



USER VOICE

**“BLACK IS GUILTY
IN THEIR EYES”**

**EXPERIENCES OF BLACK AND MIXED
HERITAGE BOYS IN YOUTH JUSTICE SERVICES**

JUNE 2021

A MESSAGE FROM MARK

There are too many black and mixed heritage boys who end up in the youth justice system, it's been a widely acknowledged fact for years. During this consultation, our conversations with these boys only served to further evidence this. What we heard was account after account of the differential treatment they experience by police and courts when compared to their white friends.

As part of the Probation Inspectorate's review, we asked these children about the difficulties they face as black or mixed heritage boys, and if the youth offending services currently provide the support they need. They had little understanding of what they should expect. Some said they didn't need any support at all. Many said it was fine. It's very difficult to fail to provide a service when expectations are set at rock bottom from the start.

We were asking questions they could not answer. In these circumstances, what they did not say is just as important as what they did: they said that they didn't need support, yet we know most will end up reoffending. They said they were happy with the support, yet this was because it was often 'easy', not challenging, and seen to be a better alternative than jail.

"She just checks in with me and leaves me alone"

What could be perceived to be ambivalence and a general level of satisfaction with the service provided is actually a stark demonstration of the absence of support for these boys by public services throughout

their childhood, and throughout their lives as they grow into adulthood, leaving them exposed and vulnerable to further encounters with the criminal justice system.

And whilst they didn't raise racial discrimination by youth offending services specifically as an issue, it was raised again and again about other parts of the system through profiling and stop and search.

"Black is guilty in their eyes"

If we are serious about reducing the number of black and mixed heritage boys ending up in the system and preventing them from coming back, we need a different approach.

It's easy to say that they're just children, they don't know what they need, that adults know best. But that's just not true. They do know. They are the experts in their own lives. They just need to be given the opportunity, encouragement and support to have a voice. And it cannot be a one-off conversation. We need to work with these boys, and invest in them, so that they become part of the solution, not the problem.

Mark Johnson,
Founder, User Voice



CONTENTS

SUMMARY	3
USER VOICE	4
THE PROJECT	4
HOW WE GAVE BOYS A VOICE	5
WHO WE SPOKE TO	6
WHAT THEY SAID	7
SOLUTIONS	14

"It has an effect on me, how society views it as if you're black you act in a certain type of way... you're just thinking how come I get profiled because of the colour of my skin?"



SUMMARY

In this report, we present the experiences of black and mixed heritage boys within youth offending services and partner agencies. The principal objectives of the consultation were to understand their experiences of going through the criminal justice system, and to identify any particular challenges they faced. Moreover, we aimed to assess the effectiveness and quality of the support received from Youth Offending Services.

Overall, we found that the boys spoke extensively about their experiences with the police. **For many, the number of times they had been stopped and searched was attributable to their ethnicity.** They felt that they were disproportionately targeted and profiled by the police in comparison to their white counterparts. It was felt that the profiling young black men experienced could lead to them retreating from society or conforming to the negative stereotype placed on them.

Children’s’ relationship with their YOS plays an important role in their successful progression through and departure from the youth offending system. The boys described these relationships as ok and believed that their YOS worker understood them quite well. Some spoke of the positive influence their YOS worker had on their lives, detailing how they had listened to them, provided advice and been present when needed.

Nevertheless, it was also suggested that issues directly affecting black and mixed heritage boys were not being tackled by the YOSs. **The boys faced a number of challenges specific to their ethnicity, such as profiling, routine stop-and-search and discrimination. However these issues were not widely discussed or addressed by the YOSs.** Other key influences on their offending behaviour, namely their peers, were also not addressed in a concerted way.

Further, the boys had no understanding of what support they should expect from the Youth Offending Services; some believed they didn’t need any support at all. Just 1 in 4

believed that the programmes and interventions they were involved in met their needs.

There are some clear recommendations to Youth Offending Services, from black and mixed heritage boys, on how to improve the services to better meet their needs.

- Acknowledge and address the profiling and discrimination the boys experience in other parts of their lives and in the criminal justice system.
- Providing tailored interventions that give due consideration to the interests and skills of service users, as opposed to a one-size-fits-all approach.
- Assist in navigating the underlying causes of offending behaviours, such as the influence of an individual’s peer group.
- Assess their support needs and provide an individualised plan rather than a ‘box-ticking’ approach.
- Provide guidance and mentoring on the career and educational opportunities available to them as well as the support they need to apply and stick with them.
- Provide simple, easily digested guidance on the criminal justice process and what they should expect at each stage.

NEED FOR PERSPECTIVE

UNSURE WHAT SUPPORT THEY SHOULD GET

The boys had no understanding of what support they should be getting from their YOS worker.

Another common feature across the country was that the boys either did not think that they needed support or could not articulate what support they needed. This is an important factor to consider when assessing positive responses the participants provided towards the YOSs meeting their needs:

“No special needs, I’m ok.”

(Manchester)

“I don’t have any needs, I don’t really ask for anything.”

(Lewisham)

“I don’t really know. I think I’m pretty self-motivated but if I needed help I would ask.”

(Manchester)

“No I don’t.”

(Leeds)

“No needs, I just need someone to have my back.”

(Manchester)

“I don’t know what I needs help towards.”

(Nottingham)

ALL TOO EASY

When speaking to the young people it became apparent that some of the positive views towards the YOS were attributable to how easy they had found the experience. For children who struggled to recognise the support they needed, the lack of intensive or challenging interventions from their YOS worker meant they responded positively towards the staff, even if they were not receiving the support that would ultimately help them to stop reoffending.

One young person explicitly stated that he felt his YOS worker was good because she left him alone.

USER VOICE PEER RESEARCHER:

"What is it that makes your YOS worker good?"

YOUNG PERSON:

"She just checks in with me and leaves me alone...sometimes I might forget to reply, or I get a missed call."

The young person continued explaining that their conversations, though of little substance were positive because he did not feel stressed by her.

USER VOICE PEER RESEARCHER:

"What do you talk about?"

YOUNG PERSON:

"Chats about like what I'm doing on that day or what I've been up to, ask questions to do with my work and that and then questions that she has to ask like filling out forms and stuff like that."

USER VOICE PEER RESEARCHER:

"Do you feel understood, the issues you face?"

YOUNG PERSON:

"I don't know like, we don't really talk about anything, we just talk about what happened with the court that's it."

USER VOICE PEER RESEARCHER:

"Don't talk about your situation?"

YOUNG PERSON:

*"I don't really feel stressed by her or anything."
(Nottingham)*

A similar scenario was outlined by a young person from a different YOS, who stated that he appreciated only being contacted once a month, as opposed to the daily supervision he used to experience. In addition, his relationship with his YOS worker was framed in a positive light even though it appeared there was little actual input from his YOS worker.

"He [YOS worker] is calm, he doesn't tell me what to do... I was meant to report to someone every day, which was boring and not something I wanted to do so I stopped attending. Now I have X, I report once a month which I find easier to do, he understands my point of view."

(Manchester)

Another young person spoke about his experiences at a previous YOS, where he was never challenged regarding his behaviour despite his YOS worker being aware that he was still involved in criminality.

"No, not at all... in London they knew what I was doing but never tried to stop me."



ALTERNATIVE TO JAIL

The outlook of young offenders towards the YOS could be significantly based on its status as an attractive alternative to jail. For that reason alone, they viewed their experience positively, regardless of the support received or impact upon them.

This view can be explicitly demonstrated in the reflections of one boy:

"I mean it was alright."

"That's why, that's why I really didn't mind it (Youth Offending Services) because I knew it was either that or something worse (jail)."

"That's why I did those, might have missed a few but I did go most of the time."



USER VOICE

User Voice is a nationwide UK charity created and run by people with lived experience of the criminal justice system. We exist to reduce offending by working with the most marginalised people in prisons and on probation. We ensure they have the opportunity to be heard, and to influence change.

User Voice operates elected Peer Councils in prisons and the probation service throughout the UK. We give a voice to over 40,000 people per year, including nearly 23,000 in 2020 despite Covid-19 restrictions.

Black, Asian and ethnic minority children are disproportionately represented in the criminal justice system, accounting for 35% of the out-of-court disposal cases and 43% of custody cases but just 18% of the general youth population.

We are proud to enable them to voice their needs, to recognise their worth and to put forward their own solutions, created through experience.

We hope this report will promote greater understanding of the causes behind the over-representation of these children in the justice system. Although it's clear that the problem and the solutions are 'bigger than the YOSs', we highlight the important measures that YOSs can take to help these boys achieve their potential.

THE PROJECT

The overrepresentation of black, Asian and ethnic minority boys in the criminal justice system has received renewed attention in light of The Black Lives Matter debate.

This report was commissioned by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation (HMIP) to assess black and mixed heritage boy's experiences of youth offending services across England and Wales.

In particular, we wanted to know:

- The particular difficulties that black and mixed heritage children experience when supervised by youth offending services.
- The effectiveness of youth offending services at delivering services to children and their families.
- The quality of the services being delivered.

Through this consultation we were able to hear directly from black and mixed heritage boys and present their unfiltered feedback to key decision-makers responsible for managing youth offending services.

This consultation ensures that the evaluation of youth offending services is grounded in the experiences of the children attending those services. It is imperative that we better understand why it is that black and mixed heritage children have worse outcomes than other children attending youth offending services. To do this we must listen and act upon the insights provided by the boys in this consultation.

HOW WE GAVE BOYS A VOICE

Because of their lived experience of prison and probation, User Voice engagement staff are able to quickly and effectively build trusting relationships with service users. Through peer research, we are able to gain the perspective of service users, generating honest and authentic insight. This enables mutual service user and service provider collaboration, providing a positive experience for those who participate.

All peer researchers on this consultation identified as black or mixed heritage. Shared experience enables User Voice staff to connect with black and ethnic minority boys and adopt a sensitive and informed approach.

HOW WE FIND PARTICIPANTS

Due to national lockdown restrictions, User Voice were not able to recruit individuals through our normal approach. This would have been to attend youth offending services and directly engage with the boys, explaining who User Voice are and the value of the consultation, before asking them to participate.

Instead, case managers were responsible for outlining the scope and purpose of the consultation to the boys who then decided if they wished to participate. For those who consented to participate, contact details were then provided to our peer researchers who called the boys to conduct semi-structured interviews.

Whilst this approach enabled the consultation under lockdown restrictions to take place it presented certain challenges. Primarily, it meant User Voice could not influence how many boys were willing to participate in the inspection. User Voice were also reliant on the telephone numbers provided by the YOSs which were sometimes incorrect or unanswered when called.

ENGAGEMENT

We conducted semi-structured interviews with children via telephone. Trained peer researchers engaged service users in conversation and recorded their responses.

We believed it was vital that we adopted a conversational interview approach which allowed our staff to discuss complex topics of ethnicity and discrimination with children. This approach ensured that rich, quality data was collected in a method that accommodated the specific needs of the children we engaged with.

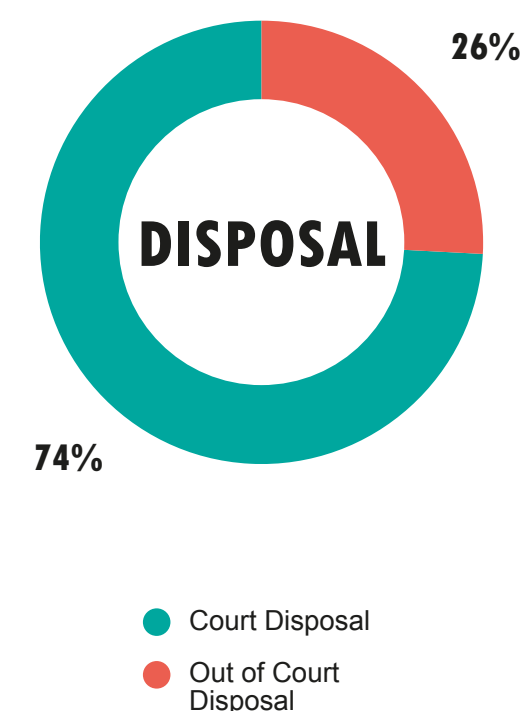
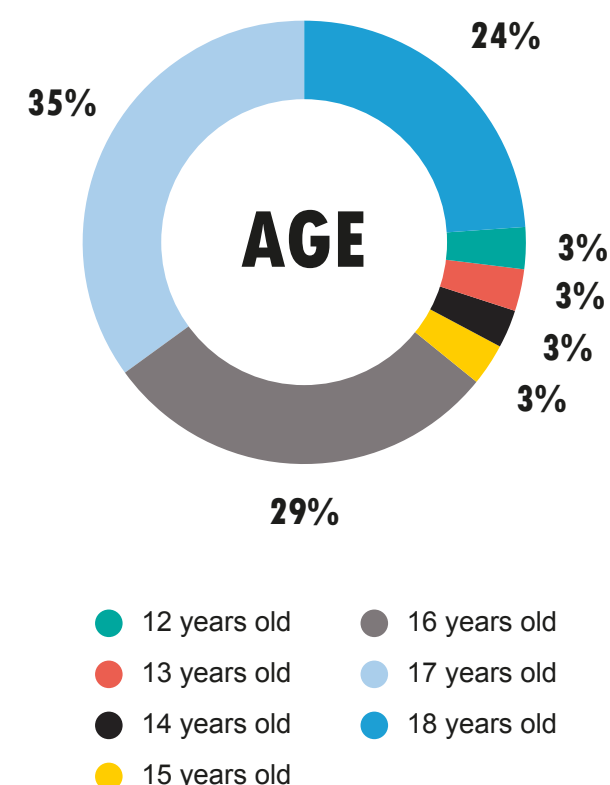
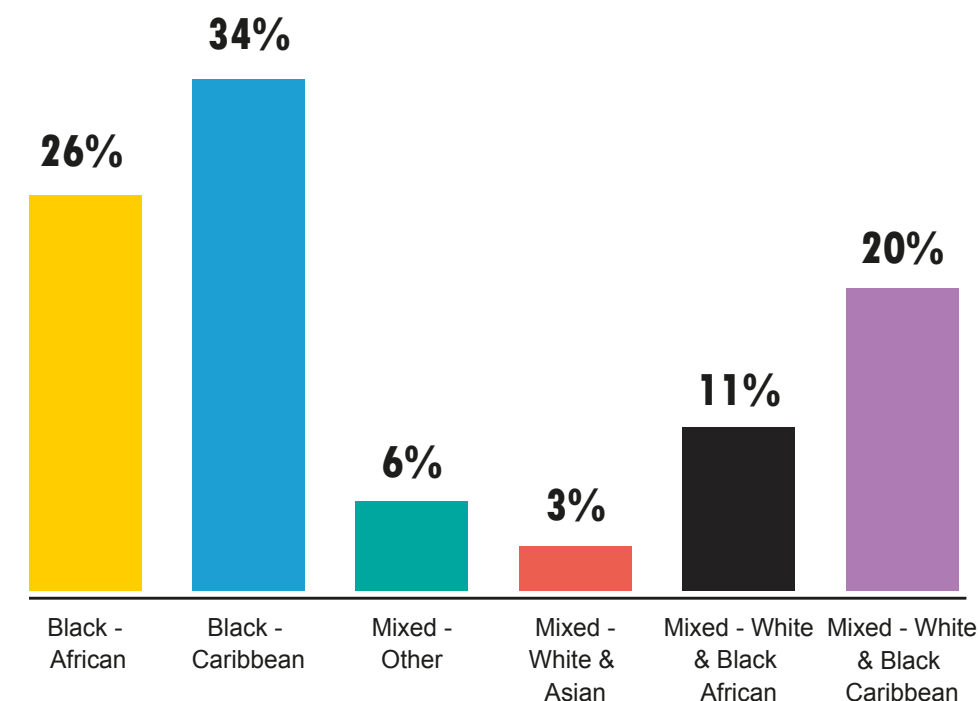
As stated, User Voice staff were not involved in the recruitment of participants and therefore the telephone interview was the first time they had spoken to the boys. Despite the fact that all the boys had consented to the interview, on multiple occasions, the numbers provided were incorrect or unanswered. This reduced the number of young people we were able to hear from. Often, they were not expecting the call or had little information regarding what the purpose of the interview was. Fitting interviews around school and other extra-curricular activities also proved challenging.

WHO WE SPOKE TO

We spoke to 38 children across 9 YOSs for this consultation.

The demographics of those we engaged with are as follows:

ETHNICITY



WHAT THEY SAID

The questions we asked covered a range of subjects relevant to black and mixed heritage boys in contact with YOSs. Through data and unfiltered feedback, we can outline the challenges they face, their experiences of YOSs and what changes should be made to support them out of the criminal justice system and into fulfilling lives.

PARTICULAR CHALLENGES FACED

We identified the following areas as common issues affecting black and ethnic minority children engaged with YOSs.

INFLUENCE OF PEERS:

This consultation spoke to boys in nine YOSs spread across the country. A striking feature, across eight of the nine YOSs (Oxfordshire being the exception), was when the boys spoke about their experiences, they firmly grounded their offending behaviour in their environment and the influence of their peer group. One compared the area where he lived to a 'war zone', where others described the need to defend oneself and spoke about having to avoid certain parts of the city to elude trouble. Some, with the agreement of parents or carers, resorted to moving cities in an attempt to progress and move on with their lives.

EXPERIENCE OF DISCRIMINATION:

The boys were asked specifically about their experiences growing up as black or mixed heritage in society. Some felt that being stereotyped based on their ethnicity led to them being unfairly dealt with by the criminal justice system. In some cases, they believed their charges were unduly severe because of their ethnicity; others felt that they were blatantly treated differently to their white friends. Some of the boys spoke of the systemic racism they experienced in other areas of their lives, such as in school and college, which had led them to drop out.

POLICE STOP AND SEARCH:

The boys also spoke extensively about their experiences with the police. For many, the number of times they had been stopped and searched was attributable to their ethnicity. Some felt "targeted" and "profiled as a drug dealer" by the police due to the colour of their skin, noting that their white counterparts were not stopped and searched to the same extent. The boys we spoke to vividly explained the damaging impact which aggressive stop and search tactics had on them. They felt victimised, anger and frustration and believed that the profiling could lead to them retreating from society or conforming to the negative stereotype placed on them. However, there were significant regional variations with those from London far more likely to speak about being harassed by the police than other areas.

"Sometimes I feel like its targeted because I was the only black person sitting in a park and you're profiled as a drug dealer or you're looking like you're going to commit some type of offence. When, realistically, you're just in the park, trying to have your own space and just get out of the house. ... When they see a white friend, who is wearing the same clothes as me but the policemen wouldn't look their way at all but when they see a black friend. Like if I was to wear an expensive coat I would get stopped and searched by the police because I'm wearing an expensive coat but if a white person was to wear an expensive coat nothing would happen"

(Hackney)

"When I was first arrested, I was with my friend that is a couple years older than me and white. Despite us both being charged and arrested that day he was not on the order with me as the charges were dropped against him, he got N.F.A (no further action) and I was left to suffer the consequences alone. There's no doubt in my mind that if he was black we both would have been in trouble. It didn't even matter about the age difference, the system just stereotyped me as guilty because of the colour of my skin. Black is guilty in their eyes."

(Lewisham)

"The police would stop and search me regularly, despite not finding stuff most of the time, it was frustrating and made me feel victimised. I was angry and annoyed because it just kept happening whenever I went to meet my friends in a certain area, it always felt like a waste of time I mean I was stopped for walking down the road on route to my pal's house. I remember police officers always approaching me two or three at a time and making remarks trying to aggravate the situation, but I never reacted, it was pointless, I had nothing on me during those searches."

(Liverpool)

"It happens all the time when I'm with my white friends, the police don't really go for the white boys, and if they do they just pat them down. With us they make sure they search us proper and always try to pull something off. Now in Nottingham I have not been stopped once... I feel that I get treated better up here because they have no preconception of me, in London they were always trying to harass me to get a response"

(Nottingham)

EXPERIENCES OF YOS'S

Overall, the boys reported broadly positive experiences with the YOSs and felt that the workers 'did their best', however there are many areas where the support they received was insufficient or the intervention was viewed as 'pointless'. From interventions to diversity awareness, this is what the boys had to say.

PROGRAMMES & INTERVENTIONS

A quarter (24%) of the boys we spoke to felt offending programmes and interventions met their needs, whilst roughly half (49%) reported that they sometimes met their needs. Over a quarter (27%) of the boys we engaged stated that programmes and interventions rarely or never met their needs.

The area where the children reported the most progress was in their decision making and understanding the consequences of their actions. They felt that they now understood the wider consequences of their actions on victims and would 'think first'.

"Yeah the work has helped me because back then the certain situations that I think it wasn't that deep or whatever, it's made me realise like how bad it is innit because say for example that same situation that person getting robbed, then I would just think it's just one guy getting robbed and the bank will probably give him money back or whatever. Whereas he could be affected, he could be scared every time he goes round that area or every time it's late he could get scared. So, there's more than one factor to it and I've started like realising that innit."

(Nottingham)

Some spoke positively about the approach of staff who clearly explained questions and concepts and took a more collaborative approach. Others discussed the positive impacts of specific programmes such as music, sport and drug and alcohol courses.

"After completing drugs and alcohol awareness courses I realised I need to wise up and stop experimenting with drink as I end up acting a fool. Although it seemed fun at the time. Getting into trouble made me realise it's not a game and I could end up doing something I regret so I needed to stop and I have."

(Oxfordshire)

NO IMPACT

27% (10) of the boys we engaged stated that programmes and interventions rarely or never met their needs, 49% (18) reported that they sometimes met their needs.

Thus, only 24% (9) of the boys we spoke to felt like the programmes and interventions always met their needs.

The most common response from individuals who were critical of programmes was that they got nothing out of them.

The courses were likened to a box ticking exercise since they did not "address anything relevant" and had no impact on their thinking or behaviour. Others spoke of how they found the programmes repetitive or felt they were already aware of the consequences of their actions, therefore garnering limited value from the rehabilitative elements of programmes. It was felt that the programmes did not address the underlying reasons which were driving their behaviour in the first instance. One individual explained that he was completing a course, which he had no interest in but was not being supported to find alternative, vocational courses.

"I think I was meant to do some type of behaviour course which was one session a week for four weeks but that was a waste of time if you ask me. The conversations did not address anything relevant in my opinion... The course was just a way to keep me busy, the work we were doing did not help with my attitude or behaviour, I done that myself."

(Manchester)

"Nah I didn't think it was worth it, for me it was a waste of time because that part I already knew how deep it was. I already knew everything about that and plus there wasn't anything involved in it for me, so that was a waste of my time to be honest innit."

(Nottingham)

"I don't know because when you're doing something, you know that you're doing something, you already know how the victim feels; don't need victim awareness to tell me how the victim feels because I already know."

(Sheffield)

RELATIONSHIP WITH YOS WORKER

One of the most important elements of support for these boys is their relationship with their YOS worker. Overall, there was evidence of positive support, where their YOS worker listened, were available and gave them the advice that they needed. However, there was also evidence that YOS workers weren't tackling the systemic issues faced by the boys, such as discrimination and police profiling, and that they didn't challenge the boys' offending behaviour.

OK RELATIONSHIPS

The boys we spoke to had quite good relationships with their YOS workers and felt staff understood them quite well.

- 38% stated they had a very good relationship with their YOS worker, whilst 62% felt their relationship was quite good.
- 15% felt their YOS worker understood them very well, whilst 77% stated staff understood them quite well. Only 8% felt that staff did not understand them in any capacity.
- 11% felt staff understood their needs very well, whilst 71% felt staff understood their needs as black/mixed heritage boys quite well. Therefore, only 18% felt that their needs as blacked/mixed heritage boys were not understood well.

When explaining what aspect of their relationship with their YOS worker was beneficial, the boys drew attention to the fact that were listened to and supported by flexible and available YOS workers who showed a genuine interest in them.

- **LISTEN:** The boys stressed how important it was that they felt listened to; one boy explained that being listened to made him feel like an equal to his YOS worker and disrupted the power imbalances often present in the criminal justice system. Another found his conversations with his YOS worker so beneficial that he likened the experience to therapy. He felt the meetings were an "open space" and had encouraged him to think about and address issues, which he had previously suppressed.

- **SHOW INTEREST:** Some noted that YOS workers exhibited a real interest in them as people, and this was often demonstrated by incorporating family welfare within their discussions.

- **ADVISE:** One child admired the honesty and advice his YOS worker provided. It is important to note that the boy stressed that he did not always agree with his YOS worker; though their conversations were not always easy, he respected his YOS worker. Ultimately, their discussions led to him pursuing further education opportunities.

- **AVAILABLE:** Some also expressed the importance of feeling that their YOS worker was available for them, noting that they could contact them for assistance with an issue they needed support with.

- **FLEXIBLE:** An individual appreciated the flexibility of his YOS worker who would book sessions at a time that worked best for him. As well as this, their sessions did not take place in an office or formal setting but involved the pair walking around the local area. In addition to making him feel more comfortable, the boy stated that this flexibility helped the YOS worker gain a better understanding of his life.

- **NON-JUDGMENTAL:** A number of the boys expressed that their YOS worker understood who they were and never judged them.

- **SUPPORTIVE:** The boys detailed numerous examples where their YOS worker had supported them to enter education, training or employment with accessible advice, coordinating work experience or advocating on their behalf in school.

Some of the boys felt that their YOS worker couldn't have done any more for them.

"He [YOS worker] still just kind of made out to me that he would be flexible and do whatever time, so we always agreed on a time. So, when he came to meet me, we kind of just walked around my area, so it was chilled and I still felt comfortable. It wasn't like a meeting kind of thing where I felt there was any pressure. We just maybe walked to the shop, walked in bought an orange juice or something, so to make me feel comfortable so nothing felt weird in that way."

(Oxfordshire)

"Yeah, yeah literally that's what came to my mind it's more like therapy to be fair... we were talking about things that affect me... so that was beneficial to me. It made me understand more things that I didn't really like to think about, different aspects. I actually realise some things were kind of important that I kind of brush off but it was good to talk about it because it kind of made me see things that were beneficial."

(Oxfordshire)

"My YOS worker listens to what I have to say, which I respect because it makes our conversations meaningful. X [YOS worker] always seems to give me good advice and although I do not always see eye to eye with it, I respect the honesty and the effort he puts in to work with me... I'm sure, but I must admit X [YOS worker] is the one that helped see college was an option for me. I already had a job but over time X [YOS worker] slowly pushed me to pursue my interests and look into college courses."

(Manchester)

"She's more than a YOS worker, like I wouldn't expect, like she goes over the top. She gives really good advice. Say I want to do construction or coaching, she'll break it down to me, she helps me with a plan... They told me about what I could sign up for realistically and they helped me get a training mentor thing with Tottenham."

(Haringey)

FAIR TREATMENT — SOME OF THE TIME

The boys were broadly positive when asked if they had been treated fairly as a black/mixed heritage boys by youth offending services.

14% reported that they were treated fairly all of the time, whilst 69% stated they were treated fairly sometimes. 11% reported that they were rarely treated fairly, with only 6% of boys stating that they were never treated fairly.

It should be stressed that, during the consultation, no child felt that they had been discriminated against based on the colour of their skin by any staff member at a YOS.

Some examples of positive approaches to diversity include:

— **BME STAFF:** Two boys noted that their YOS worker was also black, meaning they could better relate to their experiences, such as being stopped and searched by the police. This understanding helped foster a positive relationship between the boy and YOS worker.

“She’s helpful and sees things from my side because she is black, she can relate to the things that are happening out here to black males. It don’t take much for us to be involved in stupid shit, the police will stop and search us for no reason and make us look bad... she is black as well so she can relate to what I’m saying.”

(Lewisham)

— **DIVERSITY AWARENESS:** One child stated that his YOS worker had identified an employment opportunity specifically for black teenagers, which aligned with his interests. He felt this demonstrated that the YOS worker had considered his ethnicity; when the subject arose, the YOS worker spoke comfortably and did not create an awkward atmosphere.

“Yeah, yeah definitely, I can tell that he kind of took that into account as well because he talked to me about Lewis Hamilton because I was talking to him about how I want to get into engineering and vehicle maintenance and stuff when I’m older. So he was talking about how Lewis Hamilton he’s created a programme for young black teenagers to get involved in stuff like that. So he’s understood that there from that perspective but it’s not like he talked to me awkwardly about it, he talked to me in a nice manner, so everything he said, there’s not one thing he said that made me feel uncomfortable to be honest.”

(Oxfordshire)

— **LANGUAGE SUPPORT:** One boy noted that the YOS had been very understanding and supportive, recognising that English was not his first language.

NOT ADDRESSING THE BIG ISSUES

Despite some positive experiences, there was evidence that the relationships with YOS’s were often superficial, and that the children didn’t discuss the root causes of their offending, their experiences of being stopped and searched, or have deeper discussions about their ethnicity and how it impacted their lives.

One of the main features leading to offending, in the eyes of the boys, was the influence of their peer group. It was worrying to hear that this crucial aspect of the boy’s life could be avoided during conversations with their YOS worker if they did not want to discuss it.

“No, I don’t really talk about it [my friendship group and what we get up to], I keep that private.”

(Haringey)

The boys also expressed the damaging effect stop and search had on them but, in the same instance, did not feel that this was an aspect of their life they needed to discuss with their YOS workers. Part of the reason for this was that the boys had almost internalised stop and search as something that simply happened to people like them and that it was not a big issue.

“I’m ready for it, I’m a young black boy so it’s normal. It’s not a good thing because I’m targeted but I’m used to it.”

(Haringey)



USER VOICE PEER RESEARCHER:

“Do you speak about it [stop and search] at the YOS?”

YOUNG PERSON 1:

“No, it’s not that deep.”

YOUNG PERSON 2:

“Nah, not really, there’s no point really.”

(Haringey)

A reason for this may be the limited contact that some boys had with their YOS worker. One boy stated that he appreciated only being contacted once a month, as opposed to the daily supervision he used to experience. In addition to this, his relationship with his YOS worker was framed in a positive light even though it appeared there was little actual input from his YOS worker.

“He [YOS worker] is calm, he doesn’t tell me what to do... I was meant to report to someone everyday, which was boring and not something I wanted to do so I stopped attending. Now I have X, I report once a month which I find easier to do, he understands my point of view.”

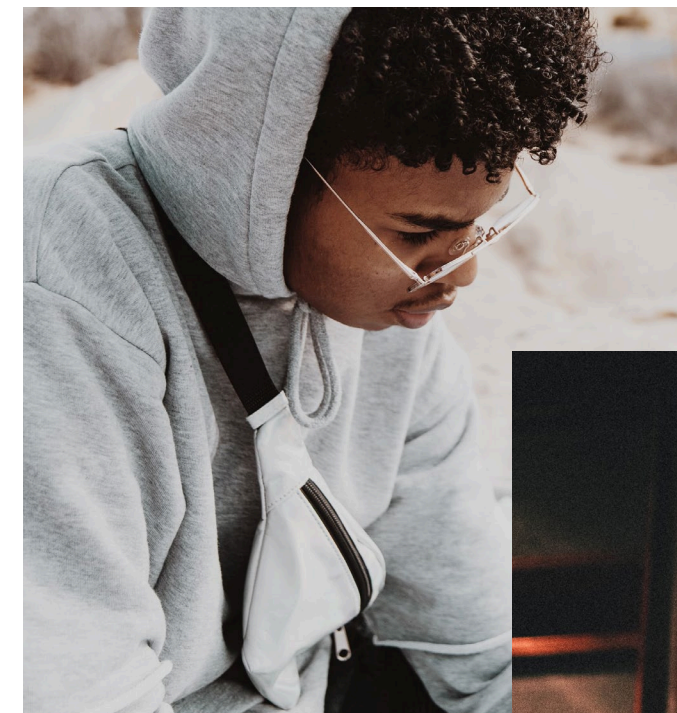
(Manchester)

One individual felt that rehabilitative courses did not address the underlying reasons driving offending behaviour or engage with the reality for many black or mixed heritage boys in the criminal justice system.

The boy explained how he had been stereotyped going through the court system and treated as an older individual based on his appearance. He then reflected on his experiences in prison, where the prisoners were overwhelmingly from ethnic minority backgrounds, whilst the staff were white. He felt courses did not address or even discuss these systemic issues, which contributed to individuals from his background forming a disproportionate percentage of people in the criminal justice system.

“I was made to do victim awareness, which was a waste of time in my opinion I already know what the ripple effect is and being empathic. That stuff does not help me, can’t people see the system does not work if people reoffend... Because I’m mixed west Indian, white and Persian my hair is thick and wavy and I have a full beard and 6ft tall everyone assumes I’m an adult... when I walk into the courtroom I can feel the judges eyes taking me in as a grown man rather than a child... because of my appearance I’m judged. I’ve been to jail and in my opinion 80% of the people look like me, black, I was on a wing with 100 other people and only white people were the staff. What can I do if I look bigger then my age? I have no doubt that the colour of my skin has a big impact on my experience as well.”

(Manchester)





ACKNOWLEDGE AND ADDRESS THE PROFILING AND DISCRIMINATION THE BOYS EXPERIENCE:

Although many of the boys felt supported, there were few instances where their negative experiences in other parts of the criminal justice system or society were discussed, explained or addressed. Although the boys didn't state that this is something they wanted, the boys spoke positively of instances when staff had shown awareness and consideration of their ethnicity. Two boys discussed the positive effects of working with BME staff.



TAILORED INTERVENTIONS:

The activities offered must align with the interests of the child and address their needs so that they see and experience the value of them. Some mentioned doing intervention courses they didn't feel were relevant to their crime.

Many of the boys expressed a passion for music and it was seen as an important method for them to express their identity and experiences in a productive approach. Therefore, the YOSs should consider providing opportunities to attend music courses.

"I think they could offer advice/workshops for things people are interested in. For me its music, I love to write and record music. I'm a rapper would love some tips on ways I could pursue my dream... they would have to be offering something that interests me in order for me to willing interact with them more, hat I could do to further my career as a rapper."
(Manchester)



ADDRESS THE UNDERLYING CAUSES OF OFFENDING BEHAVIOUR SUCH AS PEERS AND ENVIRONMENT:

Peers were identified as the biggest contributor to the boys offending behaviour. Some lived in environments where defending themselves sometimes led to their offences. These issues aren't something that the YOS can fix alone, but the boys did comment on the lack of activities in their area to keep them occupied. The YOSs can help by signposting or organising activities to keep the boys engaged.

"There used to be loads of youth clubs in my area but they got closed down one by one. They were a good way to keep young people engaged and out of harm's way. If I'm honest I miss them and the activities they offered when I was younger."
(Manchester)

"Maybe like actually go somewhere, like day trips, still talk about the thing, the programme but do something more productive. Like it was still fine walking around the area and stuff because even X [YOS worker] is finding out more about where I live because we were walking around different places but even like a bike ride or something more productive would help because it would engage the young person more."
(Oxfordshire)



ASSESSMENT OF SUPPORT NEEDS:

The boys often didn't believe they had any support needs or didn't know what support they should or could be getting. Some of the children were happy with someone checking in regularly to ensure they completed their sentence plan. Others would have liked and benefited from more help, support and guidance, and felt that what was offered was a box ticking exercise. It is important that those who need this additional support are offered it.



GUIDANCE AND MENTORING:

Children need guidance on the career and educational opportunities available to them. It was suggested that this could be achieved through a dedicated team at each YOS who could provide information on the different pathways available. Once the children identify the courses or jobs that they wanted to do, they need support to apply for these and stick with them.

Some of children had specific ambitions and identified the need for a mentor who had achieved what they wanted to achieve and could advise and support them in their efforts.

"I think they should have a network for young people to access and cover a range of different pathways. So instead of the YOS worker having to persuade young people to attend college, there should be a specific team allocated for this purpose, I believe this would make all the difference."

(Manchester)

"I'm currently studying business, criminology and psychology but I want to find a job and leave as I'm bored of studying. I know what I want to do, I want to buy and sell cars and eventually move into property to do the same... I think I could get better support when it comes to finding a suitable career path... It's a way for me to earn money independently and legally. I feel like I need someone to advise me in the world of business, a mentor or coach to guide me through some of my business decisions."

(Nottingham)



GUIDANCE ON WHAT SUPPORT YOSS SHOULD PROVIDE:

A major concern was that the boys had no understanding of what their rights were or what support they should expect from YOSs. There needs to be clear guidance for children on the process, as well as their rights, expectations, responsibilities, and the level of support they should expect to receive.

This report has given voice to the experiences of Black and Mixed Heritage boys within the YOSs. They now need you to move beyond superficial support to finally tackle the systemic challenges they face.





**FOR MORE INFORMATION PLEASE CONTACT:
USER VOICE
20 NEWBURN STREET
LONDON SE11 5PJ**

**TEL: 020 3137 7471
EMAIL: INFO@USERVOICE.ORG
WEBSITE: WWW.USERVOICE.ORG**

© USER VOICE 2021