

Policy, purpose, and pragmatism: dilemmas for voluntary and community organisations working with black young people affected by crime



Helen Mills highlights the contradictions and tensions for organisations in a funding climate that prioritises 'crime reduction' and short-termism.

*In 2007 the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies (CCJS) and the Institute for Criminal Policy Research held a roundtable seminar to discuss the implications of Home Affairs Committee's (HAC) report *Young Black People and the Criminal Justice System (2007)* with a group including voluntary and community organisers, academics, and statutory body representatives. A point of consensus from this event was the perception that innovative and interesting work is taking place in the voluntary and community sector (VCS) with black young people affected by crime, but that these practices are not well documented. To address this ambiguity CCJS conducted research to explore the approaches of voluntary and community groups predominantly working with black young people affected by crime in England.*

This research was published in June 2009. Funded by the Barrow Cadbury Trust, the project included interviewing individuals involved in 16 voluntary and community organisations (VCOs) in four English cities predominantly working with black young people affected by crime.

A year and a half on from the roundtable seminar, the event held to discuss the findings of this research featured a very different discussion about the VCS to that which had instigated this research. In short, the hopeful talk of the potential of the sector was replaced by discussion about the challenges and limitations facing voluntary and community providers.

Against a backdrop of contradictory governmental agendas, our interviews with VCS providers suggest a sector under pressure to engage in funding engages of questionable ability to fully meet young people's needs. The ambiguity about VCS practices which inspired this research in part appears to be the result of a tendency in official reports to idealise the contribution of the VCS without recourse to clear evidence and, it is suggested,

ambiguity is in part an understandable strategy employed by some voluntary and community providers to survive a precarious funding environment.

This article first discusses the policy context for voluntary and community work with black young people affected by crime and before outlining the most striking issue which emerged from our interviews with providers; the conservative funding climate constraining VCOs ability to develop quality work with young people.

Ambiguous, uncertain and contradictory: the policy environment

If we first turn to the HAC report's conclusions about the VCS. The Committee emphasised the role of the VCS to address the overrepresentation of black young people in the criminal justice system. Indeed the VCS is endorsed as:

... already providing many solutions to young black people's over-representation in the criminal justice system.

(HAC, 2007 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). These recommendations recognise long-held, well-established issues for the VCS. However, on closer inspection, the report is not specific about the role the VCS should play in addressing the overrepresentation 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. Indeed, the Committee's conviction that the VCS has a vital role to play in addressing the overrepresentation 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.

The first annual government report on the progress made towards the accepted recommendation of the HAC report suggested VCOs have a role in providing 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 (HM Government, 2008)

However, this encouragement of specialist voluntary and community support for black young people affected by crime runs 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. 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 government accepted this recommendation not to provide single-group funding 'unless there is a clear business and equalities case' (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2008).

There is an obvious tension between the government's classification of the VCS by ethnicity in criminal justice strategies, its encouragement of the VCS to address the (unnamed) specific needs of black communities and the move to restrict local statutory funding for VCOs that identify their work with a particular ethnic group.

Added to this is the uncertainty brought about by developments in the broader relations between the statutory and voluntary sector in criminal justice provision.

The VCS is increasingly being called upon to meet government criminal justice policy objectives and deliver services. The Ministry of Justice and National Offender Management Service recent strategy for working with the VCS over the next three years outlines the key method for engaging with the VCS is statutory sector commissioning of services through a competitive process based on best value (MoJ/NOMS, 2008). Whilst this sets the framework for VCS engagement in general, there is an emphasis on ensuring that Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) VCOs are engaged in this process. Targeted infrastructural support and capacity building for BME VCOs are suggested as necessary to ensure BME organisations are able to participate in statutory partnership arrangements.

The implications of these new arrangements for the VCS have been the subject of considerable debate. Several voluntary and community groups have voiced concerns that commissioning may threaten the

independence of voluntary and community work and its ability to challenge statutory organisations. Whilst these are not issues unique to the black VCS, historically strained relations between the two sectors makes independence a particularly sensitive matter, with previous government strategies for funding black community groups heavily criticised for setting black VCOs up to fail (John, 1982; Howson, 2007).

Playing football can someone from shooting somebody? Taking them on an activity can? No and I've always said that': constraints on developing quality practice in the VCS

The voluntary and community providers interviewed clearly express their values. They believed in providing holistic, flexible support, and building relationships with young people based on trust, engagement and the life experience they and others at the organisation had. However, the institutional arrangements for voluntary and community work were considered to stand at odds with this preferred approach. Providers described funding exchanges which focused on quantity not quality, and with a questionable ability to fully address young people's needs.

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. The type of interventions described make sense in policy terms because they are able to show a 'high' number of young people engaged without the risk involved in funding more intensive forms of support with more ambitious outcomes. 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 or meaningful engagement. Indeed, despite many claims of interest, genuinely innovative ways of addressing needs were considered

by several long-established providers to be too expensive, too 'outside the box', or too long-term a commitment to be supported.

Interviewees' accounts defy easy classification in relation to what they do, who they work with or what difference they set out to make. VCOs work takes place across a broad range of interest hence perhaps one precise definition of such work isn't possible. However, given the insecurity of financial support available to these organisations, there may be a more pragmatic reason for this ambiguity.

In seeking sustainability for their work, providers found themselves having to make significant compromises regarding how they presented their role. Inevitably there was some degree of distance between what providers might ideally want to do and what it was possible to fund. For example, one provider described

The VCS is increasingly being called upon to meet government criminal justice policy objectives and deliver services.

gun crime as a media inflated phenomenon that negatively stereotyped their local area. However, when it came to fund their work they had found inserting gun crime into their applications an effective way to gain support. Whether the unstigmatising support models for young people that providers' promoted when talking about the aims and benefits of their work can simply be poured into bottles labelled for funding as 'tackling gun crime' is questionable. A common consequence of these compromises (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.

In such circumstances, 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 accessing resources. Operating with a fixed, bespoke strategy would be limiting, precarious, and, if funding sources' agendas shifted, impossible for providers to sustain. Providers, who were responsible at least in part for the organisation's survival by obtaining funding, are understandably attracted to try to be all things to all people – an approach which enviably entails some ambiguity about practice.

Tragic bargains

VCOs predominantly working with black young people affected by crime have to contend with nebulous statements about their role by official reports and policy agendas about their work which are hard to reconcile.

Much is claimed about the VCS 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 describe limited scope to develop their practices in ways which are neither circumscribed nor underfunded. The rhetoric used to describe voluntary and community practices 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. Moreover, does providers' own ambiguity about their work, whilst understandable given the precarious funding environment they face, come at less widely recognised costs for the sector? In building a consensus for their work, are voluntary and community providers adding to the spin about what can be achieved by limited, constrained funding environment? ■

Helen Mills is Research Associate at the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies.

This article is adapted from *Policy, purpose and pragmatism: dilemmas for voluntary and community organisations working with black young people affected by crime* published by the CCJS in June 2009. The report can be downloaded here: www.crimeandjustice.org.uk/policypurposeandpragmatism.html

References

Department for Communities and Local Government (2008), *The Government's Response to the Commission on Integration and Cohesion*, Wetherby: Communities and local government publications.

HM Government (2008), *Home Affairs Select Committee Inquiry: Young Black People and the Criminal Justice System*. First annual report. London: HM Government.

House of Commons Home Affairs Committee (HAC) (2007), *Young Black People and the Criminal Justice System*. Second report of the session 2006–2007, volume one, London: The Stationery Office.

Howson, C. (2007), 'Working with black young people: The development of black consciousness in an oppressive climate', in Salloh, M. and Howson, C. (eds), *Working with Black Young People*, Lyme Regis: Russell House Publishing, pp.1-19.

John, G. (1982), *In the Service of Black Youth. A Study of the Political Culture of Youth and Community*. Special report series for the National Association of Youth Clubs. Leicester: National association of youth clubs.

Moj/NOMS (2008), *Working with the Third Sector to Reduce Re-offending. Securing Effective Partnerships 2008 – 2011*. London: MOJ.



Centre for Professional Ethics

KEELE UNIVERSITY

MA / Postgraduate Diploma in the Ethics of Policing & Criminal

Do you have to deal with ethical issues like these in your work?

- public security versus individual rights
- equality and discrimination
- use of force
- deception
- confidentiality and information sharing
- punishment, deterrence and restoration
- mental illness and responsibility

Would you like to be able to make better-informed decisions about these and other moral problems?

This unique part time course, taught by ethicists and criminologists, will be of interest to people working in all areas of criminal justice including police, prisons, courts and probation. Designed to fit in with the demands of full-time employment, it is taught in four intensive 3-day blocks. This structure, which combines face-to-face teaching with distance learning, makes the course accessible from all over the UK.

A first degree is not essential for entry to the programme – professional qualifications and experience may be sufficient.

Recruiting now for October 2010

For more information contact
Claire Cartwright, Centre for Professional Ethics,
Phone: 01782 734084 Email: ethics@keele.ac.uk
or visit our website at www.keele.ac.uk/ethics