Reimagining youth safety: Practitioner reflections on multi-agency police involvement with marginalised young people

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CENTRE FOR CRIME
AND JUSTICE STUDIES

WORKING PAPER

About the author

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She conducted this research as part of her MSt in Social Innovation at Cambridge University, guided by a critical lens on state oppression, policing, and racism, alongside over seven years of experience as a practitioner and researcher. The study was awarded the 2023 Jennifer Stephens prize for public social innovation research.

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Introduction

This working paper examines how youth practitioners navigate the challenges of multi-agency work (MAW), specifically in their interactions with police while supporting young people in proximity to serious violence and crime. In London, partnerships between police and community organisations are the norm and largely framed as necessary to address youth violence and criminal exploitation. However, these collaborations bring significant tensions due to the conflicting priorities of police and youth practitioners.

Drawing on interviews with 13 youth practitioners, this working paper identifies the underlying conflicting logics of these partnerships in this context – punitive vs. welfare-driven approaches, racial discrimination, and a victim-perpetrator overlap – and how practitioners navigate this using four key strategies: 'challenging', 'resisting', 'shielding', and 'avoiding'. These strategies offer practical insights for practitioners navigating these partnerships while remaining critical of policing and punitive measures. I later discuss alternatives to police involvement in multi-agency work, focusing on community-based and anti-oppressive approaches that prioritise care over punishment.

Youth practitioners, due to their closeness to both young people and the police in multi-agency settings, offer unique insights into the conflicts between punitive and welfare-driven approaches. Their frontline role provides a professional lens that allows them to understand and navigate the competing interests of law enforcement and the needs of vulnerable youth from marginalised communities. This dual perspective enables them to develop strategies that mitigate harm while advocating for more supportive, non-punitive frameworks.

A note on language

Violence affecting Black and marginalised youth is layered, involving symbolic, structural, and physical elements. Though "youth violence" is frequently used in media and policy circles as if it exists in isolation, it remains inseparable from the broader contexts shaping these young people's lives. Consequently, I have opted for terms like "youths in proximity to violence" and "youth in violent contexts" rather than simply "youth violence", which oversimplifies the issue to the individual level and pathologises Black and marginalised youth (Billingham and Irwin Rogers, 2022; Seal and Harris, 2016).

Background - Police partnerships

Over the past 15 years, UK government policies addressing youth violence have emphasised a 'holistic', 'multi-agency', and 'public health' approach. While some of these networks have achieved positive outcomes by tackling the root causes of crime and the needs of youths in proximity to violence, they tie welfarist services in 'at-risk' areas to local police forces, embedding policing into broader service provision, where its centrality remains largely unevaluated and unquestioned.

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Key developments

Ending Gangs and Youth Violence Policy (2011) and *Serious Violence Strategy* (2018) were both initiatives that adopted a 'total policing' framework, targeting specific areas and community organisations to reduce gang activity and violence. This involved collaboration between law enforcement and non-police agencies through:

● Surveillance and intervention
● Information sharing across agencies
● 'Multi-strand' approaches involving diverse partners (Williams, 2018; Nijjar, 2021).

Violence Reduction Units (VRUs) were established in 2019 with £35 million in funding, VRUs aim to reduce violent crime by bringing together police, local government, health services, and community leaders. This funding complements an additional £63.4 million allocated to tackle serious violence and knife crime.

Despite claims of success, concerns persist

Data sharing

A perceived 'success' of the government's *Ending Gangs and Youth Violence* initiative was the reported improvement in data sharing among multi-agency partners regarding individuals identified as 'gang nominals'. Research on the impact of the Metropolitan Police Service 'Gangs Matrix,' which was a vital data source listing and ranking 'gang nominals', evidenced how this data is often rooted in discriminatory policing practices with tangible negative consequences for young people. Amnesty International's *Trapped in the Matrix* (Amnesty International, 2018) and StopWatch's *Being Matrixed* (Williams, 2018) detail the perils of intelligence gathering and sharing, showing how the Matrix systematically discriminates against young Black men based on flimsy and racially charged 'intelligence', violating their rights, restricting access to opportunities such as employment and housing, and eroding trust. Although presented as objective, such data reflects and reinforces existing biases and stereotypes.

Policing-centric strategies

The annual Metropolitan Police Service business plans prioritise punitive performance metrics like conviction rates and speeding up arrests, with mentions of but no clear evaluation of crime reduction or prevention. Despite this, policing remains central to these targeted initiatives, with limited evaluation of their impact on supporting young people or reducing violence. The Mayor of London emphasises the importance of partnerships in reducing violence, explicitly referring to these arrangements as Met-led partnerships (Mayor of London, 2021). These collaborations heavily rely on engagement between frontline public and third-sector workers and the police to facilitate 'targeted interventions'.

Soft policing

Soft policing, as Innes (2005) and Schept (2015) describe, involves the non-coercive aspects of social control, where police and the state enlist non-police agencies, such as community organisations, youth services, and schools, to carry out or support policing objectives. Policies like these embed police within community partnerships aimed at reducing crime, violence, and 'gang' activity. These frameworks integrate police with other agencies in surveillance, intervention, and information sharing, expanding police influence while presenting as community support.

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Wacquant's (2010) concept of the "penalisation of poverty" refers to how social and economic hardships are often addressed through policing rather than welfare, particularly under austerity measures. In this context, we see policies and practices that tackle harm and violence – caused by social and economic factors – through collaborating with policing rather than investing in community-led initiatives that address the root causes without expanding the reach of policing.

Complexity within organisational partnerships

Within any organisational collaboration or partnership, there is inevitably a level of tension or a need to navigate differing pursuits and priorities. Often within these collaborative dynamics, there is a hierarchy of organisations based on size, resources, or legitimacy within whichever field they operate (Fleming and Spicer, 2014). Workers within these organisations must use their agency to navigate these conflicts, both large and small. In the context of youth support practitioners partnering with the police, practitioners must make daily decisions that consider the needs and behaviours of the young people they work with closely, the aims of their own teams/organisations, and the needs/requirements of partner organisations such as the police, social care, and other state bodies.

Mixed approaches to crime and safety – welfarist vs punitive

Public institutions often operate with overlapping and conflicting belief systems that influence their goals, policies, and actions (Lipsky, 1980). Nowhere is this more evident than in western approaches to crime and safety, where strategies often combine punitive practices like policing and imprisonment with welfare-focused efforts to address individual needs. Critical scholars argue that punitive logic and tools like policing, imprisonment, and surveillance disproportionately and inherently target marginalised groups, perpetuating systemic racial and class-based inequalities rooted in colonialism (Elliot-Cooper, 2021). Welfarist logics, by contrast, aim to reduce harm by addressing social, health, or resource-based needs in individuals and communities.

Despite these tensions, public institutions and political strategies often leave these contradictions unresolved. In these specific multi-agency dynamics concerning youths in proximity to violence, practitioners must navigate a complex and often contradictory environment, collaborating, communicating, or sharing information with the police while also supporting vulnerable young people who are disproportionately marginalised and affected by both state and peer-based violence. Understanding how practitioners manage this complexity is critical to improving outcomes in these challenging environments.

Aim

This working paper aims to summarise and spark a conversation from my master's dissertation, completed in 2023 at Cambridge University. I wanted to investigate the critical claims and observations concerning the harms of police partnerships as a discriminatory form of soft policing, through the lens of practitioners working within multi-agency dynamics. I also aimed to illuminate the practical, daily challenges from a practitioner perspective and the experiences of combining multiple logics, agencies, and priorities, with the goal of creating anti-oppressive policies and practices in this field for practitioners, organisations, and systems.

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Methodology & researcher

This working paper is based on a study involving 13 unstructured interviews with frontline staff from youth-focused organisations who support young people affected by or involved in violence. These practitioners had worked for at least a year in multi-agency networks alongside the police, primarily in the ten London boroughs with the highest levels of 'serious youth violence'. The sample comprised five men and eight women aged 30–45 from diverse ethnic backgrounds; eight Black, one Asian, one Mixed Black and White British, two White British, and one White Other. All participants are referred to with pseudonyms, and no identifying details about their organisations, locations, or individuals are provided. Specific job titles are also omitted, opting instead for the broader term 'youth support practitioner'.

Interviews were semi-structured and began with two open-ended questions about their roles in supporting young people and their experiences working with the police, then followed up with 'descriptive' or 'example' prompts to encourage candid storytelling.

My position as both a practitioner and a Black woman from the same community provided insider insights that enabled more probing questions, yet I was careful to limit bias by continually referring to direct quotes, existing theory, and prior research.

Findings

1. Conflicting logics

The practitioners in this study referred to three central conflicting logics through which they experience conflict and complexity in multi-agency work dynamics. These conflicts importantly underpin and contextualise their experiences and the actions we will go on to explore.

Welfarist vs. punitive logics

Youth support practitioners frequently highlighted the conflict between welfarist and punitive logics in their work with the police. All practitioners rejected the punitive logic of policing and imprisonment as ineffective and harmful, seeing it as conflicting with welfarist actions. This conflict pertains to the inherently punitive role of policing itself, not issues of misconduct or discrimination. Common statements included "punishment doesn't bring about change" and "arresting them is doing more harm than good."

Racial prejudice vs. anti-racist stance

Another layer of complexity was the practitioners' perception of police as racially prejudiced, using criminal stereotypes that affect treatment and outcomes for young people. This was based on practitioners' knowledge of systemic racism in policing and on personal and professional experiences, often manifesting in the labelling of young people as associated with 'gangs' and violence.

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Victim-Perpetrator overlap

A recurring theme in every interview was the reality of the overlap or cycle, where many young people in this context exist as both victims and perpetrators of crime and violence. Practitioners noted how police often criminalise youths in proximity to violence, particularly Black youth, viewing them solely as perpetrators or even potential perpetrators based on their race, socio-economic status, and location.

> *"You see these people as perpetrators, and that's it… It's just a clash of visions. Like we see things differently and we're actually here to do different things, and we can't align."*
> Nessa (youth support practitioner)

One practitioner described the punitive effect of the 'victim' label, stating that this is used by police but that young Black people are not actually treated as victims:

> *"By virtue of language and labels, when something happens to somebody, you have to call them a victim, isn't it? For the purpose of prosecution, but you don't treat them as the victim because in your head they're a perpetrator."*
> Ruth (youth support practitioner)

2. Practitioner experiences of police support

'Good officers'

Despite critiques of the police's impact on Black and marginalised youth and the recurring conflicts in logic between them and youth practitioners, all practitioners mentioned encounters with 'good officers'. In 12 of the 13 interviews, these officers were described as rare, often using terms like 'few', 'a couple', and 'some' to reflect their scarcity.

One youth support practitioner, Jay, described a couple of officers who "go above and beyond" for child criminal exploitation victims, showing understanding of both perpetrator and victim roles despite past arrests. Jay wished encounters with this type of officer was more frequent but that they were in the minority.

Another practitioner, Michael, described a 'good officer' who took young people to a boxing club rather than arresting them for minor anti-social behaviour issues. Despite initial hostility, Michael gradually appreciated the officer's efforts but remained wary, taking his actions with "a pinch of salt".

Consequences for 'good officers'

Two participants noted that 'good officers' faced negative consequences for being too supportive, highlighting the difficulties in maintaining supportive practices within the police force.

Michael described an officer who was moved to a different borough for developing a positive rapport with young people and practitioners which led to him being "too supportive" and becoming critical of other officers. Another practitioner, Nessa, described an officer who faced hostility from colleagues after she asked him to present her team's findings about police violence toward their young people, with the response from his colleagues being completely dismissive.

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Scepticism about police motives

Practitioners were sceptical about the police's 'welfarist' actions, believing they were often linked to punitive practices rather than genuine care. Many practitioners described rejecting police engagement based on this.

Elliot critiqued the police's welfare checks, pointing out that police are "happy to do a welfare check when they feel someone has done wrong and they wanna arrest someone" rather than offer real support.

He contrasted the police's welfare checks with a description of their demands for young people who faced a real threat of violence in certain areas to attend a specific police station, "knowing that the young person is not safe in that part of the borough."

Police role in locating missing young people

Eight practitioners noted that police played a role in locating missing young people, describing this as a necessary or positive aspect of their work, though they also identified problematic racialised and gendered dynamics in how these young people were treated.

One practitioner observed a racialised and gendered difference in the treatment of missing young people, with white female victims of child sexual exploitation receiving care while Black female victims of criminal and sexual exploitation were denied victim status:

> *"They were just making comments about her 'putting herself in these situations'"*
> Ellie (youth support practitioner)

Another practitioner described feeling positive when a young person was located and arrested, though he expressed cynicism about whether the arrest was really for safety.

Police in housing emergencies

Practitioners also noted that the police could help to expedite requests from other agencies to meet the needs of young people where resources are scarce, such as emergency housing requests for young people at risk. Although this was less frequently discussed in detail, it was considered a positive aspect of their role.

3. Practitioner actions

Critical practice – 'challenging' & 'resisting'

The first two practitioner 'actions' identified in this study, 'challenging' and 'resisting', can be grouped under 'critical practice'. Practitioners described verbally 'challenging' the police and other professionals on perceived discrimination and harmful punitive actions toward the young people they work with, and they also pre-emptively 'resist' contributing to any potential or perceived punitive outcomes. They shared stories, observations, and perspectives that align with critical perspectives on multi-agency work with the police, particularly around information sharing and police presence in youth and education settings. This stance was rooted in an understanding of how such practices can perpetuate disproportionately negative outcomes for marginalised youth.

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Challenging

Practitioners described directly challenging the assumptions and decisions made by police in order to protect the young people they work with. This involves questioning the use of labels like "gang member" and opposing decisions that focus on punishment rather than support. All practitioners expressed knowledge of the devastating effects of the gang label on young people's lives and believed that it is used carelessly among police and other multi-agency working colleagues.

One practitioner, Ricky, said police "are usually the ones to be forthcoming with that label" despite having the least personal knowledge of or interactions with young people. He said that he does not "sit back" when the label is used carelessly by any professionals because of its potential negative impact.

Multiple practitioners referenced the police's status and authority in multi-agency settings such as 'strategy meetings' hosted by social care and attended by all professionals involved with a young people or an incident. They spoke of the need to challenge narratives about young people and information shared in that setting.

> *"We do need to challenge sometimes because then it's on the minutes… these things can get pulled up in court… we're not there to convict the child like we're there to support them"*
> Ellie (youth support practitioner)

Resisting

'Resisting' involves practitioners protecting young people by refusing to comply with police requests or information sharing that could lead to criminalisation.

One practitioner, Ellie, was asked by the police, and later the council's contextual safeguarding team, to leverage her close relationship with a young person who had disclosed knowledge of a person with a firearm. Concerned about the repercussions of "snitching", Ellie refused, instead encouraging the young person to make her own decision while promising support regardless of the outcome.

> *"I said no…What they (police) want to achieve is to get this man, whereas what I want to achieve is to make sure she's okay… they're not going to be bothered by making sure she's safe afterwards."*
> Ellie (youth support practitioner)

All practitioners highlighted how trust and confidentiality enabled them to gain greater insight into young people's lives and subsequently wield greater influence to support them in decision-making. However, information sharing – particularly with the police – hinders this element of their relationship.

> *"They need to know when they tell you something… It's not going to end up in them being in a jail cell."*
> Kemi (youth support practitioner)

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"When they trust you, and they can open up to you … They are a lot more receptive when I say to them, you know, 'Maybe you should think about counselling' or 'How do you feel about me doing a mental health referral?' We can become a bridge to a lot of services, a lot of help… and without that trust, we can't keep them safe."
Ruth (youth support practitioner)

Three practitioners identified that resisting collusion with the police ultimately helped them de-escalate and prevent physical violence. They explained that young people in proximity to violence and crime trust them more when they are not tied to the police. One practitioner described a role she held working with young people involved in 'gangs' in which this discretion enabled her team to 'do their job' of de-escalating situations and mediate between young people as they would share who they were in conflict with, in which areas they were unsafe and support young people to navigate any violent incidents that were "about to pop off".

Practitioners' other methods of resisting punitive actions included rejecting police requests to accompany them on 'home visits', refusing to provide official statements, and withholding young people's contact details from the police.

Safeguarding from police – 'shielding' and 'avoiding'

The final two practitioner actions, 'shielding' and 'avoiding', can be grouped under 'safeguarding young people from police'. These are actions practitioners employ to protect young people and themselves from harm and distress through police contact.

Shielding

Practitioners use shielding to protect young people by creating barriers between them and the criminal justice system. This often means diverting them away from police contact or providing safe spaces where they are less likely to be targeted. Police were depicted, both implicitly and explicitly, as posing a threat to young people's safety. Practitioners referenced 'safety' and 'safe spaces' in two distinct ways: first, to mean protection from violence and harm; and second, as described by five practitioners, to indicate spaces free from police presence or involvement, suggesting that they view the police as a threat to young people. Additionally, when discussing their role in supporting young people's safety, they noted that educating young people about their rights regarding police harassment was addressed alongside other threats like peer aggression and grooming.

"Our organisation is a safe space. Police officers can't come in uniform. If they do, we'll talk to them at the gate... It's just that we have young people there, and they are our first priority."
Michael (youth support practitioner)

One practitioner, Sabrina, recounted being among ethnic minority support staff in a pupil referral unit who challenged senior staff about the police being on-site.

"Why are they here? If they're making us as grown adults feel uncomfortable, I can only imagine the kids… school is meant to be a place where kids can feel safe."
Sabrina (youth support practitioner)

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Sarah described the police delivering a racially charged and upsetting presentation to her young people. Afterwards, it was agreed that "from a safeguarding point of view, all their presentations had to start going through me… Police can't be trusted with young people."

Avoiding

'Avoiding' refers to the practitioners' strategy of minimising or rejecting police interactions altogether. Some practitioners avoid meetings and settings where they know police will be present. In particular, this was true for Black practitioners who had intimate knowledge of police racism and often negative personal experiences. Another reason for avoidance stemmed from the perception that punitive measures and welfarist approaches are fundamentally incompatible.

Six respondents, including Sabrina (an Asian woman) and Elliot (a White Non-British man), discussed growing up in working-class, diverse London communities where police were not seen as trustworthy or safe:

> "We've never called the police in life before. It's like we're not going to start now… We couldn't rely on that service… So now that we have to work with them. It's even very strange… And even these interactions. Now, you can see, some of them [police] have a problem with it."
> Elliot (youth support practitioner)

> "Police weren't seen as someone that could protect you…everyone would handle their issues… I should go to the police for what? For a crime reference number?"
> Sabrina (youth support practitioner)

> "They've [police] done some Black people so wrong. They [colleagues] won't talk to them, even in the professional capacity."
> Michael (youth support practitioner)

Michael went on to quote one colleague in a meeting with the police:

> "I don't talk to police. Why does he keep saying hello to me?… They started harassing me since I was like seven years old. Almost 40 years. I will never [talk to them]."

Self-protection and emotional concealment surfaced in multiple Black practitioners' accounts of 'avoidance', where their feelings toward the police in certain situations are so intense that they avoid encountering them.

Kemi shared, "I've still got a lot of processing to do with where the police are concerned," explaining she avoids them to "protect" herself and hide "the emotions that I don't want to display."

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Nessa described working with a teenage Black girl who was hospitalised after the police knelt on her neck:

> *"right after George Floyd dying the exact same way.* [...] *I called my manager and said I can't supervise this case. I had to be honest with myself at that moment…this is a young girl who looks like me… but also the accumulation of all of my negative experiences with the police and the treatment of Black people by the police…I don't think I have the emotional capacity… I'm going to be sitting in a police station with this girl and her mom… I can't promise I'm going to be able to contain myself."*
> Nessa (youth support practitioner)

Discussion

Conflicting logics

Given the decades of evidence, official reports (Scarman, 1981; McPherson 1999; Lammy, 2017; Casey 2023), critical academic literature, and statistical data on racial disproportionality and brutality of the UK criminal justice system; this report does not intend to debate the racialised and structurally violent impact of policing. Instead, the aim is to explore how these tensions and issues manifest through the lens of practitioners for the attention of community organisations, commissioners, practitioners, and fellow researchers.

The practitioners referred to three layers of conflict in their experiences of multi-agency work with the police. They believed the police to be racially prejudiced, punitive, and prone to viewing young people in proximity to violence – in particular Black young people – as criminals and perpetrators or "pre-criminals," rather than victims of violence, exploitation, or circumstance.

Practical functions of policing

The first finding highlights some standard policing activities in multi-agency work with youths in proximity to violence, revealing conflicts and incompatibilities between punitive and welfarist approaches in this context.

Participants referred to 'good' police officers as rare and not the majority of those they encounter in their professional engagements. They described three specific functions the police currently fulfil: locating missing youth, speeding up other agencies' responses, and referring young people to welfare services. Informed by emerging practice, community organisations, commissioners, and researchers could explore how these roles might be shifted to exclusively welfarist entities. Rather than further reforming and expanding the reach of policing, the focus could be on developing anti-oppressive methods of meeting these basic needs outside policing – for instance, specialised missing-persons teams that prioritise safety, or housing advocates who process referrals independently of the police.

A recent example of this in the UK is the 2023 withdrawal of the Metropolitan Police from routine mental health responses, placing responsibility with more appropriate agencies. The aptly named 'Right Care, Right Person'

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principle resonates with those calling to limit the scope of policing so that essential services are delivered by professionals better suited to meet community and individuals' needs. The Right Care, Right Person principle acknowledges that the police are ill-equipped and have disproportionately harmful and sometimes deadly outcomes in responding to mental health crises (Home Office, 2023). The same can be said for dealing with the welfare of predominantly Black and marginalised young people in proximity to violence.

Community-led approaches offer an alternative to police involvement by focusing on relationship-building and local knowledge. These interventions can provide support to young people in ways that are more aligned with their needs and less likely to lead to criminalisation.

Critical practice – 'challenging' and 'resisting'

Participants described choosing to confront, question, and sometimes refuse police or other professionals' actions they deemed punitive or discriminatory toward young people. They also took proactive steps to avoid contributing to punitive outcomes, such as limiting the labelling of young people or the sharing of information with the police, aligning with critiques of multi-agency work that can extend policing into welfare settings. Without citing academic research or theory, practitioners recognised the ways these arrangements disproportionately criminalise marginalised youth. Their refusal to feed information into enforcement processes was seen as rejecting this criminal justice "net-widening" effect.

Findings of direct challenges and resistance indicate that many frontline staff do not blindly comply with oppressive structures. Anti-racism repeatedly surfaced as a significant motivator for resisting police involvement, given the deep-seated biases against Black youth. While these acts can strain relationships with police and other agencies, they reflect practitioners' conscious use of discretion to protect young people from outcomes they believe to be unjust.

Youth practitioners may engage in 'constructive confrontation' (Seal and Harris, 2016) wherein they support young people in addressing harmful behaviours while also challenging oppressive actions by authorities. Although participants did not specifically describe such proactive strategies, many organisations are experimenting with youth-led dialogues to examine systemic racism and policing.

Training in areas like institutional bias and cultural competency is common for practitioners and police alike, yet this study suggests that conflict between agencies remains a stumbling block when practitioners voice challenges aligned with these values. It might be beneficial for organisations to develop formal or informal ways of supporting and legitimising such dissent, recognising that resistance can be a healthy response when confronted with racism and the disproportionate targeting of marginalised youth.

Some examples of community organisations who are actively critical of policing while supporting marginalised young people are 4Front, BLAM and The Advocacy Academy in London and Kids of Colour in Manchester.

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Safeguarding from the police – 'shielding' and 'avoiding'

Another theme highlighted in these findings was that practitioners actively 'safeguarded' young people – and themselves – from police contact. They portrayed law enforcement as both a direct threat to Black or otherwise marginalised youth and a hindrance to organic methods of safeguarding and guidance. Many Black practitioners also noted the emotional toll and racial trauma triggered by engagement with officers, prompting them to avoid direct contact.

Some recalled harnessing youth clubs or community-based spaces and relationships to keep young people safe from the police and to de-escalate peer-on-peer conflicts informally. However, sustained budget cuts to local social services and youth programmes have often replaced these organic support systems with 'targeted' funding of initiatives which include multi-agency work with the police.

Youth workers may need to maintain distance from certain partnership demands if these undermine trust with young people (Seal and Harris, 2016). Participants stressed that organic safeguarding depends on confidentiality and a safe space for youth to speak freely, so they often avoid information sharing that could lead to criminalisation. Organisations might consider designing internal safeguards and rethinking formal agreements within multi-agency work to preserve trust.

Avoidance of the police due to the racial trauma many Black practitioners experience when dealing with the police emerged as a recurrent theme. Organisations should acknowledge this potential and embed methods for supporting staff efforts to protect their own mental well-being in and around police encounters in their work with young people.

Conclusion

Practitioners in this study consistently reported conflicts of interest and priorities that mirror critical literature and perspectives on the soft policing of Black youth as a harmful extension of the criminal justice system. Their unique position – close to both young people and police – provides vital insight into how these dynamics affect marginalised youth from the inside, illuminating their impact on day-to-day practice. Their actions further demonstrate an active response to the harms of policing on marginalised youth, prompting measures to mitigate its harmful effects.

Interviews revealed how multi-agency frameworks, when intertwined with policing, may complicate and hinder the function of youth work or youth development support – especially for young people from Black and other marginalised backgrounds in violent contexts. Practitioners pointed to conflicts between practitioner and policing priorities, noting that inevitable intelligence-gathering and surveillance linked to policing undermine the trust needed for effective engagement. They described actively 'challenging' and 'resisting' perceived discrimination and information sharing with the police, as well as 'shielding' young people from or 'avoiding' police engagement.

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These findings encourage us to interrogate the police's purported welfarist functions in multi-agency work and whether they could be better fulfilled by other agencies, considering the historically and presently harmful impact of policing on Black and marginalised communities. Given the challenges and harms tied to police involvement in multi-agency work, it is crucial to reflect on the impact, necessity, and centrality of policing in youth and community support multi-agency work networks.

Organisations, commissioners, and researchers should critically assess what the police contribute to and gain from these partnerships, identifying where conflicts of interest lie. They may also consider whether others might be better placed to fulfil certain responsibilities, taking into account young people and staff well-being as well as overall practice. This approach opens the door for community-led, anti-oppressive, holistic services that organically engage and safeguard youths in proximity to violence, separate from the criminal justice system; addressing underlying needs through youth work, education support, mental health support, personal development, and more.

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