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'The first initial bit was trying to get her to speak to me': trauma informed relationship-based practice with female offenders in care

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ABSTRACT

This article reports on findings from a research project that explored how youth offending practitioners applied a trauma-informed approach to relationship-based practice when working with girls who were in both State care and contact with the Criminal Justice System in England. The study was conducted in three local authorities, using semi-structured interviews with 20 youth offending practitioners. The findings suggest effective youth offending practice with this group of young women is distinctive in prioritising complex welfare needs as a route to addressing offending. This is managed in practice through developing strong and supportive relationships that are individualised and led by young women. This bespoke approach to criminal justice practice presents challenges to the traditional care/control dichotomy and adds to the developing discussion around ambiguities of role when addressing vulnerabilities through a criminal justice lens. It also discusses ethical issues when considering wider systemic structures around these girls and their future pathways. Finally, the article argues that an explicit intersectional trauma-informed approach reframes youth offending practice and allows practitioners to navigate the inherent tension in the care and control dichotomy, creating relationships that are containing, predictable and safe for young women in care with histories of trauma.

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Introduction

The findings from this article are drawn from a doctoral study which examined how the youth criminal justice system works with girls and young women in State care and how this response is gendered (see Humphery, 2019). This set of findings focuses on the application of a gendered trauma-informed approach to relationship-based practice. The findings argue that an effective trauma-informed approach requires the inclusion of an intersectional lens and that this reframes traditional understandings of offending behaviours in young people. Therefore, an intersectional trauma-informed approach centres youth offending practice on the impact of trauma and in doing so reconstructs approaches to youth criminal justice.

Prior to the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 in England and Wales the Youth Offending Service (YOS) was a part of social services and practitioners were predominantly social work trained (Urwin, 2018).

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However, New Labour's restructuring of the YOS saw a shift to focusing on 'results', prescriptive practice and achieving key performance indicators. This pushed prioritisation towards a more criminal justice, risk-focused service. More recently the YOS have promoted a welfare-led approach to justice with the prioritisation of Haines and Case's (2015) 'Child First' model. However, the focus on 'results' – particularly around desistence – remain and authors argue that because of this the YOS is unable to detangle itself from being a risk focussed service (Briggs, 2013; Day, 2023). Hence, despite youth justice being rooted in social work values, contemporary organisational structures remain focussed on crime reductions which 'creates questions around what youth justice work should do, and what the best way of reducing crime is' (Urwin, 2018, p. 135).

Compounding this the success of New Labour's *Youth Crime Action Plan* (Home Office, 2008) reduced the number of young people entering the youth justice system for the first time. This has meant that the remaining youth justice population has been made up of a small pool of young offenders who have highly complex needs (Bateman, 2014). This includes an overrepresentation of young people in State care (Taylor, 2016). Government-led research examining this over-representation identified risks and resilience factors faced by children in State care in engaging in offending behaviours but did not distinguish between gendered pathways (Youth Justice Board 2016).

The small body of literature on girls involved with the YOS in England and Wales depicts young women who are likely to have multiple, complex, and intersecting trauma histories and welfare needs (Arnull & Eagle, 2009; Batchelor, 2005; Sharpe, 2012; Staines et al., 2024). They are also more likely to be care experienced when compared to their male counterparts (Prison Reform Trust, 2016). Two thirds of girls in custody are care experienced compared to a third of the boys and 31% of the adult female prison population have a care history compared to 24% of the adult male population (House of Commons Justice Committee, 2016). This suggests that there are complex, interconnected factors indicating a unique relationship between being in care, being female, engaging in offending pathways and potentially for those pathways to become more entrenched, leading into the adult criminal justice system.

Research also recommends that the unique needs and pathways of girls who offend are considered in practice approaches with them and that effective practice is necessarily gendered (see Burnett & McNeill, 2005; Dowden & Andrews, 2004; Fitzpatrick, 2017; Mason & Prior, 2008; Rex, 1999; Sharpe, 2012; Staines et al., 2024; Taylor, 2006, 2016; Umamaheswar, 2012). Despite this however, the Prison Reform Trust (2016, p. 15) highlights that 'there are concerns about the extent to which the needs of looked after girls are addressed in the criminal justice system because they represent a very small proportion of the whole'.

In more recent years the consideration of the impact of psychological trauma on offending has come into focus for policy and practice in England and Wales (see Home Office, 2018; YJB, 2017). This is considered particularly significant when working with children in care who offend. The 2018 *National Protocol on Reducing Unnecessary Criminalisation of Looked-After Children and Care Leavers* recommended that 'all professionals working with looked-after children and care leavers should understand the impact of trauma and abuse on development, particularly their effect on emotional and behavioural development and self-regulation' (Home Office, 2018, p. 9).

The concept of psychological trauma refers to experiences of harm and loss that are unresolved and continue to impact on thinking, feeling and behaviour (Mendes, et al. 2014; YJB, 2017). Exposure to trauma has negative impacts on abilities to regulate emotions and interpersonal development (Ford et al., 2012) and is correlated with engaging in certain offending pathways (Dierkhising et al., 2013).

Addressing psychological trauma originated within the field of psychotherapy (see Briere, 1992; Van der Kolk, 1988, 2014). These foundational theories propose that individuals who are exposed to psychological trauma particularly on a repeated basis are at risk of developing a hyperactive parasympathetic nervous system response, which has negative impacts physically, cognitively, emotionally, behaviourally, and psychologically. When an individual is exposed to trauma in childhood this can also impact development, and individuals can re-experience these traumas when triggered on a conscious and/or unconscious level.

Therapeutic interventions for trauma recovery aim to support individuals in processing their experience neurologically. Foundational to these interventions are the recognition of the importance of environment and relationships. For an individual to be able to process their trauma safely the trauma cannot be ongoing, and their environment, daily lives and relationships should be predictable and secure.

Trauma-informed practice is based on these fundamental principles and is guided by certain elements of trauma recovery therapeutic interventions. Trauma-informed practice originates in the Substance Abuse and Mental Health sector in the United States of America (SAMHSA, 2014) but soon applied to other service sectors, including youth offending practice (see Branson et al., 2017; Day et al., 2023; Evans et al., 2020; Haqanee et al., 2015; Skuse & Matthew, 2015). The application of a trauma-informed approach is founded on a belief that individuals need to process their trauma before they can make successful behaviour changes.

In Wales, the 'Trauma Recovery Model' (TRM) was developed by Skuse and Matthew (2015) drawing on their work with young offenders in Secure Children's Homes. This was then adapted by Evans et al. (2020) to work with young offenders in the community, of which are the majority of the youth offending population. This approached was coined 'Enhanced Case Management' (ECM). The evaluation of the pilots of ECM in both England and Wales found that although the young people and the practitioners in these pilots described this model as helpful, reoffending rates were not impacted (see Cordis Bright, 2017; Opinion Research Services, 2023).

Hence, despite trauma-informed approaches to youth offending practice being promoted at an international level (see Branson et al., 2017; Day et al., 2023; Haqanee et al., 2015) the nuances around how to apply a trauma-informed approach to youth offending practice requires careful consideration. As Branson et al. (2017) found in their examination of recommendations of a trauma-informed juvenile justice system in the United States of America, if these nuances are not addressed the role of youth offending will continue to be ambiguous and is unlikely to be consistently and successfully applied to practice.

One element of addressing these nuances includes developing an understanding of gendered pathways. In their recommendation of applying a trauma-informed approach to practice neither the Youth Justice Board (2017) nor the national protocol (Home Office, 2018) considered how gender may impact this. Similarly, the TRM and ECM did not consider gender in their trauma-informed practice models (Evans et al., 2020; Skuse & Matthew, 2015). This paper considers the role of gender in the application of a trauma-informed approach to youth offending practice with girls who are also in State care, focussing on the role of the professional relationship.

Methodology

Ethical approval for this study was granted through the University of East Anglia, School of Social Work Research Ethics Committee. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 youth offending practitioners between November 2017 and May 2018. These practitioners were employed across three local authorities and had between 2- and 13-years' experience in practice, with an average of 6.5 years. All had worked with female offenders in care. Of the 20 practitioners interviewed 19 identified as female. In terms of professional backgrounds, the sample was made up of 7 social workers, 4 probation officers, 3 youth workers, 4 with certificates in effective youth justice, 1 teacher and 1 police community support officer.

The demographics of the girls selected by participants for discussion were varied. They were aged between 13 and 17 years old with the most common age being 15. In relation to ethnicity, one case discussed was of a girl of Asian descent, two were of mixed heritage (white British/Caribbean), three were described as black British, one was Hispanic, and one was described as European. The remaining 12 young women were described as White British. Two of the girls were described as identifying as lesbian.

In terms of the care history of the girls discussed, 13 of the young women were in residential care at the time of the offending, four were in foster care and one had recently moved from foster care to residential care. One young woman was in secure accommodation. One was placed in special guardianship, and one was in semi-independent accommodation.

Individual case histories showed complex pathways into care through troubled and often abusive family lives, in which loss and trauma dominated. Drug misuse, violence and mental health problems interacted with these family histories. The girls also experienced significant loss via parents or significant guardians (sometimes grandparents) either abandoning them or passing away. However, despite these significant experiences of abuse and trauma many of the girls felt protective of their families – in particular their mothers and younger siblings – and would often abscond from placements to return home. Most girls had histories of sexual abuse, and many had histories of self-harm and attempted suicide. In most cases, concerns about risks of sexual exploitation were raised by the practitioners interviewed.

Most girls came into care in middle childhood or adolescence. Offending behaviour for some had started prior to coming into care, most often shoplifting, but in many of these cases, offending behaviours became more serious once in care, and often included assaults on residential staff. Attempts to distance girls from family members or peers who put girls at risk sometimes led to remote placements in residential care which created its own problems, with girls running away, for example, or missing education and experiencing deteriorating mental health and self-harm. Risks of violence, sexual abuse and exploitation often persisted in care as girls became involved with partners who threatened them.

In terms of the offending patterns, 14 of the 20 young women discussed were sentenced for assault charges. Of these assault charges, 8 were perpetrated towards care staff, four towards family members, including a mother, and two were perpetrated against peers. Other charges included criminal damage (all in care homes), arson with intent to endanger life, burglary, grievous bodily harm, possession of a weapon, drug trafficking, and shop theft. Two young women were in or had been in custody, whilst the rest were in the community.

The research questions included:

1. What do youth offending practitioners consider to be the welfare and offending needs of female offenders in care?
2. What challenges do youth offending practitioners face when working with female offenders in care?
3. What do youth offending practitioners consider as effective practices when working with female offenders in care?
4. What are the implications for the future of frontline youth offending practice?

The research questions guided the semi-structured interview schedule, which allowed practitioners to discuss their experiences and perceptions of their work with girls in care.

The data was then analysed using 'constructionist thematic analysis' (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 85), which provided rich insights into practitioners' frontline experience. Constructionist thematic analysis is not primarily concerned with individual meaning and psychologies but rather aims to investigate the structural and sociocultural context which enable individual accounts to make sense (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This method of analysis allows for the exploration of themes and connects them with wider sociocultural constructions, such as gender, crime and punishment.

Findings: the role of relationship-based practice

The 'relationship' between the girl and the youth offending practitioners in this study was constructed as being both gender specific and key to creating an environment where more traditional youth offending practice could be completed, such as victim empathy and anger management.

According to the practitioners, it is the relationship that facilitates an environment where work directed by the courts can be completed.

Although practitioners reported that relationships are important in youth offending practice with young men, being able to complete more 'traditional work' was not seen as being dependent on having built a relationship with them, as it was with female offenders – particularly those in care. As a result, it was difficult for workers to envisage being able to complete court-directed work without an established relationship with these young women.

Although it is not specified on court orders or recorded as a specific goal in assessments, building relationships was highlighted as youth offending 'work' in and of itself and described as essential for effective practice with female offenders. Building, maintaining, and ending relationships was therefore constructed as a gendered process, linked to care histories, and considered an essential part of the job. These relationships were also unique in their approach to and prioritisation of the impact of trauma.

Engagement: working with resistance

Key to engagement was understanding that female offenders from care presented with previous experiences of rejection. This rejection was at least two-fold. Being in care meant that they were likely to have experienced rejection from their birth family, which in many cases was ongoing and something that needed to be managed within the professional relationship. Additionally, the current structure and pressures on services risked repeating this pattern of rejection through changes in social workers, multiple placement moves and not feeling heard by the courts.

Practitioners found that previous experiences of rejection could result in young women having difficulty in trusting professionals. Because of this, earning trust takes time and the young women may resist engaging until this trust is built.

Managing this lack of trust was initially achieved by focusing exclusively on the relationship, rather than the traditional work set by the courts. Accounts suggest that practitioners would often spend the first few weeks or months in sessions just being present with the young women.

> The first initial bit was trying to get her to speak to me [laughs]. Which took a couple of weeks … she was very distrusting of professionals … So initially we just sat, and we did jigsaw puzzles and we didn't speak about offending or anything else
>
> – *Participant 5 (female, experience 5 years, probation officer)*

This gradual process of getting past initial resistance at the pace of the young women appeared to contrast with more typical youth offending work. Due to the mandated nature of youth offending practice, engagement is often considered the responsibility of the offenders themselves. They are mandated by the courts to attend the YOS and complete certain 'behaviour change work'. Therefore, non-engagement can put young people in breach of the conditions of their criminal order. Yet in these accounts, the resistance to engaging in youth offending work is almost expected from female offenders and engaging them was constructed as the responsibility of the worker themselves. No practitioner described the resistance to engage as a lack of motivation to change. Rather this resistance is described as self-protection and a justifiable response to experiences in the girls' background.

> The first 18 months that we had … that was really hard work. And she wouldn't really engage with anything or any kind of format. There was no kind of getting around that and I think that was just to do with her own resistance to engaging and not wanting to open herself up to another professional.
>
> – *Participant 2 (female, experience 4.5 years, social worker*)

By taking histories of trauma into consideration practitioners reframed 'non engaging behaviour' as an understandable reluctance to trust professionals rather than an unwillingness to want to change or take responsibility for their actions.

Practitioners described that giving the young women choice and control over the sessions also assisted in building relationships and navigating initial resistance. Practitioners understood that

female offenders from care may have experienced limited power and choice in their lives. Therefore, this approach was described as empowering the girls by giving them a sense of agency through letting them set some of the boundaries. This included how long sessions will be, where they will be held or what the focus would be.

> That gave her an element of control in it, rather than say if I turned up today and said 'Morning … today we are going to do victim work' she would just turn around and tell me where to go. Whereas if I turned up and I said, 'Right ok, these are our three choices we've got victim work, thinking and behaviour work or whatever which one do you want to do' she would then pick, and she'd get on with it.
>
> – *Participant 5 (female, experience 5 years, probation officer)*

Being flexible to some degree about time was also part of working in a negotiated partnership and empowering these young women to become active agents within this space.

> One girl I finished with recently, she'd always give me a time when she'd come in and she went 'I'm going to be gone in half an hour' and I'm like OK. She just feels like she needed control of the situation … we'd sit and talk and she'd always be there longer than half past, until she remembered that she said that at the beginning and then she'd be like right I'm going now and that'd be it, she'd be off. But that's just her way of trying to control the situation.
>
> – *Participant 3 (female, experience 4 years, social worker)*

Although they did not use this term, what practitioners described in these accounts are examples of a trauma informed approach. Practitioners considered how the girls trauma histories could impact their behaviour and adjusted their practice accordingly. This space then became safe and containing as the session content was in the control of the young women themselves. Hence, by applying a trauma informed framework, practitioners could reframe the 'control' aspect of mandated attendance to be one of providing 'containment' for traumatised young women.

Maintaining relationships: creating safety through boundaries

Once initial trust had been built, practitioners were then faced with maintaining these relationships. With the aim of not repeating previous experiences of rejection by services, practitioners' accounts emphasised the importance of 'sticking with a case'. If a young woman reoffended it was thought to be imperative that the same practitioner continued working with her. This allowed trust to be sustained within the relationship and demonstrated to the girls that the worker would not give up on them. In doing so practitioners felt this counteracted previous experience of rejection, which was considered especially significant to those who had experienced multiple placement moves.

> Enabling her to feel that actually she wasn't being judged that you know we were taking everything into consideration and yep, she might have a blip and she might have another offence and we would go to court … but her relationship would carry on as it was before, you know, that we treated her fairly.
>
> – *Participant 4 (female, experience 4 years, probation officer)*

However, practitioners also stressed the importance of setting appropriate boundaries. The setting of appropriate boundaries takes into consideration the impact of trauma and the fact that many of the young women in care came from homes that were neglectful and they may not have experienced clear boundaries before. Practitioners felt that many of the girls internalised the lack of boundaries from birth families as not being cared for. As a result, they constructed the setting of appropriate boundaries that were fair, consistent, predictable and trauma informed as an expression of care. This was considered as assisting the maintaining of the relationship.

With the creation of these appropriate boundaries, the relationships became a safe place for female offenders to express their frustration and emotions. Emotional outbursts were considered positive, as they were reflective of how comfortable the young person felt within the boundaries of the relationship. Practitioners did not consider these outbursts as genuine threats, nor did they consider them personal. Rather, they saw a female offender who was struggling with regulating her emotions due to her history of trauma. They also reported that by not treating these outbursts

as a genuine threat the situation did not escalate and therefore the working relationship was not risked. This also provided room for a discussion with the young person around emotional regulation and became a gateway to completing the court-mandated work.

> she'd feel comfortable enough to scream and shout at us but then apologise afterwards and say 'I'm just really upset' or 'I'm angry' or be able to verbalise her emotions and what she was thinking and feeling but also to be able to trust us with stuff and enable us or allow us to challenge her as well
>
> *– Participant 4 (female, experience 4 years, probation officer)*

Although mandatory engagement in youth offending does remove the individual's liberties and is linked to their punishment, when prioritising the impact of trauma this mandated space, and the appropriate boundaries created within them, can be productive and containing. Girls who offend and children in care who offend in England and Wales are likely to have experienced unstable home lives (Sharpe, 2012), have insecure attachments (Schofield et al., 2014; Taylor, 2006) and when in care can experience multiple placement moves (Schofield et al., 2014). Therefore, the mandated nature of the YOS and the trauma-informed appropriate boundaries set can provide consistency and predictability in a life that may very well be chaotic.

Ending relationships: facing an ethical challenge

Practitioners discussed needing to manage carefully the ending of relationships they had built with female offenders in care, which included planning the ending early and starting to reduce contact early. However, in many cases reducing frequency of contact caused anxiety for the young women who had established strong relationships with their worker:

> I said look yeah you can go from weekly to fortnightly now; No, I don't want to; Ok but you've done really well; Yeah, I know but I'm used to seeing you every week and I want to keep it that way.
>
> *– Participant 5 (female, experience 5 years, probation officer)*

The paradox here is that the more the girl improves, the more likely the supportive contact will be reduced. Practitioners grappled with the ethics of this process and the potential negative impact this could have on female offenders.

> I did, in supervision raise those concerns that she may be over attached in the relationship that she had with me and that she might struggle to end that, which was the reason we were offering the voluntary appointments and I wonder now whether her cancelling those appointments and then reoffending, whether that had an impact on her reoffending. I think that she, when she finds somebody that she trusts, she finds it very hard to let go of that person … she wouldn't have done the work if that relationship wasn't there, but I am not sure that she was able to let go of that really. And I am not sure that that is a positive for her.
>
> *– Participant 10 (female, experience 4.5 years, probation officer)*

> I found it really difficult to encourage her to let go. She became really, really attached to me … she didn't want to let go because I was someone that she could trust and someone that is constant, exactly what we were trying to work to build. We built that and almost it's a bit unfair really … you build a good relationship with someone and then only to say actually that's enough now.
>
> *– Participant 9 (female, experience 10 years, certificate in effective youth justice)*

Some workers discussed how their YOS navigated this by providing a semi 'drop in' services for these young women post their criminal order. Accounts relayed instances of young women voluntarily dropping into the YOS or calling their ex-worker when they needed support. This is an interesting role for a YOS to play in a young person's life but is also illustrative of the strength and quality of the relationship practitioners built with these young people.

> I had a girl come back not too long ago that I hadn't worked with for a couple of years and she came back because she got her cheek pierced and it had got infected and I just thought, you know like, I hadn't had contact with her but I thought that says a lot that like this service is the one place that she could think of to get help.
>
> *– Participant 8 (female, experience 5 years, social worker)*

Despite being able to provide this level of support to young people, practitioners struggled with the ethics of this support being provided by a criminal justice service. This tension reflects dilemmas within the ambiguities of the role of the YOS. Typically, meeting welfare needs is within the remit of social services and youth offending services prioritise desistence from offending. However, the practitioners in this research suggested that some young people are unable to build effective relationships with their social workers as a result of multiple placement moves, high turnovers of staff and reduced support provision caused by austerity measures. Therefore, the youth offending worker became the stable, supportive, welfare-focused professional in the young person's life. Although criminal justice practitioners may not seem the most appropriate service for these young women from care, they were constructed as the best or only option currently available in austerity Britian.

> They just want to know that they can call you if they are having a bad day or just come in and see you once. They might want help with an application for things or just to see you really because sometimes we are more consistent than the care staff because sometimes they have quite a high turnover of staff, especially if they are out of county. They might not even know their social workers because they keep changing the allocations. So sometimes, as sad as it sounds, we can be the most consistent thing for the young person.
>
> *– Participant 6 (female, experience 8 years, social worker)*

Building secure, containing relationships within the current structure of the YOS therefore raises some concerning ethical challenges. Practitioners raised concerns that the behaviour of some female offenders were indicative of fear of loss and that they may reoffend when the order is near completion to maintain these relationships. Furthermore, it is established in the literature that becoming involved with the current criminal justice system is the single, highest predictor for further involvement (see Bateman, 2014; Goldson, 2013; McAra & McVie, 2007; McGhee & Waterhouse, 2007). This suggests then that although the youth offending practitioner can and does become a protective secure base for girls who in care, the very fact of the court-ordered involvement with the YOS is putting them at risk of further engagement with the criminal justice system.

Reframing youth offending practice: an intersectional trauma-informed approach

Prioritising the impact of trauma in youth offending practice changes the question from 'what did you do and how can we prevent you from doing it again' to 'what happened to you and how can we address it'. This is not suggesting that offending behaviour is excused, but rather it suggests that a trauma-informed approach reframes how offending behaviour is understood (Briggs, 2013; Dunkel, 2014; McGhee & Waterhouse, 2007; Skuse & Matthew, 2015). As Evans et al. (2020, p. 63) argue a trauma-informed approach proposes that 'if the developmental needs of the child can be met, the presenting problems will begin to fade'.

A trauma-informed approach also rejects the construction of care and control as dichotomous, but rather places these binary positions as complementary and necessarily integrated to provide effective support. When directed to prioritise the impact of trauma, control does not have to be punitive but can be beneficial and practice can be reframed as providing safety, predictability, and containment rather than punishment.

A trauma-informed approach is also necessarily gendered. As society at large remains far from being gender neutral, so is the criminal justice system. Spacey & Thompson (2022, p. 20) argue alongside individual, familial and generational trauma, trauma can also be experienced and impacted by structural oppression. Girls who offend are required to negotiate gendered systemic barriers within a criminal justice system that is dominated by boys and men and therefore to better understand girls' behaviour and how best to respond to them, recognising the intersection of gender is essential. Implementing a trauma-informed approach which does not consider the Black feminist theory of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) risks ignoring the impact of gender and will 'inevitably prioritise the male majority' (Fitzpatrick, 2017, p. 143). Hence, an effective approach considers the impact of trauma beyond the individual and recognises how this can be impacted by wider social structures.

This can mean that when considering the profile of girls in care, the impact of trauma and the intersection of gender, many of the traditional youth offending practices may not be appropriate. For example, practitioners found that victim empathy was not an issue with most of the young women they discussed. Rather, practitioners considered that the girls in care they worked with often felt immense guilt for their offending behaviours, which led them to feel that victim empathy work was inappropriate due to concern for the girls' emotional well-being. When this is considered alongside the established literature which suggests that girls who commit crimes against a person tend to have complex relationships with the victim (see Larsson, 2019), traditional victim empathy work does not seem suitable. Rather than lacking empathy for their victims, offending behaviours of girls in care may be linked to unconsciously driven responses due to their unaddressed trauma being triggered. For example, a girl may be emotionally invested in a relationship with a peer which takes a negative turn. This may cause feelings of rejection to be triggered which they may respond to with violence. Hence, their offending behaviour will not be addressed by building on their ability to empathise with the victim – it is likely that they already have this ability. More appropriate work would focus on addressing unprocessed trauma and recognising triggers.

Therefore, effective youth offending practice with female offenders in care is intersectional, welfare focused, flexible and informed by an understanding of their experiences of trauma, as opposed to prescriptive practice that is narrowly focused on the offence itself.

Conclusion

The successful reduction in the number of young people entering the youth justice system in England and Wales has meant that youth offending practitioners are more likely to be working with more 'entrenched' young offenders who present with complex welfare needs. Compounding this, the impact of austerity measures in Britain has seen wide cuts on the welfare state, and this has led to a crisis in health and social services, including the wider criminal justice service (see Grootegoed & Smith, 2018; Rogowski, 2021).

Therefore, the work youth offending practitioners are doing needs to be reconsidered and adjusted to address the changing demographics of the youth justice population and the harsh funding climate faced by children's services. Government recommendations recognise some of these challenges and suggest embracing a trauma-informed approach (see Home Office, 2018; YJB, 2017). However, the translation of this into practice is still in its infancy and the nuances around prioritising the impact of trauma in criminal justice practice are not clearly addressed, as evidenced in the evaluation of the ECM pilot in England and Wales (Cordis Bright, 2017; Opinion Research Services, 2023). Therefore, the lack of clarity around the role of the YOS when working with traumatised young people remains.

Addressing these nuances has implications for wider youth offending practice. For a trauma-informed approach to be successful, what is constructed as a 'successful intervention' requires reframing. Rather than measuring success as achieving key performance indicators which focus on reoffending rates and completion of criminal orders, a trauma-informed approach considers the micro interventions focused on the professional relationship. Many of the 'soft outcomes' that are currently invisible in the evaluation of work done by the YOS, such as building trust in a relationship or feeling ready to engage in therapy, are the interventions that practitioners in this study suggest have the biggest impact on girls in care. This needs to be recognised so that it can be caught within the evaluation of the work the YOS do.

The YOS also do not act in a silo and as suggested in national protocols (see Home Office, 2018), a trauma-informed approach is going to be much more effective if the approach is taken by all the systems around the young person. This way the services provided to young women and girls in care will not be contradictory or overlapping – but rather consistent. It also means that the service sector as a whole becomes a secure base for young women and that the sharing of resources

within the services assists in providing consistent and predictable support that the young women can then rely on. These are all essential for trauma recovery.

To achieve this, services will need to come together for shared training on trauma and the links to offending and wider problems in education and mental health. Given the challenging nature of this work, professionals within teams and across agencies could also benefit from the 'team as a secure base' model which is based on mutual support, promoting emotional resilience and avoiding burnout (Biggart et al., 2017). Taking this approach does not only have benefits for the girls themselves, but it will also provide benefits to the professionals. Working with trauma will require professionals to be aware of the impact of vicarious trauma and having an established care team can provide this type of support.

It is also important that this approach to addressing trauma applies an intersectional lens and that this is made explicit and included in the training. Without this, a trauma-informed approach risks minimising the impact of gender, race, class, ethnicity, sexuality, ability, etc. and its interaction with trauma.

Limitations

Since the project focused on how youth offending practitioners experience their practice with young women in care, outcomes for the young women, including their experience of the service, were not part of the study. However, the case for a trauma informed, relationship-based approach would be more persuasive if the perspectives of girls in care themselves were available.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

Donna-Maree Humphery has a PhD in Social Work which was secured by a departmental scholarship and awarded by the University of East Anglia. Her thesis examines contemporary youth offending practice with female offenders in care and advocates for a trauma-informed approach to criminal justice practice which applies an intersectional lens. Her research interests focus on vulnerabilities and construction of crime; intersectionality and criminalisation; trauma and trauma-informed responses to offenders; child sexual exploitation; the intersection of care experience, gender and criminal justice; experiences of transitions within criminal justice systems. Donna-Maree is also a qualified and registered Social Worker. Donna-Maree is employed as a Lecturer in Social Work at the University of Salford. She is currently the programme leader of the Social Work Masters programme.

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