individual young people, providers are not disputing that there are structural inequalities facing those they work with. However, on the whole, the only conceivable way providers considered that they could help young people was to encourage young people themselves to overcome these disadvantages:

> I just don't think, you know, right now, certain things are set up for black people. You know, once you're labelled, you're labelled, and it's hard to fight yourself out of the box to get somewhere. If you're determined and strong, yeah. But if they haven't got that behind them, they haven't the backing, you know. And this is what we try to do is empower young people and then that is very important.
> (VCO 10)

> We call it our mission statement … to empower and equip for life, so it's about transferring that process to a youngster, so no matter what they're going through, they've got that core in them which can help them to overlook certain things.
> (VCO 3)

The response of people in the local area to their work was vital to providers both in terms of personal reputation and the legitimacy of the organisation. As the following interviewee's experience highlights, challenging structural inequalities through policy-based interventions involves inhabiting a very different world from working with individual young people. These two different worlds are difficult for providers to weigh up in terms of benefit, with the former seeming an abstract game, fundamentally futile and difficult to justify to the local community who see nothing as a result of these activities:

> [Sometimes] we more concentrate on the social action and the advocating side because that's what's prevalent now. But at times we've decided, you know what, let's block off that side of things, you know what, forget talking to government and these people, they ain't going to do nothing. While we're there talking to them, our kids have been shot and killed and maimed and all of that, and all our community has been destroyed, so why speak to them? While I'm there talking to this person now I could be out doing youth work out there […] So it is about change in policy and we do want to do it, but it can't be done in this framework. And to be honest with you, if you're trying to use the positive [social] action side of working […] they (the local community) look at you when you're doing that type of work [like] you're a sell-out, communicating things to the system. 'You don't care about us, you just care about you getting your job paid.' And that's what was being said to me.
> (VCO 3)

'Just little bits of change, that's all we can make'

The basis for change being achieved by VCOs, connecting young people to educational or employment opportunities and stirring within young people a belief that they can and must take advantage of these opportunities, requires several optimistic assumptions. A VCO's contact with a young person often ended when the young person accessed training/education/statutory support or found employment, with the assumption that the young person was in a better position than they had been and was on their way to a positive future. Without maintaining contact and support for young people, several providers doubted that this was the case.

Some providers themselves also acknowledged that there were problematic linkages between their individual approach and what they would like to see for those they worked with. In particular, a lack of structural change to accompany their work with individual young people was considered to be a hindrance. Their efforts to empower young people without accompanying changes to their environment and opportunities felt lopsided. In the following anecdote about mentoring a young person who enrols in college, the provider moves from recognising that this is a successful outcome on one level to uncertainty about whether this short-term achievement will have any longer-term impact:

> I think most important is role models, inspiration to help [young people]. When I say role models and mentors, people who they can look up to and see that can make a difference. (Interviewee goes on to describe in detail the day he spent accompanying one young person enrolling in college.) And at the end of it now he's got enrolled, he came back to me yesterday and said, 'Oh guess what, my mum said she's not kicking me out now because I got in at college.' To him it's the first time he'd ever showed me any sort of emotion when he came and said, 'Look, thanks because my mum said if I didn't do something this year she was kicking me out.' He's 20 years of age, he hasn't done anything for four years, but yet I've taken him into college and kicked him through the first door and broke down the second door, and now got him a chance to go. The truth is he still needs a bit more pushing and support to go and stay there. Can I give him that support? No, due to the amount of time and everything else, but the truth is he'll possibly be back in the same circle of where he's left (implying that the young person's friends are a negative influence), but I know as an organisation that we've given so many people a chance, the opportunity, it's about them taking it. There are opportunities around, there are chances for young people around, but it's getting them to take the opportunities. What tends to happen with us is, for example, we get a piece of work to get young people into employment, so you've worked with a young man for six weeks on CVs, interview techniques, decision making, self-awareness, getting them to a position where they're ready for employment. You take them to the job, you get them the employment, you help them through the CV, you help get their interview clothes and everything, they'll start the job, my work is then finished. I believe that's when my work needs to start, because then I need to make sure that they stay in the job, and if they're not happy help them to change, do something they are going to like and enjoy. But what tends to happen is because I've ticked the box, the funding box, I then step back, and then the young people then a week later, two weeks later: 'Oh yes, they put me in the changing room. I ain't fucking working in the changing room' or 'They made me sweep up in the morning and then left'. So all the hard work you've done, you've got them employed but the truth is they then fall off at the back way. And it's happened so often. What I say as an organisation is, if you're funding us, make sure there's a contingency plan after. Because I said to you at the beginning that we [got] 200 and odd kids into employment last year. What you should have asked me is how many stayed in employment for over six months.
> (VCO 13)

While it is hard to argue that the common types of outcomes VCOs appear to be achieving outlined at the start of this section are not good, more seasoned providers admitted to feeling frustrated about what could feel like their relatively modest nature. However, given the small-scale nature of their operations and the limitations facing them in terms of financial resources and resources to affect the environment faced by disadvantaged young people, what more, some implied, can they be expected to do? Their organisations are not panaceas for the young people they work with:

> So we're trying to show [young people] different ways. Kind of like, if you go on it that side

or we can offer you this and the training can continue. So it's good that we have the learning communities project because we can pass the young people over to them where they can, because they've got loads of money, so they can take them on the courses where they need to be and support them more. So I think what we do, we're just kind of like the first, you know. *It's like we can only take them so far.* I'm glad that we're working with other organisations where we can give them higher, you know, we're not into setting up young [people], we're not into false promises. We only do what we say we can do.
(VCO 10)

I can show you showreels, I've got proper showreels, DVDs of work that we've done. I can show you all types of different things like that, but at the end of the day now, I don't see how it can engage [young people] for that period of time but then what after that? You know what I mean? I sent some young people the other day on an exchange programme. They've come back now, nothing ain't changed round here, it's still the same. They're still poor, they still haven't got a job, and how can I get them a job, I'm not an employer. The only thing I can do is send them to a job interview […] I could change somebody in mindset, but how long is that going to last for? Because I've done it all, I've transformed gang members' minds and sent them back out and everything, two years they're back in the gangs in a more higher level because they're more empowered now. And the reason why that's happened is because their environment hasn't changed.
(VCO 3)

Me as a person or this as an individual organisation can only help individuals. So, if you was to come along or you was referred, we can help you maybe find accommodation or get a job or, you know, get you some gainful employment or some gainful training or assist you with your anxiety or just do something that's relevant for you and then it's *just little bits of change. That's all we can make.* We can't make no mass change because in order to, because to make mass change takes money and that's what prevents organisations like us who've got vision, who've got ideas. We've got the skills to actually help people en masse because you just haven't got the funding to do it, to do mass campaigns, to do mass pieces of work. You just can't do it […] all we've done is affected one person […] We're just, as things flare up, we react to them so it's about social reform and then once we've got that social reform in place and once people are thinking differently and people kind of want to live differently, once you've got to that place, then the services that you provide for people, the support you provide for people will be more accurate, and I think sometimes we do things the wrong way round. So that's what, ultimately, that's what I think needs to happen for people is social reform.
(VCO 11; emphasis added)

Providers' presentation of the benefits of their approach

Providers identified various inter-related benefits which they considered their organisations conferred upon young people. All these benefits are:

- About how work with young people is carried out; who delivers it, not what is delivered

- Not possible to capture or measure in a straightforward way

- Considered, at least by providers, to be in opposition to statutory services approaches to young people.

'You've got to be human with [young people]'

Rather than narrowly working within the boundaries of a particular issue, providers believe that part of their strength is working holistically with young people and being adaptable to their perceived needs. So projects run by the organisations may have a title but, with a few notable exceptions, providers described this as only a starting point for what they would offer a young person accessing them:

That's the core of what the project's called, the driving project, so everyone comes on because it's driving but at the same time you do numeracy and literacy, you do CV building, you do

cultural awareness, you do drug awareness, you do sexual health, so there's many things we bring. You may have a title or a heading as a project, but there's many other things which we bring into the project to make it successful, because we're fully aware of the needs of the people within the area.
(VCO 13)

Maybe being able to explore your rights, what rights you've got in the community and, you know, educational, the way, or your educational journey, your job prospects, because just because you're a youth club it doesn't mean to say all you do is play table tennis all day long. You can do that but in doing that the first thing, the other thing that you do do and that's even more important, is the conversation aspect, getting to know young people, starting and maintaining a relationship, and then with that it's kind of finding out what the issues are and how you can help or how you can signpost to where help can be. And maybe offer the support and encouragement.
(VCO 15)

This contact with young people was underpinned by an ideology of building a relationship *with* them over time rather than delivering a particular service *to* them. Some described their contact with young people using the analogy of a family, perhaps to emphasise the intensity of these relationships and the importance they attribute to them:

I know that there are so many activities out there, but it's not enough [or as] effective as when you spend time with somebody on a one-to-one, where thereby you can hear from that person, he can give you the thing that is bothering him, he can open up. He can see you as a friend, he can see you as a professional, you know. And sometimes they see you as a family. So when they see we talk, they see they can trust you, they can talk to you.
(VCO 5)

We're able to support those young boys in a way to satisfy the need to have a father figure around, and by coming here they have multiple father figures. We're not fathers, we're father figures, we are adult figures who are able to support them through that difficulty […] we see things in a different light, from a relationship perspective.
(VCO 2)

Providers advocated being a place where young people engage on an intimate, emotional level. Young people feeling cared for was considered valuable in itself, but was also suggested as the key to developing the trust and engagement necessary to influence them:

Faith, love, trust, time, passion and integrity. Yeah. And that's like the foundation of everything that we do […] because I go around to different meetings people think, 'Oh that doesn't sound strategic enough to me. Oh you're just going to love people'. But I'm talking about true genuine love, man, making a person feel – because I will call it the spirit, some people call it energy or some people call it, I don't know, that warmth.
(VCO 16)

The whole idea is to make sure that these boys have positive attachments to people who they could feel that cares for them, not just by words but it's by deeds, you know, they feel it, they know it and they see it is consistent.
(VCO 2)

So we do quite a lot to just make sure that at least they are not just on their own, to show that somebody cares about them. No matter how bad it is, someone will care for them.
(VCO 5)

One of the young males, he didn't continue [to access the organisation], and he said that what he found really useful [was] the phone calls, because I would phone and say, 'Where are you?' I'd say, 'We're just about to start [the group].' And that's the kind of support. And even though it feels at times tedious, you're thinking, 'Well, if you want this why aren't you here?' But sometimes

they need that extra push. And he said he really valued that, if nothing else he took away just that support, just that ringing up and saying, 'We're about to start, where are you?'
(VCO 9)

You've got to be human with them, you've got to be real with them, and I think everything is too mechanical and robotic. There's no love and young people can sense it […] It's hard to have a service devised and built around love. The only thing that looks like that is the faith-based groups. But for individuals within the organisation that's what's needed, and the young people will respect you and respect that, and that's what they will engage into.
(VCO 3)

This was accompanied by a flexible and accessible approach to young people, giving, providers suggest, VCOs reach and remit beyond the more rigidly defined statutory sector:

We're flexible in the way we approach young people because I see that young people automatically see a government organisation as authoritative, as punitive, So it's like a tension, but when [young people] are with us it is not [a problem].
(VCO 3)

I get [phone] calls [from young people] two, three o'clock in the morning, all different hours of the day I get telephone calls, and, you know, they're phoning to say, 'I was just about to do something (implying something negative), but I remembered what you said and because of that I didn't do it.' Do you understand what I'm saying? So I know that when we say something to them it does register.
(VCO 1)

We work in a pastoral way where we follow young persons through the whole thing. If we weren't doing that, Connexions don't care, they only care up until 4.30, half an hour before they go [from] work, they just want to go home. Also, now if we had a young person come to see us now at quarter to five we'd probably stop here with them until ten if necessary. Them statutory jobs wouldn't do nothing like that.
(VCO 3)

So we have a space where they can actually share what's going on, knowing it's not going to go back. Whereas the statutory organisation is much more, say, intervention isn't it, so we're coming out of different gates really. So I'm not getting at teachers or anything like that, or local authority workers. But there's [only] so much you can do to do your job, and that's it, it ends. Whereas here people go the extra mile, and you get the people that the local authority people are trying to reach coming through the front door, and achieving on there. And from where I am, that's the difference. They [the organisation's staff and volunteers] go the extra mile, they are that supportive.
(VCO 9)

'We live it and we see it'

Nearly all interviewees, without being directly asked, mentioned that they lived in the area in which the VCO was located. Further to this, many had been motivated to get involved in voluntary and community work partly because of their experiences as a concerned resident of the area. Their position, they advocated, gave them 'insider' status in an area which is experienced differently depending on whether you are an insider or outsider. This insider status had dual benefits: they understood the needs in the area; and young people, especially those not in contact with statutory services, engaged with them. This lack of distance between those who provided and those who accessed VCOs was considered to contrast with statutory provision's 'them and us' separation and hierarchy of providers and users. Statutory services *work* with (or try to reach) service users, VCOs *live* amongst them:

I think the good thing about the [organisation] is *we live here,* and we live it and we see it, that's how these projects develop, you know. We don't just sit upstairs, you know. We don't shut our doors, you know what I mean, and then come back at ten [o clock], you know, and work and then

leave again. You know, when I finish work and I'm on the street and I'm talking to people, I'm still the image and people will still call me and say, 'Yeah, what about this project?', 'Oh, do you know about that?' You know, *I live it* and I love it because that's why I do it, you know.
(VCO 10)

We live in it and we know it and our hands aren't tied like a statutory offices' hands would be tied, because if you worked for one of the statutory departments within youth offending or social care and health or one of those or education, you've got to follow strict guidelines and strict rules of operation. Whereas third sector organisations have the same infrastructures and have the same rules and policies but because we recognise the need in a different way, we try to meet that need realistically because *we feel it more* rather than try to kind of have this kind of sterilised approach to everything where we keep professional distance and all those kind of ridiculous ideas.
(VCO 11)

Where is the support or the real support [for young people] without being stereotyped and judged? You go into a service provision, traditional service provision, i.e. Connexions or city council, and they've got too much stereotypes and preconceptions because the reality is it's dealing with people that *don't come from the community* that you've come from. They had a different upbringing so they don't really relate, they're just doing a job and *you feel that and you know that*. So it doesn't, it never feels real. But when you get to meet people, we try and be like, 'At the end of the day we've come from where you've come from and we've aspired to do better and we are doing better but we still remember and know how it feels from where you come from.'
(VCO 16; emphasis added)

In keeping with this, most providers emphasised the life experience they and others at the organisation brought to working with young people. Experience was considered either an important addition to formal qualifications or, in some cases, formal qualifications were not considered necessary. Experience mattered to providers because it enabled their organisation to relate to and be respected by young people. Indeed, as has already been indicated, some advocated that the best people to engage with young people were those who had had a past life in crime that they had turned their back on:

Young people will work with me because they know that I've been down that road before (the interviewee is speaking about being an ex-convict) so they can relate with me and I could relate with them.
(VCO 14)

A lot of young black young people love to get involved in it, love the work we do, but if they've got a criminal record it's up to the organisation to say yes or no. The best people which make the best youth workers are the people which live on the ground, lived it and done it.
(VCO 10)

And all my staff have got life experience that they can share, all different backgrounds and life experience that they have that builds up [the organisation], that if a young girl comes in, and they were abused by her father or something, I've got somebody here that have gone through that can support that young person. So they all come from different walks of life. You know, we've got staff that have been to prison. So their experience of going to prison, they can then share that with the young people as well, and because they know the prison system, they know how it feels to be in prison, come out of prison, not have anything, not have no support, so they then know what they had to go through, the system that they had to go through, to get the help. So they know the system already. So they know the housing, where they can go. They know what they need to do. So it's used in that way than rather lying down, okay I had to go to college to know about who does housing, who does this, who does that, you will never really know unless you've really experienced it.
(VCO 1)

A lot of people say these [young people] are hard to reach, and that saying doesn't get used

in our organisation because there's nothing hard to reach. What I will say is they (statutory organisations) don't know how to reach, and they don't know where it is. It's not hard to reach, it's just that you're un-engaging, you're not able to engage in where they are and how they are. (VCO 13)

Chapter 3

Voluntary and community providers' attitudes to resourcing their work and the implications of their funding environment

Interviewer: What have been the challenges that you've faced so far trying to meet the needs of the young people you're working with?

As a voluntary organisation, it's funding. It's money, money, money, money, money.
(VCO 7)

Unsurprisingly, the funding environment for their work was a subject of great concern to those interviewed. Indeed, the providers who at the time of interview had only obtained funding to facilitate one-off events or run short-term projects largely restricted their comments about funding to discussing how possibly to attract it. For such interviewees to question their funding environment was perhaps a luxury they felt they could not afford. However, the accounts of those who had sustained their operations over a longer period of time suggest that providers reflect a great deal on their funding environment, not just in terms of the opportunities it may offer their organisation, but also the implications it has for the young people they work with and for the health of the VCS in general. This chapter explores these views and experiences. It considers the nature and limitations of the current funding environment of VCOs as well as indicators about the potential opportunities closer statutory partnerships might offer.

Financial insecurity

Despite significant differences between the VCOs including in the research, not least in size, length of time they had been established and the particularities of their work, there was one issue where there was considerable consensus amongst those interviewed: as a VCO it is a constant struggle to survive. All the VCOs were characterised by their overall financial insecurity and the instability this created for their work. At the time of interview several providers said they were operating with reduced, restricted or, in a couple of cases, no funding currently available to their organisation. How providers managed this instability partly depended on their scale of operation. Those who relied on volunteers, some of whom themselves had employment obligations in addition to their voluntary work, continued carrying out informal, small-scale activities between the funding they received, such as visiting young people and their families at their homes. For those VCOs with a staff team and a programmatic approach, fluctuations in their funding had a direct bearing on their functioning. Two such organisations, which were amongst the most well established of those interviewed, had, at the time of interview, closed their main programmes of work with young people, they hoped temporarily, due to insufficient funding. It is worth pointing out that, whatever their current status, providers did not consider being reliant on volunteers to be feasible in the longer term. In part this was because people in their local area were not perceived as being able to devote significant amounts of their time to non-income activities:

I'm the only paid staff, along with two other staff, which is literally paid the minimum, nonsense really, and then the rest are volunteers. And at the end of the day, I know it takes time for a project to be birthed really, and I speak positively rather than negatively that I'm hoping now

that from next year I can start applying for funds to pay my staff because I've been running for four years on volunteers and I've lost some very good volunteers because they need to live and they've had to go and find jobs, you know. So those that I've got here now I don't want to lose them for the fact that I couldn't get funding to pay wages.
(VCO 1)

The sources of funding for larger VCOs could best be described as wide and shallow. One such provider said they had between ten and 15 current funders, and this did not appear to be uncommon. The most frequent funding source amongst those interviewed was the local authority, followed by the police, corporate funding, charitable trust funders – with other funders including Connexions, schools, NHS trusts, the youth offending team, probation, central government, social enterprises and non-departmental public bodies. Most of the VCOs were funded on the basis of providing a specific event/course/project. One provider likened this relationship to being kept on a funding drip. They had to constantly look for and then compete for these opportunities to fund their work, at the expense of longer-term planning for their organisation. The appearance of a new funding opportunity was described by this interviewee as causing an atmosphere amongst local VCOs akin to a 'feeding frenzy at the zoo' as VCOs vied to obtain funds.

'People gravitate towards the money don't they?' The necessary compromise of funding

Interviewees did not tend to discuss the merits of particular funding sources, rather they spoke about how funding as a whole affected their work. Once obtained, all funds necessarily impose conditions on these organisations – the promise of delivering something, to address identified needs or to work with a specific group of young people. There was inevitably some degree of distance between what providers might ideally want to do and what it was possible to fund. Some suggested that while their own aims and objectives were necessarily malleable rather than autonomous, they entered into funding exchanges with open eyes by weighing up the benefits and costs to their organisation and to the young people they worked with before deciding whether or not to apply for particular funds. These exchanges were sometimes proposed as a process of incorporation. They get what they want and a funder's agenda is added to this. A common consequence (sometimes acknowledged and sometimes not) was that, as their activities progressed over time, VCOs became less focused on achieving a particular mission as a result of adapting their work to a variety of funding opportunities:

Interviewer: Why [did] you broaden out and widen your focus?

So much reasons really to be honest with you. The main reason is sustainability. We want to do what we want to do, and we want to work how we want to work. But the external powers that be and resource doesn't allow us to do that. You have to pay overheads, building costs, staff wages, and the work which we would like to specialise in there's not really no funding for it, and we don't get funded for it so it can't be done. So we have to do the general services which every other organisation does.
(VCO 3)

For example with Every Child Matters out a lot of our things have had to work around that, because obviously to be sustainable and get certain funding we have to look at those sort of issues, and obviously incorporate them in what we believe and how young people need to see things, and I think that's worked extremely well.
(VCO 13)

Given the insecurity of financial support available to these organisations, there would be a financial cost for a VCO to nail its colours to a particular mast. Rather, providers who were responsible at least in part for the organisation's survival by obtaining funding were understandably attracted to being all things to all people. Hence, even if one precise description of their work were possible – and as previously outlined, this might not be a reasonable expectation – providers' accounts suggest that there are benefits in avoiding precision. It makes pragmatic sense for providers to weave their way

around theories/definitions/issues in a broad, wide-ranging account. Such an approach enables their work to take place across a spectrum of concerns and issues and so increases the potential opportunities for engagement available to VCOs. Operating with a fixed, bespoke strategy would be limiting, precarious and, if funding sources' agendas shifted, impossible for providers to sustain.

However, in some cases, becoming fundable seemed more a matter of contradiction than simple incorporation. For example, the following provider describes gun crime as a media-inflated phenomenon that negatively stereotypes the local area. However, gun crime is also a powerful lever for the organisation to fund its work:

> One thing we decided to do as a group as well was tackle the media, especially the way they always negatively portray [this area] as being linked to gun and gang crime, as if never anything good comes out of [the area]. The only thing that ever comes out of [the area] is the gun and gang crime. Whereas if you live round here, you've probably seen here very little of the gang crime that the media tends to portray, that it happens every day, you have to walk around looking over your shoulder. Whereas children play out, they do ordinary things what ordinary people do. (Later in the interview the interviewee talks about his experience of funding applications.) Sometimes, if you don't put the word guns in it, they [funders] like it, but then also there's other things if you put the word gun in it, they like it because they'll fund it because it's connected to gun crime. So you need to know where to put the word gun crime in. It's like with [x project run by the organisation], normally we get the police to, they will fund [it], because to the police again you'll pitch at that: 'Well, this is a very good way of reaching those hard to reach people in the community who are the ones that are probably involved in the gun and gang crime, this is a way of reaching them.' The police like that, they're like, 'Oh yeah, we'll fund that', because it also ticks one of their boxes doesn't it, and their key performance indicators […] I thought okay fine, well if you're going to pay for all the equipment, at least we get our [project]. So I've found that yeah, everybody has got an agenda, and so long as it can meet one of our aims and objectives as well, then yes we should engage, and we should work together for the betterment of the whole community.'
> (VCO 8)

By relating their work to gun crime is this provider reinforcing the very stereotype of the area that he is concerned about? Or is he subversively using such stereotypes to his advantage to deliver something that at least he believes is needed? Can the unstigmatising support models for young people that providers promote when talking about the aims and benefits of their work simply be poured into bottles labelled for funding as 'tackling gun crime'? It is understandable that providers may become caught up in ensuring the success or simply the survival of their organisation and accept funding which might, at best, be spurious in terms of connection to their intentions or, at worst, may contradict the organisation's mission. It was suggested by some that the funding market for voluntary and community work inevitably means that some portion of the work of VCOs is funding-led:

> I think one of the problems I do see with [voluntary and community] organisations, possibly not ourselves, but I do see with organisations is that there's small pots of money around, and we chase the money, but we get the money and then do things which as an organisation we don't really want to be doing, and I find that a huge problem.
> (VCO 13)

Innovative practice: more spin than support?

Despite much claimed interest and support of innovative voluntary and community practice with young people, providers found that such work was often unattractive to funders as it was too 'outside the box', too expensive or too long term a commitment. In reality, the funding environment was considered to be conservative in terms of the nature of provision it supported:

> I'll tell you one of the challenges, one of the really frustrating challenges, which is a complaint, is that all of the language now that's out there is kind of Dragons' Den [13] language. So everybody wants to hear we need a much more entrepreneurial society but actually most of the stuff out there, most of the big [funding opportunities] out there are actually very risk

13 Dragons' Den is a television programme in which would-be entrepreneurs compete for financial investment by pitching ideas to potential financial investors.

averse […] And I think that's the biggest one, that actually a lot of the stuff that needs to be solved is not going to be solved by the way they're trying to solve them […] So one of the challenges is how do you get people to believe in something which is a specialised service, when so many [VCOs] are just, actually if you look like the template, they are just easy to recognise.
(VCO 7)

A colleague of mine used to say it all the time, new dominoes, same shufflers. (The interviewee is referring to the frequent launching of 'new' funding regimes but within the same structures.) Do you know what I mean? So, yeah, you know, they always come with the new stuff or stuff in disguise with still the same people dealing the cards. It doesn't work. So those are the kinds of things you learn, that nothing changes. It's the same old bullshit.
(VCO 11)

Terms such as 'innovative practice' or 'new solutions' were, some suggested, rhetoric for funds which supported bland, limited provision. Short-term, cheap projects such as group activities and events for young people or accepting referrals from statutory organisations were considered to be the mainstay funding opportunities:

We get like, maybe, I don't know, £5,000 [funding] if you're lucky, and you say, what am I going to do [with this], take [young people] away to Alton Towers and holidays and Drayton Manor Park and Madame Tussauds or we'll go quad-biking or go-cart or something? So you help that little crowd [of young people] on the corner. But the thing about it is when you're at your job in the day and I'm at my job in the day, they're still hanging on that corner because, you know, we've got our lives and as much as we want to help, the help we give is very piecemeal and the help we give doesn't actually change their mindset. All it does, it just gives them something to do.
(VCO 11)

Youth work can't change a young person's life, playing football can stop somebody from shooting somebody? Taking them on an activity can? No, and I've always said that.

Interviewer: So describe to me how you'd want to work with a young person.

Number one, we want to have the resource to intervene. How we'd like to work with them is to develop tailor-made packages for them, support programmes which are user-friendly to the young people within their timeframes and their lifestyles, and creating opportunities for them. The programmes which we're commissioned to deliver, they ain't like that. Like Connexions for instance, they want you to do work with young people within any category, they want to give you £2.33 per hour per young person. Nothing can't happen. The only thing you can do with that is take them to a place like Alton Towers and stuff, and even then there's still not enough money. So to engage them we have to have enjoyment and excitement, which costs resource. To work with them in a therapeutical way you need time and commitment and that needs staff, high level quality staff which these agencies don't really subsidise. And all [VCOs] can offer is general youth work and that's it. There's no specialist programmes, anything what's specialist costs money. We want to pioneer on NLP, neuro-linguistic programming, to transform young persons' behaviours. Who's going to pay for that? Because, you know what I mean, it's a joke […] Meet [young people's] needs? Simple. I'm not going to lie to you, you can't. No chance. Because there's nothing what you can do in your service or in any of these services to help them. This is why we need a new service for those kids, and we tried to create one [here] but no one wants to fund it so what can you do?
(VCO 3)

Interviewer: What do you find is fundable?

[…] Work to complement the youth offending team, work to do with NEET [14] group, mentor projects.

14 NEET refers to young people aged 18–25 who are not in education, employment or training.

Interviewer: What is less fundable?

Day educational support programme, long-term funding, [funding for] behavioural issues.
(VCO 2)

Easy to fund is just small, if you wanted to do a project for two weeks that's easy.
(VCO 10)

The short-term, low-cost interventions described make sense in policy terms because they are low risk and enough users will benefit to show a quantified 'significant result'. However, from a practice point of view, young people's needs are not fully tackled, and there is no investment in VCOs developing as sites of quality practices. Providers' feelings of being caught between how the funding environment presents itself and their experience of surviving within it resulted unsurprisingly in some cynicism:

But the truth is, I think the support which we need and we want isn't the support that people give. [Funders] may give you a letter to say look the work that you're doing is outstanding, they know that you're doing positive work, they know that you're engaging in the right target audience. But the truth is, there isn't the funding for us out there to be sustainable, or to get us to the position where we want to be.
(VCO 13)

Well, people like to fund anything that's going to bring them kudos, that's it, they don't want to fund nothing else […] That's probably the only reason why they fund us. They're not funding us because they want to change people's lives, if they wanted to change people's lives they'd give us more money. You know what I mean? It's simple.
(VCO 3)

One of the things about this work is, if you're not strong, you can become very disillusioned very quickly and I've seen it happen. I've had members of staff come here to work very enthusiastic but when they see how hard it is, the obstacles it has, how much you are banging your head against a brick wall, it can disillusion you and you just give up.
(VCO 11)

Statutory partnerships and funding

Amongst those interviewed, the opportunity statutory partnerships and funding presented to their organisation attracted some of the greatest variations in providers' views. Some, usually the more recently established organisations, saw their statutory relationships as an acknowledgement of their hard work and, broadly they considered that with this engagement came at least some influence. Others were suspicious of statutory services and cynical about the extent to which their organisations benefited from engaging in statutory agendas.

Across this spectrum of views, the common impetus for statutory/VCS exchanges was that the VCOs interviewed had access to and credibility with young people, which statutory agencies did not. As one provider put it, it is easy to broker statutory organisations coming into the area, but very difficult to broker their organisations or the young people accessing their organisations going out of the area. Hence, a sense of tokenism was often ascribed to providers' experiences with statutory organisations. In multi-agency groups, some felt they had been used for establishing access to young people or for statutory agencies to claim credibility with local people, rather than their having a more strategic role:

We've learned that, especially as we've become more and more credible, that people will want *to use our name and use us*, and that's when I talk about the agenda thing […] Mainly because they don't live in the communities, and a lot of your council workers that come into the communities to talk, not even with us, *it's usually at us*, they have no idea how people live round here. They have no idea where the people are coming from, they have no idea of the issues. The only idea they have of the issues is what they read in the media, which is not necessarily the same thing.

So therefore *they have to work in conjunction with local people*, but they need to build very good links with local people. People that they can trust, people that they know will tell them the truth, people that are willing to work with them as well. *People who can be their eyes and their ears on the ground level, so that they can then set their agendas, tick their boxes.*
(VCO 8)

Everybody [at multi-agency groups] wants to help, and everybody wants you to have an input into what they're doing or how they're doing, or everybody wants to say they're working in partnership to what we're doing […] For example, all the police officers, all the school teachers, everyone else, all the local authorities, everyone's getting paid to be at these meetings apart from community organisations. But yet we're the first people that they're calling because they know that *we can reach their target audience*.
(VCO 13; emphasis added)

Two of the organisations interviewed undertook statutory contracts as an explicit business opportunity separate from their charitable objectives and for which they set up a separate company. For these organisations, the nature of this relationship was unambiguous. The statutory commissioner owned the agenda; the interviewee had the job of communicating this to young people:

Interviewer: In terms of the organisations that commission you, what is it that you think they're commissioning you for? Why come to you kind of thing?

Answers to a problem that they don't even know […] They're looking for, right, then going back to [x] contract. You'll see a council and the police that commissioned us the work and they says, 'Oh my God, we've got loads of problems with the young people, they're causing a lot of antisocial behaviour, there's been some graffiti and there's been some alcohol abuse, this and that. You need to go and see what's the problem or we're going to move them. *We need you guys to go out there.*' And they had a big complex report done, and like people say what is it that you do? And Helen, you know, *what we get paid to do in the most stupidest way is to speak to people and listen.* It sounds so crazy. Like these people are panicking, 'Oh my God, we've got a problem'. So we just go out there and ask them (young people) what's going on? And then try to – once we've got that kind of rapport – trying to challenge their thinking, saying, 'Well, how do you think this looks on the outside?' Like thinking, 'Look at yourself and like step out and look at this situation. Everyone is dressed in black, how do you think this looks?' [The young people say] 'Oh my God, for real.' And it's spending that time just to – I'm not saying that we changed the whole thing but it's just challenging them, and it's like *people call us basically to speak to young people*, which is so stupid. And that just shows the patheticness and the gap between generations where, you know, *they're asking us to do something that they can't do when in fact they can* because all it is is just get off your high horse, *get out your office and go and speak to them.* That's it. That's really like it.'
(VCO 16)

[I have] given the opportunity and the ability for the police and the NHS to *claim a credibility* with young people because I'm standing next to them, and I stand as to say, '*I am today the NHS and I'm going to deliver a message that the NHS want me to deliver, talking about sexual health in a way that young people understand*' … And my work has been going on and on never ceased, and like I said it's evolved, mushroomed so wide that I've got everybody from Youth Offending, Home Office, Connections, every statutory body, even down to looked after children, contacting me: could you come and do our young people?
(VCO 12; emphasis added)

This proposed dual identity of being a megaphone for hire to talk at young people as well as being a holistic young person-centred VCO seems contradictory, although neither of the providers saw it this way. Rather, they advocated that the profits from undertaking statutory contracts bought independence to their separate VCO work as it reduced their reliance and need to chase VCS funding streams:

The [charity is] separate to the business, so if someone wants us to go out there and consult with young people regarding eco homes, like what we're going to do in a bit, it's probably not exactly what we want to do but that contract allows us to stay in employment and also helps us to continue to do the [charity] or things that we want to do.
(VCO 16)

As outlined in chapter 1, at the time the interviews were conducted there was a sense that statutory sector commissioning was an expanding prospect for the VCS. The notion of VCOs being on the precipice of a new funding environment was evident in providers' responses to a question about the future challenges facing their organisation. Several spoke about the heightened pressures they considered the funding environment would place on their knowledge and skills, with some considering employing, for the first time, fundraising staff or developing their organisational capacity as a response:

So that for me is our mountain in a way, to get to understand the commissioning process, best practice and all that, because we just want to get on with the work [with young people]. But if we're going to be here for another five years, we have to be part of those processes.
(VCO 9)

The third sector isn't really ready around marketing or anything like that, or having that business face, so obviously there's a massive capacity-building programme to get them up to speed. I would also say as well you have to be forward thinking and strategic in everything, and in planning as well. And you need to know your terrain. I think you have to know everything. You have to know how to run an organisation, handle the budgets, deal with politicians, deal with other agencies, communicate, market yourself good.
(VCO 2)

So you need a professional fundraiser really to help you with your funding bids … I mean in our business plan we've got a whole organisational chart as to how we want to be set up, but it's just about capacity building, to be able to get people in those positions so that we will be able to do a lot more of the strategic outreach work.
(VCO 8)

The more experienced VCOs were notably more critical about the impact a commissioning and contract environment may have for their organisation. The following interviewee's fears for the future raises concerns about the increased distance that commissioning may create between those accessing VCOs and the providers of VCO services; a closeness providers considered essential to their motivation and the success of their work:

I think the voluntary sector is totally overlooked and bypassed, and I think what's happening now is a transition for the third sector. But the way in which it's going, it's not having no governance in the direction, it's being led by a government policy around its new funding regime and commissioning procurement processes. While that's happening the community is being sidelined because the [organisation's original] work's got ceased, and the edge has been kind of taken away from that sector. I think if groups survive it, because obviously now it's a process, they might come out the other end being like, how can I put this, the effects what they could have had being in their former state probably won't be the same, like us now. If we was to change our image we have, the system would want it to be, we'd probably just be an outlet of Connexions or an outlet of youth offending teams or an outlet of youth services. The young people would see us how they see them, which they probably do now anyway […] We have to do stuff which we don't want to do, we've got to compromise our whole credibility within the community, aligning ourselves with certain agencies which the community don't like […] There's nobody in my community who's able enough to challenge youth services in a strategic way.
(VCO 3)

Conclusions

> People like you keep coming along and writing all these reports and it just sits on some bureaucrat's desk and it creates a little pot of money and then he says [to voluntary and community groups], 'here's £5,000, save the world.'
> (VCO11)

The subject of this report emerged from a series of roundtable events held in response to the HAC report about the over-representation of black young people in the criminal justice system. At these events there was much interest and optimism about the potential contribution of the VCS to addressing this over-representation. Interviews with voluntary and community providers have revealed a picture of voluntary and community practices which is ambiguous and that demonstrates there are numerous tensions embedded in carrying out voluntary and community work which are largely missing from the public debate about their contribution. These conclusions draw together the findings of this research and raise questions about the challenges currently facing VCOs predominantly working with black young people affected by crime.

It is interesting that nearly all of the voluntary and community providers interviewed reject the definition of their work in terms of ethnicity. Voluntary and community providers have concerns that defining interventions by ethnicity is stigmatising for young people and that it limits the relevance of their organisation. However, longer-established voluntary and community practitioners suggest these ethnicity-neutral accounts are the result of the challenge and marginalisation that VCOs which identify their work with ethnicity face.

Part of the responsibility for this ongoing contentious debate about the role of ethnicity in defining interventions with young people lies in policy ambiguities and positions regarding ethnicity that call for greater scrutiny. There is a tendency for policy documents to discuss ethnicity and the VCS without recourse to clear evidence about:

● the significance of defining interventions and practices by ethnicity

● the (unresolved) causes of black young people's over-representation in the criminal justice system

● the benefits and limitations of the VCS.

Moreover current government expectations about the role and identity of the VCS in relation to ethnicity appear to be contradictory when it comes to black young people affected by crime. As a consequence government strategies to reduce the over-representation of black young people in the criminal justice system emphasise the role of the VCS but do not provide clarity about how this concern translates into supporting voluntary and community-based interventions.

The voluntary and community providers interviewed tended not to give precise definitions about what they did or their approach. This isn't to say that the VCOs interviewed aren't carrying out valuable work with young people, but that these practices are not clearly articulated. Respondents' accounts suggest that this ambiguity is not simply a matter of definition itself being difficult, although aspects of their approach were by their nature difficult to capture, but that ambiguity is an inevitable consequence of the structure in which VCOs operate, which is embedded in compromise and, for some, notable contradiction.

Voluntary and community providers clearly express their values: providing holistic, flexible support, and building relationships with young people based on trust, engagement and relating to young people's lived experiences. Whilst this study has focused on VCOs that predominantly work with black young people, it would not be surprising if a study of other parts of the VCS were to produce

similar findings. These values indicate that providers preferred practice. They do not mean that providers will reject bureaucratically defined programmes or resources which permit limited opportunities to address young people's needs when they are offered. The descriptions given here of funding exchanges which enable bland, generic provision with a questionable ability to address needs suggest that voluntary and community providers are accepting tragic bargains in their constant struggle for sustainability. The extent to which quality practices with young people, which voluntary and community providers clearly passionately believe they are able to provide, can actually take place within the suggested confines of a constant competition for resources and a limited conservative funding culture is concerning.

Much is claimed about the sector as a site of innovative practices and as an alternative to statutory provision. However, these claims appear to stand at odds with providers' accounts about the opportunities the institutional arrangements for their work creates. Providers commonly describe limited scope to develop their practices in a way which is neither circumscribed nor under-funded. The rhetoric used to describe voluntary and community practice creates an illusion that does not match the limited resources - both financial and in terms of those needed to effect change - that providers of VCOs predominantly working with black young people affected by crime describe.

It has also been shown that it makes pragmatic sense for voluntary and community providers, who have no safety net for continuing their work, to leave themselves open to more than one explanation of what they do. Crudely, it allows voluntary and community providers a higher denominator of appeal and, a greater prospect of financial support for their work. However, according to their own accounts, does this come at a less widely recognised cost to the sector? In building a consensus for their work are VCOs adding to ambiguity about their purpose and spin about their practices?

Future directions

Whilst any assessment of the impact of statutory commissioning is premature, providers' accounts of their relations with statutory agencies indicate the following points are worthy of attention, given the growing prospect of these arrangements.

Firstly, many of the VCOs interviewed are uncomfortably positioned between hard-pressed local communities and statutory agencies. They are the organisation in the middle, seeking credibility from both for their survival. Will the proposed strategy to capacity build small VCOs to engage in statutory contracts increase the distance between these organisations and those young people accessing them, a closeness that providers considered vital to defining their benefits for young people?

Secondly, voluntary and community providers had considerable criticisms and grievances regarding their current partnerships with statutory organisations. No one mentioned the Compact, which was established to address this very issue. If VCOs are not to be 'used and abused' by statutory contracts, are the current safeguards for the sector adequate? Or do the additional sensitivities of closer partnerships with statutory bodies call for new structural arrangements, such as an independent ombudsman overseeing contractual funding?

Finally, as the quote at the start of this section illustrates, there is some scepticism amongst providers about the value of research. It was evident some VCOs predominantly working with black young people affected by crime feel they and the young people who access their organisation are over-consulted and over-researched. Some providers also implied that they felt disengaged from research agendas as they had not found them beneficial to their work. Meanwhile, there are clear gaps in understanding and knowledge about voluntary and community work and significant new structural circumstances for VCS organisations working in criminal justice. Moreover, it is striking that the voluntary and community practitioners interviewed were not always in a strong position to advocate clear messages about the VCS as a site of quality alternative practices with young people. These scenarios suggest future research with the VCS has a potentially valuable role to play in developing and protecting quality practices with young people but that there are barriers to these collaborations taking place. How can sensitive, robust collaborations between the VCS and the research community be encouraged?

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This report explores the experiences of voluntary and community organisations (VCOs) that are predominantly working with black young people affected by crime in England.

Based on interviews with individuals from 16 VCOs, providers' accounts are discussed in relation to three main issues:

● The explicit role of ethnicity in voluntary and community work
● Providers' presentation of the outcomes and benefits of their approach
● Providers' attitudes to resourcing their work and the implications of their funding environment.

These accounts are considered in a wider policy context in which VCOs have been identified as having an important role in addressing the over-representation of black young people in the criminal justice system.

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