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**How peer support contributes to a Child First, trauma-informed, and reparative model for Youth Justice**

Journal:	<i>Safer Communities</i>
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Manuscript Type:	Research Paper
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## MANUSCRIPT DETAILS

TITLE: How peer support contributes to a Child First, trauma-informed, and reparative model for Youth Justice

## ABSTRACT:

This article explores how peer support can support a combined Child First, trauma-informed and restorative approach for youth justice. While other scholars have identified clashes between these approaches, particularly between Child First and restorative approaches, a focus on restorative practice with peers has been under-explored as a more child-centred model for reparation-focused work.

We draw on qualitative data from interviews and surveys undertaken with young people and parents/caregivers in a London youth offending service. The data was part of a broader mixed-methods study in the YOS that used observational methods alongside surveys and interviews to evaluate the effectiveness of its model of practice. Peer support emerged as a theme.

Participants expressed the desire to see young people working and volunteering in the YOS and felt this would help make it a safe and non-threatening space. Young people who had completed their time with the YOS saw themselves as role models with the insight and skills to support others. These young people expressed a strong desire to work in the YOS and in some cases, to develop long-term careers in supporting young people.

CUST\_RESEARCH\_LIMITATIONS/IMPLICATIONS\_\_(LIMIT\_100\_WORDS) :No data available.

CUST\_PRACTICAL\_IMPLICATIONS\_\_(LIMIT\_100\_WORDS) :No data available.

CUST\_SOCIAL\_IMPLICATIONS\_(LIMIT\_100\_WORDS) :No data available.

Our research challenges the notion that young people who have been involved in crime struggle to empathise, providing rich examples of their empathic understanding for peers. Peer support opportunities could offer a reconceptualising of restorative practice that is Child First and trauma-informed. Such opportunities would benefit both the young people being supported and those offering support, building a co-produced approach that is directly informed by the expressed needs and desires of the young people.

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4 **“I would want to see young people working in here, that’s what I want to see...” How peer support**  
5 **opportunities in youth offending services can support a Child First, trauma-informed, and**  
6 **reparative model of practice for Youth Justice.**  
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## 11 **Abstract**

### 12 *Purpose*

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15 This article explores how peer support can support a combined Child First, trauma-informed and  
16 restorative approach for youth justice. While other scholars have identified clashes between these  
17 approaches, particularly between Child First and restorative approaches, a focus on **reparative**  
18 practice with peers has been under-explored as a more child-centred model for reparation-focused  
19 work.  
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### 22 *Design/methodology/approach*

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24 We draw on qualitative data from interviews and surveys undertaken with young people and  
25 parents/caregivers in a London youth offending service. The data was part of a broader mixed-  
26 methods study in the YOS that used observational methods alongside surveys and interviews to  
27 evaluate the effectiveness of its model of practice. Peer support emerged as a theme.  
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### 30 *Findings*

31  
32 Participants expressed the desire to see young people working and volunteering in the YOS and felt  
33 this would help make it a safe and non-threatening space. Young people who had completed their  
34 time with the YOS saw themselves as roles models with the insight and skills to support others.  
35 These young people expressed a strong desire to work in the YOS **and in some cases, to develop**  
36 **long-term careers in supporting young people.**  
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### 39 *Originality*

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41 Our research challenges the notion that young people who have been involved in crime struggle to  
42 empathise, providing rich examples of their empathic understanding for peers. Peer support  
43 opportunities could offer a **reconceptualising of restorative** practice that is Child First and trauma-  
44 informed. Such opportunities would benefit both the young people being supported and those  
45 offering support, building a co-produced approach that is directly informed by the expressed needs  
46 and desires of the young people.  
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50 **Key words:** trauma-informed practice, Child First, restorative justice, youth offending, youth justice,  
51 peer support  
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## 55 **Introduction**

56  
57 This article draws on data collected as part of a research study in a youth offending service (YOS) in  
58 London. The research focused on exploring the effectiveness of the YOS model of practice, which  
59 combined a trauma-informed approach with restorative justice and awareness of bias and  
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3 discrimination. We focus on the overall themes and findings from this research in another paper  
4 published in XXX, entitled 'XXX' (XXX and XXX, 2021). Therefore, in this paper, we extrapolate in  
5 detail one qualitative theme that emerged from our interviews and surveys with young people and  
6 parents/caregivers, this being the need for peer support opportunities in the YOS.  
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8  
9 We explore how young people's desire to set up peer support activities in the YOS combines trauma-  
10 informed, Child First and **draws on some of the principles of** restorative approaches to youth justice.  
11 Our research suggests that while the provision of peer support opportunities is a key principle of the  
12 trauma-informed approach (SAMHSA, 2014) they have arguably not been implemented and  
13 formalised to the extent that young people are asking for. Deficit and risk-based framings of young  
14 people as well as procedural barriers have contributed to this (Burns and Creaney, in press). We use  
15 our research data on peer support to demonstrate how overcoming these barriers to fully embed  
16 such opportunities might offer potential for a **reconceptualising of restorative** practice that remains  
17 Child First and trauma-informed, co-produced and delivered by young people who have been  
18 involved in youth offending services themselves.  
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22 The examples in our study of young people's deep-felt empathy for their peers and their keen desire  
23 to offer support and even to develop careers in work with young people, present a challenge to  
24 other research that has suggested that young people who have been involved in criminal activity  
25 struggle to empathise (see, for example, Edwards, Adler and Gray, 2016; **Trivedi-Bateman, 2015**).  
26 Instead, it is arguable that typical restorative and reparative interventions have been misdirected  
27 and need to be reframed to be more child-centred, connecting with young people's empathic  
28 associations.  
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32 A **reparative** approach that focuses on young people's empathy for their peers, and desire to 'give  
33 back' to the services and communities they are part of, arguably allows for a form of practice that  
34 keeps the young person at the centre and involves them in shaping services and  
35 interventions. Rethinking and reframing the dominant **focus on** victim-centred approaches to  
36 restorative justice to move towards a **reconceptualization of restorative** practice that focuses on  
37 immediate peers (a group that young people can **potentially** more easily relate to and feel empathy  
38 for) is more compatible with the Child First and trauma-informed models of practice. Centring the  
39 Child First and trauma-informed models in **reparative** approaches provides potential for mutual  
40 reparation and support for young people and arguably contributes to a restorative practice that  
41 acknowledges 'harm done to (and not just by) young people, including by the professionals and  
42 institutions and that should protect them' (XXX and XXX, 2021: 33).  
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46 Strang (2017) recognises that definitional challenges in restorative justice have led to some practices  
47 being labelled as such incorrectly. She also recognises the credible use of wider community  
48 members in restorative justice, alongside the role of the victim. **As such, we argue that the peer**  
49 **support approach we explore in this paper draws on some of the principles of** restorative  
50 **approaches or practices but cannot be defined** specifically as restorative *justice*. **In order to**  
51 **acknowledge the definitional tensions, we primarily refer to the peer support approach as reparative**  
52 **rather than restorative practice. Whilst we recognise that** incorporating work with peers sits within  
53 the broad spectrum of **and debates around** restorative practices, **we focus on it being a reparative**  
54 **approach that reconceptualises and draws on some principles of restorative practices because** it  
55 would not fit with strict definitions of restorative **approaches. This is due to the fact we are**  
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3 suggesting it as a more child-centred *alternative* to involving the victim, rather than featuring  
4 alongside victim involvement.  
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### 8 **Punishment versus support – the Child First approach**

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10 Over the last two decades, a focus on punitive rather than supportive interventions in youth justice  
11 has been increasingly questioned (Darke, 2011). Youth justice interventions in England have  
12 traditionally been framed by a ‘prevent as enforcement’ or ‘law and order’ discourse that focuses on  
13 the crime and its penal consequences rather than the vulnerabilities of the perpetrator – and this  
14 approach has been widely criticised (Darke, 2011; Hughes, 2011). At the international level  
15 (including some examples in Ireland, Australia and the USA) the use of approaches that focus on the  
16 young person and their needs as well as the links between maltreatment and offending have been  
17 found to be more effective (Arthur, 2010; Baglivio et al, 2015; Hughes, 2011). As such, scholars have  
18 increasingly argued for a turn away from a focus on punishment in youth crime interventions (Welsh  
19 & Pfeffer, 2013).  
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23 In response to the criticisms of dominantly punitive approaches in the UK specifically, alternative  
24 models for youth justice have emerged. Haines and Drakeford (1998: 89) first proposed a *children-*  
25 *first philosophy* where ‘all young offenders’ would be treated ‘as children first’. This approach meant  
26 treating children in the justice system differently to adults, recognising their status as children, the  
27 limitations of their social environment and choices and, crucially, to work with them in a way that  
28 ‘minimises harm and maximises their potential for the future’ (ibid.: 89). Case and Haines (2015)  
29 later developed the ‘Children First, Offenders Second’ approach to youth justice work, arguing again  
30 that young offenders need to be recognised first as children and not treated as ‘mini adults’. They  
31 refer to this ongoing tendency in youth justice, to view children who have taken part in crime  
32 through an adult lens, as the ‘neoliberal responsabilisation’ of young people. The children first  
33 approach accepts that young people are vulnerable, rather than simply criminal, and focuses on  
34 support over punishment. More recently branded as ‘Child First’, the approach is underpinned by  
35 principles of inclusion, participation, a focus on the welfare of the child, and on holistic support  
36 tailored to the individual’s needs that enables them to reach their full potential (Day, 2022).  
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42 The Child First model has been increasingly adopted by statutory youth offending teams across the  
43 UK in recent years and the Child First approach is now recognised and promoted by the Youth Justice  
44 Board for England and Wales, including in its most recent Strategic Plan for 2021 to 2024 (YJB, 2021).  
45 This, to some extent, demonstrates a shift away from punitive approaches towards more  
46 progressive approaches that recognise young people’s needs and vulnerabilities. However, Day  
47 (2022) argues that the Child First approach has yet to be adopted consistently at the local level. She  
48 identifies varying reasons for this including resistance from practitioners and services as well as  
49 contradictory messages from different areas of government about approaches to youth offending  
50 practice. Day identifies that a persistence of risk- and deficit-focused approaches to the monitoring  
51 of youth offending services presents a significant barrier to implementing Child First approaches.  
52 This suggests there is still some way to go for a Child First approach to be more fully enabled by  
53 national policy and embedded across the sector.  
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### **Trauma-informed practice**

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3 There is a substantial body of evidence that demonstrates justice-involved children are significantly  
4 more likely than non-offenders to have a history of exposure to traumatic adversity (Liddle et al,  
5 2016). Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation (2017) conducted a review of youth offending  
6 services and in examining 115 case files for young people who had committed a serious offence, the  
7 review found that 81% had reported experiencing trauma. A key recommendation following this  
8 review was national incorporation of the trauma-informed approach into youth offending services.  
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10  
11 Many youth offending services have begun to incorporate this approach, including the one where  
12 our research was based. This reflects an increasing recognition of impact of Adverse Child  
13 Experiences (ACEs) and their relationship to the need for trauma-informed practice in the UK (Gray,  
14 Smithson and Jump, 2021; HMIP, 2017; McCartan, 2020; YJB, 2017). The links between ACEs and  
15 offending are increasingly clear, with a wealth of evidence cited in recent UK reports, particularly  
16 from research undertaken in the USA (See, for example: Local Government Association, 2018;  
17 Scottish Government, 2018). However, as with the Child First approach, there are questions to be  
18 raised about how fully the principles of trauma-informed practice are implemented across services  
19 at the local level, despite the approach being formalised in national policy.  
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23 The trauma-informed approach to youth justice is still relatively new. There is evidence to suggest  
24 that interrupting the influence of trauma and enabling young offenders to access recovery and  
25 healthy coping methods can lead to greater levels of engagement with interventions and a reduction  
26 in re-offending (Levenson & Willis, 2019; Loughran and Reid, 2018; Skuse and Matthew, 2015). It is  
27 also recognised that a trauma-informed approach is needed in other social, community and health  
28 services, before and alongside young people's engagement with the justice system (McCartan,  
29 2020).  
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33 A working definition of the trauma-informed approach was developed in the USA by the Substance  
34 Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA, 2014). This definition is predicated on a  
35 set of key practice approaches and principles. The fundamental approaches to trauma-informed  
36 practice are to *realise* the impact of trauma; *recognise* and *respond to* generalised and individual  
37 presentations of trauma; and *resist* (re)traumatisation, with the goal of supporting service-users to  
38 access potential avenues of *recovery*. The key principles underpinning the trauma-informed model  
39 are as follows: Safety; Trustworthiness and Transparency; Peer Support; Collaboration and  
40 Mutuality; Empowerment, Voice and Choice; Cultural, Historical and Gender Issues. SAMHSA suggest  
41 the trauma-informed approach works best when these principles are embedded in policies,  
42 practices, values, and environments of a service. Building a culture of trauma-informed care also  
43 allows for adaptive practice that can be tailored where necessary to individual needs, suggesting it is  
44 compatible with a Child First approach.  
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49 In this paper, we are particularly interested in the 'peer support' principle of trauma-informed  
50 practice and how this can be better utilised in youth offending services, and support a Child First  
51 approach. This principle is described as a crucial element of trauma-informed practice because peer  
52 support opportunities 'are key vehicles for establishing safety and hope, building trust, enhancing  
53 collaboration, and utilising stories and lived experience to promote recovery and healing' (SAMHSA,  
54 2014: 11). Engaging trauma survivors as collaborators (or *co-producers*) in service development  
55 supports the organisation to remain trauma-informed (SAMHSA, 2014). In our research, as  
56 demonstrated later in this paper, we found that young people were asking for such opportunities,  
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3 which they saw as a way of developing themselves as well as 'giving back' to others and improving  
4 the service provided by the YOS.  
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### 8 **Restorative practices and peer support**

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10 Restorative justice has become an increasingly popular approach in UK youth justice over recent  
11 decades. Victims are often invited to contribute to youth offending panels, and reparation can be a  
12 requirement of a young person's referral order, to be facilitated by youth offending services  
13 (Ministry of Justice, 2018). Literature on the use of approaches such as mediation and restorative  
14 justice in youth offending work has suggested that drawing on young people's empathy for others  
15 may be an effective alternative to focusing on punitive measures (Walklate, 1998). However, more  
16 recently, the use of restorative justice approaches in youth justice have been critiqued by those who  
17 advocate for Child First practice, for placing the needs of the victim, rather than those of the young  
18 person, at the centre of the intervention, with its critics arguing that the needs and vulnerabilities of  
19 the child should remain paramount (Case and Haines, 2015). As such, Case and Haines (2015) argue  
20 that restorative justice is incompatible with the Child First model because it is victim-centred rather  
21 than child-centred.  
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26 Different approaches to restorative justice place differing levels of emphasis on the victim and  
27 offender and more 'balanced' models have been articulated (Cunneen and Goldson, 2015). The  
28 origins of restorative justice were more in line with these balanced models (particularly among  
29 indigenous groups of Australia, New Zealand and the Americas) (ibid.). Overall, however, current  
30 restorative justice models have shifted far from these ideals and are predominantly more punitive  
31 interpretations (ibid.).  
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34 The broader research literature suggests youth crime interventions should be relational, long-term  
35 and supportive (Creaney, 2014). However, within such research, emphasis on the importance of  
36 relational work tends to focus on the relationships between services/staff and the young person,  
37 rather than extending to others in their lives, including their peers and communities (XXX and XXX,  
38 2021). Such relationships with peers could be more fully considered in **reconceptualising** restorative  
39 and reparative approaches for youth justice in particular.  
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42 Young people's connection to their peer communities in particular has arguably been under-  
43 considered as an alternative form of **reparative** practice to the dominant focus on reparation with  
44 victims. Community participation has been widely established in restorative justice - and peers, close  
45 friends and family of the offender have even been suggested as key participants (see, for example,  
46 Rossner and Bruce, 2016). However, this practice of community involvement has been researched  
47 and implemented only as an *addition* to victim involvement, rather than as an *alternative* form of  
48 **reparative** practice centred on the young person and their immediate networks. The current  
49 research, while focused on community involvement alongside victim involvement, does offer some  
50 indication of the benefits of such an alternative approach. Rossner (2008) for example, outlines the  
51 benefits of collective emotion in restorative justice and how the involvement of the offender's  
52 community can lead to a *reintegrative* shaming that differs from the *stigmatic* shaming of the court  
53 process, in that it supports reintegration into the community rather than exclusion from it.  
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58 **Research has suggested that young people can struggle to develop empathy for their victims**  
59 **(Edwards, Adler & Gray, 2016; Trivedi-Bateman, 2015). This may be particularly so where they**  
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3 cannot relate to them and are disconnected from their particular lives and experiences (XXX & XXX,  
4 2021). In probably the most large-scale study on empathy in young offenders, Trivedi-Bateman  
5 (2015; 2021) found that violent offenders have less empathy for their victims than other offenders –  
6 and that lower levels of empathy correlate with lower levels of shame and guilt for their violent  
7 offences. This led her to conclude that lower levels of empathy, shame and guilt make someone  
8 more likely to engage with crime, and particularly violent crime. This suggests that restorative  
9 interventions will be less effective with violent offenders and those who are deficient on empathy.  
10 Trivedi-Bateman and Crook (2022) argue that interventions are needed that focus on developing  
11 empathy. However, while the guilt and shame scales used in Trivedi-Bateman’s (2015) research did  
12 make some wider reference to others beyond the victim, such as family and friends, the emphasis of  
13 these measures was on the offender being observed by these people in their lives or of them being  
14 aware of their wrongdoing, rather than there being a focus on negative impacts of their behaviour  
15 for their families and communities. The empathy scales focused on strangers and friends but,  
16 similarly, without a strong focus on consequences of their actions impacting on their friends and  
17 family. Her interviews with offenders focused on the victim and then on how they would feel if  
18 parents or others found out – but, again, not on the consequences of their offending on their  
19 families and communities. Trivedi-Bateman’s overall focus was on empathy for victims rather than  
20 others in the young people’s lives. This suggests there is a gap in the research as to who young  
21 people might feel empathy for, beyond their victim.  
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28 The concept of *generativity* is used in research to explore offenders’ desire to ‘give back’ and engage  
29 in reparative work or care for others. Halsey and Deegan (2017: 52) define generativity as ‘the  
30 actions of an individual or group that enable others to care in meaningful ways for themselves and  
31 their significant others’. Links have been identified between such generativity (acts of care for  
32 others) and desistance, leading to the argument that generativity is a crucial part of post-offence  
33 interventions (Halsey & Deegan, 2017; Halsey & Harris, 2011; Kashy and Morash, 2022). The  
34 research on generativity focuses on significant others, as opposed to victims (Halsey & Deegan,  
35 2017; Halsey & Harris, 2011). In research with young male offenders in custody, Halsey and Harris  
36 (2011) found that family and close friends were identified as these significant others. As such, a sole  
37 focus on victims may be limiting what is possible in terms of drawing on young people’s generative  
38 capacity for those around them, that they can relate to more readily. Rather than a sole focus on  
39 generativity as a one-way process enacted by offenders, the research also explores generativity  
40 towards offenders by others – for example, in Halsey and Deegan’s (2017) study on prison officer  
41 generativity. The research also suggests that capacity for offenders to engage in generativity is  
42 limited by their life circumstances, such as where they experience poverty, challenging family  
43 relationships and other challenges – for example, in Kashy and Morash’s (2022) research on women  
44 offenders on parole and probation. The findings of these studies support an argument for any focus  
45 on generativity and reparation in youth justice to be trauma-informed and Child First – through it  
46 being a mutual process that goes beyond victim-offender binaries and through it taking account of  
47 wider factors that impact on young people’s lives.  
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55 Strang (2017) outlines how, in Australian youth justice research, the effectiveness of restorative  
56 justice with victims varied according to the type of crime. For example, in contrast to Trivedi-  
57 Bateman’s (2015) findings on lower levels of empathy among violent offenders, Strang (2017)  
58 outlines that restorative justice reduced young people’s reoffending rates more than court  
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3 processes when used in cases of violent crime. Strang found, however, that the opposite was true, in  
4 relation to property crime (ibid.). The research reviewed also found that the approach was less  
5 effective in relation to violent crime for young people from minoritized racial backgrounds (Rossner,  
6 2008; Strang, 2017). In UK research, Strang (2017) similarly outlines that restorative justice was  
7 more effective in cases of serious crime than in other forms of crime and that it was more effective  
8 with adults than with young people. This highlights some complexities in how young people's  
9 capacity for empathy and reparation is classified and suggests that young people may struggle to  
10 experience empathy for victims in some cases more than others - and this may be linked to how well  
11 they can relate to their victim in terms of race, class and other factors. Such factors need to be  
12 considered in relation to all research studies on empathy, generativity and restorative practices. For  
13 example, the shame and guilt scales in Trivedi-Bateman's (2015) study focused on a set of examples  
14 of things that people might feel shame for, such as stealing from a shop, which may be contextual  
15 for people of different backgrounds and levels of poverty as well as according to the type of shop  
16 (for example, a large chain store or a locally run small enterprise).

17  
18 In addition, many of the benefits of restorative justice outlined by research focus on the positive  
19 impacts for the victim (Rossner, 2008; Strang, 2017). While this is clearly an important part of  
20 restorative justice interventions, it potentially compromises a Child First approach if the needs of the  
21 victim become more central than those of the child - and the concerns of Case and Haines (2015),  
22 key pioneers of the Child First approach, about this may well be justified. The research outlined  
23 above arguably has implications for the effectiveness of typical restorative approaches that centre  
24 only on reparation with victims. Young people may be better able to relate to and empathise with  
25 their immediate peers and a focus on this in considering Child First, trauma-informed and restorative  
26 interventions could offer a reconceptualisation that brings the principles of these three approaches  
27 together. A trauma-informed approach to reparative practice would maintain peer support as one of  
28 its key principles and remain child-centred. However, youth offending services could potentially be  
29 doing more to fully explore and embed such opportunities.

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31 A note of caution is needed here. The incorporation of a peer support approach requires testing and  
32 evaluation before it is widely adopted. Strang and Sherman (2015) reflect on the ethics of using  
33 untried restorative practices without robust research evidence due to the risk of harm this creates -  
34 and they warn against the promotion of untested approaches. Additionally, in regard to the use of  
35 peer role models in youth justice practice, there have been some questions raised over the  
36 effectiveness of this when implemented uncritically. Harris (2019) for example, argues that the use  
37 of male role models as mentors to young people involved in violent crime can lead to issues such as  
38 over-identification between mentor and mentee, and in some cases promotes problematic mindsets  
39 such as hyper-masculinity. Harris ultimately promotes the use of 'home-grown youth workers' in  
40 responding to youth violence but with the need for an ongoing critical reflexivity about their role.

41  
42 Other research suggests that the use of peer role models can facilitate positive relationships with  
43 young people, characterised by empathy and lack of judgement, that lead to trust and reciprocity,  
44 and allow for realistic understandings of desistance grounded in lived experience (Lenkens et al,  
45 2021). In relation to the argument we present in this paper about the potential for peer support  
46 opportunities to contribute to reparative practices in particular, we acknowledge the need for more  
47 research and, specifically, an in-depth piloting of the approach, to build on the implications  
48 presented in this paper. Additionally, any incorporation of such an approach would require a robust  
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3 model of supervision for the peer mentors that encourages their critical reflexivity on their role  
4 (Harris, 2019).  
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6 To present our suggested approach as restorative would represent a significant reconceptualising of  
7 restorative practice, given our argument that peers could be an alternative empathic focus to victim-  
8 centred practices. However, when viewed through a trauma-informed and Child First lens, young  
9 offenders must be seen as *harmed* and not simply as *harmers*. As identified by the HMIP (2017)  
10 review, the majority of young offenders are victims of trauma themselves. Further, a number of  
11 scholars have identified that young offenders face a range of social adversities and vulnerabilities -  
12 and have argued that interventions should approach them as vulnerable rather than criminal (Case  
13 & Haines, 2015; McAra and McVie, 2010, 2016; XXX, 2019). These studies recognise the blurred line  
14 between victim and offender and the role of exploitation in young people's criminal involvement has  
15 been increasingly recognised in such research (XXX, 2019). In this sense, the *young people*  
16 *themselves* are the *victims* at the centre of any Child First and trauma-informed interventions with  
17 young offenders, and this could be better recognised in the dominant restorative approaches.  
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#### 24 **Method and sample**

25 Our research took place in a Youth Offending Service (YOS) in a diverse London borough where 47%  
26 of the borough's population were from BAME groups at the 2011 census. Black African and Black  
27 Caribbean constituted the largest ethnic groups after White British and the proportion of BAME  
28 groups was much higher among young people than the all-age population (ONS, 2012). The borough  
29 was in the top 20% most deprived local authorities nationally with poverty levels just below the  
30 London average (MHCLG, 2015). The research was commissioned by the YOS and was focused on  
31 exploring the effectiveness of their model of practice. The research obtained ethical approval via  
32 Goldsmiths, University of London.  
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36 We conducted observational research in the YOS over a four-month period (primarily of staff  
37 meetings and interactions with each other) and conducted surveys and interviews with young  
38 people and parents/caregivers. The young people's survey contained a mix of 15 closed and open  
39 questions about the young people's experiences of the YOS and its impact on their lives, particularly  
40 in relation to: their feelings of safety, trust, being listened to and the YOS having an understanding of  
41 and helping them move on from their past experiences (trauma-informed practice); the impact on  
42 their relationships with family (restorative practices), and; their experience of how inclusive they felt  
43 the YOS and its staff were (awareness of bias and discrimination). The survey for parents/caregivers'  
44 asked similar questions but for their reflections on the impact on the young person from their  
45 perspective.  
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50 The survey was sent out to potential respondents via text message campaigns by the YOS as well as  
51 YOS workers encouraging young people who were interested to take part and, in some cases,  
52 supporting them to complete it. Interviewees were recruited via a combination of a question in the  
53 survey asking if respondents would be willing to be contacted about taking part in an interview –  
54 and via YOS staff who put potential interviewees in touch with the research team. Recruitment to  
55 interviews was disrupted by the first Covid-19 lockdown, the enforced end to the observational  
56 research and a shift to a reliance on remote contact. Interviewees who had not already completed  
57 the survey were asked to do so as a prompt for the interviews which were framed around similar  
58 questions about their experience of the YOS and its impact but with more qualitative depth.  
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3 Sixty-three surveys were completed by 44 young people and 19 parents. Nine interviews took place  
4 with six of the young people and three of the parents/caregivers who had also completed the  
5 survey. At least 81% of participants were from Black and other racially minoritised backgrounds: 63%  
6 were Black; 13% were mixed/multiple ethnic groups; 5% were Asian. 10% were white while 9%  
7 stated 'other' or 'prefer not to say'. 63% of survey participants were male, 35% were female, and 2%  
8 stated 'other' or 'prefer not to say'. In terms of religion, 39% identified as Christian, 37% as 'no  
9 religion', 11% as Muslim, and 13% stated 'other' or 'prefer not to say'. Of the young people who  
10 took part in the survey, ten were aged 13-15 years and 34 were aged 16 or over. This paper draws  
11 on some of the qualitative data from the research with young people and parents/caregivers,  
12 gathered through the survey responses and interviews. The young people who took part in  
13 interviews all identified as Black, two of them identified as female and four as male. One of these  
14 young people had finished their time with the YOS but returned regularly to visit, one had almost  
15 finished their time with the YOS, three were in the latter half of their time and one had recently  
16 commenced their time. Three female parents were interviewed, of whom two identified as Black  
17 and one as White. The young people who took part in the study were primarily those on statutory  
18 orders with a small proportion who were involved with the YOS voluntarily.

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24 The researchers were not given access to information about the offence records of the young people  
25 who took part in the study. All young people at the YOS were invited to take part in the research and  
26 there were a mix of those on longer and shorter referral orders in the survey and interview samples.  
27 A couple of young people revealed in interviews that this was not their first order but we did not  
28 specifically ask about this.  
29

30  
31 The data was subject to thematic analysis where themes and sub-themes were identified through  
32 manual coding of the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). However, the identification of themes began as  
33 a broadly deductive approach, becoming more inductive as the detailed sub-themes emerged. The  
34 YOS were working to a model of practice that focused on three elements, these being trauma-  
35 informed practice, restorative justice and awareness of unconscious bias. As such, the surveys and  
36 interviews were designed, and the research data we gathered was analysed, primarily in relation to  
37 these three elements. These became broad deductive themes within which the range of inductive  
38 sub-themes emerged. Young people's desire for peer support opportunities within the YOS was one  
39 such inductive theme that emerged in open survey responses and interviews and forms the focus of  
40 our analysis in this paper. We have published a broader analysis of our overall themes from the  
41 quantitative and qualitative data elsewhere (see XXX and XXX, 2021).  
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44

45 The peer support theme was most present in the interviews, where it emerged in all six of the young  
46 people's narratives. For the young people who had completed or almost completed their time with  
47 the YOS, it emerged most explicitly as a desire to take on roles as the peer representatives in the  
48 YOS and even to develop long-term careers in work with young people. For those who had been  
49 with the YOS less time, it emerged more explicitly as a desire to see young people represented in the  
50 YOS with a sense that they would have the skills and understanding to contribute but this was  
51 articulated less boldly than those who had been engaged for longer. In the young people's surveys,  
52 which were primarily completed by those who had been with the YOS for less than six months,  
53 discussions around peer influence primarily emerged as a growing recognition of the negative  
54 impact of previous peer groups and the need to disassociate from these and form new connections,  
55 as well as some less prevalent comments about the desire to see young people represented in the  
56 YOS. For parents/caregivers in the surveys and interviews, there was caution expressed about the  
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3 influence of peers even where the young people seemed to be moving on with their lives. The rest of  
4 this paper focuses specifically on the qualitative data that emerged relating to peer support theme  
5 and analyses it in relation to how it connects with Child First, trauma-informed and restorative  
6 practices.  
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### 10 **The need for peer support opportunities in youth justice**

11  
12 The peer support sub-theme that emerged links to the main deductive themes as outlined above,  
13 with it having something to offer to young people's experiences of youth offending services as  
14 trauma-informed, restorative and to avoiding them being viewed through a negative adult lens. It  
15 offers a clear argument for how the trauma-informed, Child First and **reparative** approaches to  
16 youth justice can be brought together.  
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18

19 The young people in our study viewed peer support as something that would help to counter the  
20 feelings of judgement that exist for young people when they access the YOS and feel that they are  
21 under the 'adult gaze'. In this way, it arguably offers a form of resistance to the 'neoliberal  
22 responsabilisation' identified and critiqued by Case and Haines (2015). Further, the young people  
23 viewed peer support opportunities as a way to make the space feel safe for other young people and  
24 to enable them to trust the service. Thus, this supports the avoiding of (re)traumatisation and clearly  
25 contributes to creating a trauma-sensitive environment. Additionally, young people saw peer  
26 support as a way of 'giving back', a form of reparative and restorative practice. This suggests it might  
27 support a co-produced and Child First approach to **reparative** practice that goes beyond the focus on  
28 reparation with victims and puts young people at centre of the practice. Below, we analyse in detail  
29 how the findings from our research relating to peer support suggest that the provision of these  
30 opportunities would support a Child First, trauma-informed and **reparative** practice approach.  
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### 37 ***Peer support enhances a trauma-informed approach***

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39 Peer support is a key principle of the trauma-informed approach (SAMHSA, 2014). The young people  
40 in our study articulated their recognition of this through explaining how access to peer role models  
41 in the service would make the space feel safer and less intimidating.  
42

43 Some young people don't trust adults in general. So, they're coming to a place like this and  
44 having to express their feelings to an adult, they're bound to find it hard. That's when they  
45 feel more closed up, don't say nothing... They've already been told what it's like, already  
46 made-up their mind and [it's] drummed into their mind that that's what they're going to  
47 expect. [There should be] young people because when you see young people in this type of  
48 environment doing something good, it changes other young people's minds. (Young person  
49 1)  
50  
51

52 This and other examples (see those quoted in the next section) demonstrate that our participants  
53 understood how young people experience the 'adult gaze', particularly when first attending the YOS,  
54 based on their own feelings and experiences of this. The same young person articulated this further.  
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57 You don't expect to get as much positivity from staff because obviously you're coming here  
58 because you've been sent here for a punishment basically is how I look at it... And I was like,  
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3 you wouldn't expect much positive adults around you that still want to smile and still  
4 respect you. (Young person 1)  
5

6 This young person went onto recognise that their first impressions had not been correct, stating  
7 'Even though they know what you've done, they don't really look at you like how other people look  
8 at you'. However, it demonstrates how having peer role models present at first access might support  
9 young people to experience youth offending services as less threatening. Our participants  
10 understood that a 'trust gap' exists between young people and adults in authority, arguably more  
11 pertinently for justice-involved young people who may have faced multiple interventions in their  
12 lives from adult professionals and experienced the 'adult gaze' most sharply.  
13  
14

15 The example above (as well as those in the next section) demonstrates how young people  
16 recognised that this 'trust gap' and that their resulting expectations of the service and its staff had  
17 been strongly entrenched. They felt therefore that the opportunity to connect with a peer could  
18 support the building of trust, safety and enabling productive communication in relationships with  
19 the YOS. This supports SAMHSA's (2014) proposition that peer support can enable someone to  
20 remain connected with and progress with their trauma recovery process through connection to a  
21 role model they can relate to and that they observe also making progress. It also reflects the findings  
22 of Lenkens et al (2021) who found that relationships with peer role models supported feelings of  
23 non-judgement and trust for young people.  
24  
25

26 The young person above also articulated another key outcome of peer support, *changing minds*,  
27 highlighting how negative and often internalised narratives of young people can be challenged by  
28 the presence of other young people in positive roles (see first quotation in this section). For young  
29 people in youth offending services, challenging these narratives arguably plays a significant role in  
30 the formation of self-identity and esteem, which is a substantial element of the trauma recovery  
31 process (Skuse & Matthew, 2015). More broadly, changing mindsets through restorative peer  
32 support can potentially support minimising wider community stigma surrounding youth crime and  
33 young offenders that is perpetuated by the dominantly negative framings of young people through  
34 an adult lens.  
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### 42 ***Incorporating peer support develops a co-produced and Child First approach***

43 The young people who took part in our research who had been engaged over a substantial period of  
44 time, or had finished their time with the YOS, expressed an interest in working at the YOS  
45 themselves or acting as mentors for other young people. They explained that it was important to see  
46 other young people at the YOS because it would have supported them better as service users, both  
47 at first access, but also in terms of ongoing support.  
48  
49

50 I would want to see young people working in here, that's what I want to see... because once  
51 you have young people in this type of environment helping other young people, that's when  
52 the ratings go more up in my eyes... Even volunteering, that would still be good because they  
53 will still be making a change to young people... Just like a small little conversation you can  
54 have with a young person, you can change their whole aspect completely. (Young person 4)  
55

56 I think they should sort out young people to work in here, even volunteering and  
57 traineeships, anything. It will all be good. It will bring less distress to young people in certain  
58 ways, because they know when they come here they can see a young person that's doing a  
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3 role that they're coming to see and they can actually feel more trustworthy speaking to  
4 them... I wish that was me in their shoes because I'm here too but I'm the one sitting in the  
5 chair answering the questions. Do you get what I'm saying? I want to be the one giving the  
6 questions, like yeah, "What did you do today"? (Young person 1)  
7  
8

9 This was something that the young people were offering to be involved in co-producing for other  
10 young people and that they keenly felt that they could contribute to because of their own  
11 experiences.  
12

13 Because I found that because of my experiences, I'll be able to understand some of the  
14 young people, why they do the stuff that they do, what they're going through because I've  
15 gone through similar stuff. So, experience... Because someone could tell you something and  
16 you would understand them – like why they would have done something like that and what  
17 they're going through at the time, how – what effects it has on them. (Young person 2)  
18  
19

20 Implementing this co-produced model would support a Child First approach where the young people  
21 influence how the service should be run, take part in service delivery and are supported to build  
22 their own skills and self-esteem. The peer support approach potentially provides a mutual support  
23 model where the needs of all young people can be centred in the service.  
24

25 The desire to work in the YOS came particularly from those who were reaching the end of their time  
26 with the YOS, or who had already moved on. As such, it would offer a way for them to remain  
27 connected to support whilst also getting involved in a positive opportunity that supports their  
28 ongoing development and recovery. This presents an opportunity and a challenge – it offers  
29 potential to develop a long-term form of restorative practice but would require additional resource  
30 to support young people who have completed their orders to undertake such roles with the  
31 appropriate supervision.  
32  
33

34 Having young people who have been through the service on youth offending panels, as well as in the  
35 service itself, could support an approach that remains Child First. However, at present people under  
36 the age of 18 and those with particular or recent convictions are barred from voluntary roles on  
37 youth offending panels (Ministry of Justice, 2018). Victims, however, are encouraged to take part in  
38 these panels (Ministry of Justice, 2018). This involvement of victims but not young people arguably  
39 shifts the process away from being child-centred (Case and Haines, 2015). The development of a  
40 new role for youth members on panels, from those who have been through youth offending services  
41 themselves, would support co-produced and Child First practice to be more clearly centred in the  
42 referral order process.  
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### 49 ***Peer support opportunities as a form of co-produced reparative practice***

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51 When victim-centred restorative justice doesn't work, it is often concluded that the young people  
52 lack or have not fully developed the capacity for the empathic understanding required for such  
53 reparative work (Edwards, Adler & Gray, 2016). However, in challenge to this, several of the young  
54 people in our research did feel a strong sense of empathy, directed at their peers (as already shown  
55 in the examples above). The young person quoted below articulated this empathic understanding for  
56 their peers particularly clearly.  
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3 My upbringing was all over the place, but because of it I understand – I've gone through  
4 things people my age couldn't cope with. My dad, he never got to watch me grow up  
5 because he passed early, so that just set in my mind, I just want to do him proud and that... I  
6 don't know what instilled it into me, I think it was just the way I saw my dad and that, but  
7 even if I see someone on the road, just getting bullied or something, I wouldn't just stand  
8 there and watch it, I would – like me in my heart, like my heart will tell me that, "You have  
9 to get involved." I don't know why, but even today I came out of school and I saw a boy in a  
10 younger year crying, and I asked him what was wrong. He said he got strangled and threw  
11 down the stairs. I was like – "Why did he do that to you? Did you say something?" He said,  
12 "No I just laughed when I was walking past him." But he said it was because he was on the  
13 phone and the boy just came out of nowhere. I got involved. I took the boy to one of the  
14 teachers that was talking to him and that and I think it got sorted out. (Young person 6)

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19 The young people who expressed a strong desire to work in the YOS viewed this as a way that they  
20 could 'give back' to their peers and communities. Supporting such opportunities could allow  
21 reparative practice to be defined by young people, centred on their needs and choices, building  
22 mutual support, and not shifting focus from the child to the victim.

23  
24  
25 The young people identified how working at the YOS would benefit them as the young people  
26 offering the support, not just those receiving it.

27  
28 I think you've got to have a certain qualification. You've got to be over 18, as I know. Yeah,  
29 so I just need to get the qualifications and then hopefully I can probably. I tried a couple of  
30 months ago, quite a long time ago, I tried to ask them if they could sort out apprenticeships  
31 there because that would be good for young people that wanted to look into working with  
32 young people. But I don't know if they managed to sort that out but that's what I would  
33 want to do here to be honest, that would be good. (Young person 5)

34  
35  
36 Such opportunities were seen to build on skills they had developed or become more aware of in  
37 themselves through their own engagement with the YOS. The same young person drew on the  
38 leadership skills they felt they would bring to such a role.

39  
40 To me, from my perspective, to be honest, a good leader to me is someone that could face  
41 up to anything and everything, no matter what the circumstances is... And to be honest  
42 that's me. Anything that comes my way I'm willing to take it, hard or not. (Young person 5)

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44  
45 Other young people reflected on the insights and advocacy skills they would bring from their own  
46 experiences, recognising that their developing awareness of their insights and skills had been  
47 supported by their time with the YOS.

48  
49 Insight, it's given me insight about certain stuff. And understanding as well... Insight to  
50 myself and people in general, like why some people act the way they do. It depends on how  
51 they grew up and that... I – yeah, it will help me because say because of when I come here  
52 and work here, it's like the fact that I can judge someone's personality by hearing how they  
53 talk or how they act. It's like it will be helpful because I'm obviously going to want a job  
54 here. (Young person 2)

55  
56  
57 I would bring a lot to the table because I've seen a lot, been through a lot, heard a lot, I  
58 could show them a lot I guess. Because a lot of young people need like an advocate as well  
59 as an adult that has experienced things that they're going through. So, they can have that  
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3 person that relates to things that they're feeling, so it makes it better when they're  
4 communicating. Do you get what I'm saying? (Young person 1)  
5

6 These examples of how young people felt they would benefit from working in the YOS and draw on  
7 their own skills and insights illustrates potential for a Child First model of **reparative** practice for the  
8 young people providing the support as well as those they are supporting. These young people saw  
9 themselves as relatable role models where mutual empathy can be developed.  
10

11 The young people's reflections above suggest that their time with the YOS encouraged them to feel  
12 confident in their abilities to help support, guide and empower their peers, drawing on their own  
13 empathy and lived experiences. It appears from our study that there was still some work to do to  
14 fully explore and embed the co-produced peer support opportunities the young people identified as  
15 helpful and one challenge to this is clearly that young people may only be ready to take such a role  
16 when they have completed (or almost completed) their time with the service. The data suggests  
17 such young people were asking for these opportunities but that they had not yet materialised to the  
18 extent they were asking for, particularly in the form of training, apprenticeships and long-term  
19 opportunities for career development. This reflects Burns and Creaney's (in press) argument that  
20 risk-based approaches and a resistance to relinquishing adult control are restraining forces to  
21 participatory practice in youth justice. Legalities and structural barriers may be an issue here - for  
22 example, the rules cited earlier about who can be on a youth offending panel. However, another  
23 reason for this may be a level of caution over whether such peer influences are positive or negative,  
24 influenced by dominant risk and deficit narratives of young people. Such caution clearly feeds into  
25 the legalities issues around how easily a young person with criminal convictions can begin to develop  
26 a long-term career in the sector.  
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### 35 ***Negative peer influences?***

36 Young people recognised the potential negative influences of their peers. For example, when  
37 explaining in the survey how they were making changes to their lives, young people reflected on the  
38 negative impact of their peer groups.  
39

40 I'm not associating with certain people anymore which is making my mother happy. She felt  
41 that some of the people I was hanging around with were bad influences. (Survey respondent  
42 – young person)  
43  
44

45 I'm thinking more about my actions than previously. Even though I've gotten arrested since I  
46 started my order, this had been mainly due to others. I've been arrested due to the actions  
47 of friends and me following what they are doing rather than me committing the offence  
48 myself. (Survey respondent – young person)  
49  
50

51 Similarly, parents and caregivers raised concerns about peer influence. The extract below from an  
52 interview with a parent highlights the complexity in determining whether peer influences are  
53 negative or positive.  
54

55 **Interviewer:** And then, you've said you've seen quite a big change in his engagement with  
56 school, training or work. What is his situation at the moment?  
57

58 **Mother:** He's got involved with working in a kitchen as a volunteer which was through  
59 another friend who was also on a referral and he's been going to do that. And he also does  
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3 music himself which is all self directed stuff which he's trying at the minute to apply to  
4 college to go and do more of that. So, he's not in education or training really at the moment  
5 but he's very motivated to do something. He's going to need some help with that – with the  
6 application and things, I think, but yeah.  
7  
8

9 **Interviewer:** Right. So, this friend who's also doing the kitchen with him. Where did he meet  
10 the friend? It sounds like a great friendship to have.  
11

12 **Mother:** I'm cautious about that friendship. So, it was a friend he met through the crowd he  
13 was hanging out with – they were mainly kids from his school but his secondary school is a  
14 fairly troubled, inner London comprehensive and a lot of his friends he went to school with  
15 have been in trouble with the police or have been to court and been charged with things.  
16 And this friend he didn't go to school with but he's the cousin of a friend he went to school  
17 with and he seems like a really nice young man but he did serve a sentence in a youth... in  
18 prison basically. And [my son] formed his friendship with him whilst he was in prison and  
19 then that's continued as the guy's come out. Now he served his... he's done everything he's  
20 supposed to do and he seems to be forging a life for himself and he seems to also be quite  
21 motivated to move on and not live like that anymore and they certainly... he is the only  
22 person from that group that [my son] now seems to be in contact with. But I still... obviously,  
23 I'm his mum and I'm cautious about the type of friendship he might have with other people.  
24 I think he knows that but yeah.  
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29 The mother's caution in this example reflects that a level of nuance is needed in discerning where  
30 peers might be providing a positive or negative influence in young people's lives, as well as how  
31 adults may sometimes tend towards assuming peer influence to be negative. However, if young  
32 people who have offended are under pressure (from themselves or others) to dissociate from  
33 negative peer influences, the need for different and healthier connections with peers and access to  
34 positive peer role models is arguably ever more pertinent.  
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### 39 **Conclusion**

40  
41 The analysis above demonstrates how peer support might contribute to a Child First, trauma-  
42 informed and **reparative** conception of youth justice practice. Peer support opportunities in youth  
43 offending services could enable continuing personal growth and recovery for young people who  
44 have previously attended and who no longer have direct access to service supervision and care. For  
45 young people attending services, access to peer role models could support a Child First and trauma-  
46 sensitive experience. A focus on mutual support with peers as a form of **reparative** practice offers  
47 potential for a unique approach to reparative work that brings child-centred and trauma-informed  
48 approaches together.  
49  
50

51 There are some limitations to our study. The interview sample was relatively small and based in one  
52 YOS. As such, further research and pilots would be needed of a **reparative** peer support approach  
53 before broad implementation. Challenges that emerge in our data include that the young people  
54 expressing the strongest desire to work in the YOS as peer advocates were those who had  
55 completed or almost completed their time. As such, implementation of the long-term opportunities  
56 and career development they were asking for would require substantial investment to ensure it was  
57 well resourced, managed and supervised. Given these young people's strength of feeling about how  
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3 well they would relate to other young people, there is a danger of 'over-identification' between  
4 mentors and mentees, as outlined by Harris (2019). As such, a structured model of supervision to  
5 support critical reflexivity on their role as peer mentors would be needed (ibid.). Other concerns that  
6 would need to be investigated and mitigated for in further research and testing include issues  
7 around safeguarding young people who are acting as peers to other young people involved in  
8 criminal activity as well as how to avoid re-traumatisation.  
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11  
12 Overall, more substantial research is needed to establish exactly how a reparative peer support  
13 model might be constructed but our research suggests it would involve current and previous young  
14 people being involved in supporting others. Given the tensions in the literature around young  
15 people's capacity for empathy and some of the nuances around this, further research is needed into  
16 young people's empathy and motivations. The young people in our study expressed great empathy  
17 for their peers and a desire to support them but this needs further exploration as it is currently a  
18 significant gap in the wider literature which predominantly focuses on empathy for victims.  
19  
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21 On a national policy level, work would be needed to remove legal and structural barriers to young  
22 people's involvement in youth offending services, supporting them with training and long-term  
23 career development where they have a desire to work in the sector. Allowing young people onto  
24 youth offending panels might be one way to support a reparative peer support model. There are  
25 currently procedural barriers to this that would need to be removed (Ministry of Justice, 2018). A  
26 new role for an additional youth member of these panels would need to be piloted and evaluated  
27 before wider implementation.  
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31 Our research contributes to the international youth justice literature, demonstrating how peer  
32 support might form part of Child First and trauma-informed policy and practice models that address  
33 the tensions inherent in restorative practices that focus on the victim rather than the child, by  
34 drawing on young people's empathy for their peers and communities. It presents a challenge to the  
35 notion that young people who have been involved in crime cannot empathise with others, with  
36 multiple examples from our study demonstrating young people's deep sense of empathy for their  
37 peers. This demonstrates that rather than young people lacking empathy, some of the typical  
38 interventions designed to draw on their empathy for others may have simply been misdirected. This  
39 suggests a reframing of reparative practices to centre the child and focus on reparation with their  
40 immediate peer communities could be a possible alternative.  
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44 Within any reframing of reparative practices, there is a need to recognise that young people in the  
45 justice system have experienced harm and trauma themselves, rather than them being simplistically  
46 framed as the enactors of harm in restorative and reparative practices. The Child First and trauma-  
47 informed approaches to youth justice reinforce the need for reparative approaches that centre  
48 'harm done to (and not just by) young people, including by the professionals and institutions and  
49 that should protect them' (XXX and XXX, 2021: 33). A key way to mitigate harm and  
50 (re)traumatisation by youth offending services could be through more forms of co-produced peer  
51 involvement in the design and delivery of services.  
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