

# Connected Communities

## The involvement of children and young people in research within the criminal justice area

Jill Clark and Karen Laing



# The involvement of children and young people in research within the criminal justice area

**Jill Clark and Karen Laing**

## **Executive Summary**

This review focuses on the evidence of participation of children and young people (CYP) in, and with, criminal justice research. This review has identified the current position of CYP in research into the criminal justice system in the UK, and suggested a model of justification for involving them. The evidence shows that there has been a genuine progression over the last decade in terms of ensuring the participation of CYP. Participatory research would seem an effective way of ensuring CYP can challenge negative perceptions, stimulate change and become visible in a positive manner. Any research involving CYP needs to be clear in its focus and purpose, and provide opportunities for CYP to engage in a meaningful and relevant way, in order that it can enhance their well-being and be mutually beneficial. In this way CYP can become active and empowered citizens in their own communities and beyond. On the basis of the evidence we recommend that researchers examine their motives carefully, work in partnership to share knowledge and skills, and collect evidence from CYP about 'when' it is appropriate to involve young people in research, and 'which' young people.

## **Researchers and Project Partners**

Jill Clark and Karen Laing, Research Centre for Learning and Teaching, Newcastle University.

## **Key words**

Participation, Children, Young people, Research, Criminal Justice, Policy, Offending.

# The involvement of children and young people in research within the criminal justice area

## *Introduction*

This review focuses on the evidence of participation of children and young people (CYP) in, and with, criminal justice research. The challenges and issues of crime and the criminal justice system are those that affect all communities and all connections between them. In meeting these challenges, a perspective that has been largely absent has been that of CYP. Given that criminal careers seem to have origins in people's early lives and given that young people are some of the most numerous victims of crime, this omission is unhelpful in meeting the challenges of criminal justice and reducing criminal behaviour. This review scopes the existing literature to examine which areas of criminal justice research involve young people. The review focuses on particular sub-themes which are pertinent to young people: fear, perception and experience of crime (as both victim and perpetrator); views (and experiences) of sentencing and punishment; fighting crime and prevention and offender re-entry and resettlement.

The scoping review is a best evidence synthesis exploring the following research questions:

- What kind of involvement has there been of CYP in research within the criminal justice area?
- In what areas has there been no involvement of young people at all?
- Why do we involve young people? When do we involve them? How do we involve young people appropriately?
- What are the ethics of involving young people? What are the issues of power and voice? What is their level of involvement?

In the following discussion of the findings of the review, when we refer to researchers we mean anyone conducting research about or with CYP. We do not provide a comprehensive bibliography here, and the references we use are mainly illustrative. We will make available the full bibliography at [www.ncl.ac.uk/cflat](http://www.ncl.ac.uk/cflat) at a later date.

## *Findings*

The definition of CYP is broad. Whilst children are defined by the UNCRC as being under 18, young people could be much older. Thus there was little consistency across the studies we reviewed, in which there was a vast age range with the youngest participants being 9 and the oldest up to 27. The largest concentration of CYP involved in research

was between the ages of 11 and 18. There were no studies found which involved younger children, but this may not be of surprise, given that the subject area was the criminal justice system and children under 10 are rarely considered in terms of youth justice. Most studies tended to involve both males and females with the exception of the studies about custody, which were almost exclusively male-dominated, reflecting the population of the secure estate. Nevertheless, males are over-represented in research about every sub-theme we considered, again, reflecting the offender population or the population perceived to be at risk. Most of the research we reviewed about offending and the services supporting offenders was conducted with CYP who were service users. Research about crime prevention and the fear of crime was usually conducted in CYP 'spaces' such as schools and youth clubs, or in particular areas where they lived.

In the studies we reviewed, researchers rarely discuss their justifications for involving young people, at whatever level, in their research. Commonly, they cite the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (and it is Article 12, in particular which states that CYP are entitled to have their voice heard regarding situations and contexts that affect them), as a starting point for justifying the involvement of CYP, but do not reflect further on their own rationale and commitment to participatory approaches. Nevertheless, a clear model of justification seems to emerge based on the background of those conducting the research (see Fig 1). Studies written by academic researchers tended to emphasise the importance of better understanding complex social phenomena and were inherently knowledge driven. Because of this, CYP tended to be involved in the research in order to provide information that could help academics to make sense of issues such as why CYP offend. In contrast, much research in the criminal justice area has been, in recent years, conducted by national charities working either to enhance the wellbeing of CYP or to provide services for CYP involved in, or at risk of, offending. These charities tended to be very explicit about why they involved CYP in research. Their justifications were ethos driven and based on ensuring that marginalised voices are heard, enabling effective systems change, and enhancing outcomes for CYP themselves. The third dimension of the model is a policy driven approach. Studies with CYP that took this approach were usually commissioned by governmental organisations (e.g. national and local Government departments, Youth Justice Board). This approach was based on an appreciation of the development and implementation of policy following the UNCRC which stipulated that the voices of CYP are heard and taken into account. There are exceptions to this, of course, such as McCarry (2012), and an increasing awareness in recent years that it is possible to combine these rationales and that the reasons people undertake research with CYP can be multi-faceted and complex (e.g. Hart and Thompson 2009; Marfleet 2008). Fig 1 below illustrates the model in simple terms, but the complexities within the model need further debate.

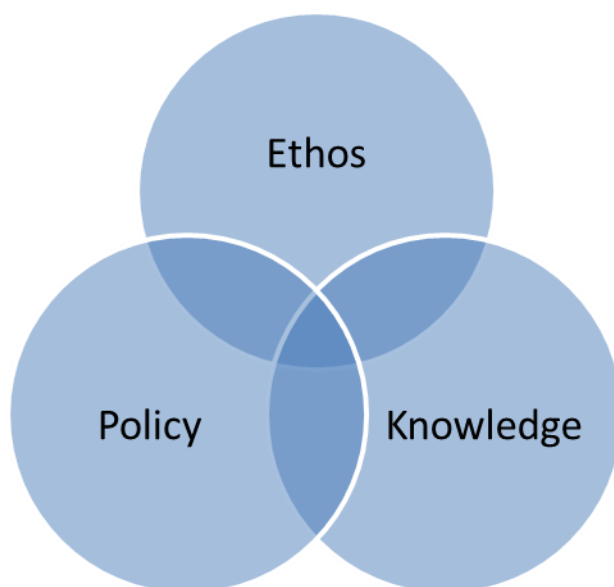


Fig 1 Justification model for the participation of CYP in research

Our review uncovered only 3 studies of what we might define as 'full' participation in research, i.e. CYP deciding a topic, designing the research, collecting and analysing data and dissemination (Young NCB 2010; HLPR 2010a; Barnardo's - undated ). In addition, we found seven further studies that incorporated many of the elements of a truly participatory approach, and which went beyond consultation or CYP as respondents, but which had important elements of participatory methods missing. The majority of the remaining studies included CYP as respondents with isolated incidents of further involvement, for example in dissemination. CYP acting as peer researchers was very rare. What we did see, particularly with long standing organisations or researchers (e.g. HLPR; Pain et al 2010; Boulton et al 2008) is that a process of development occurred as the involvement of CYP progressed. The CYP who had been involved in previous studies started to formulate new research ideas and the experience gained by the researchers enabled an increasingly participatory approach. We found no evidence of CYP being asked about their experiences of taking part in the research process itself although clues could sometimes be gained about how they felt about taking part in research. For example, some young people were quoted as saying there was 'no point' in taking part in consultation as nothing had been done with findings in the past, and nothing had changed (e.g. Children's Society 2006). The methods used in research that involved CYP were often predictable. Much research was based on surveys of CYP where CYP tended to be respondents only and the questions asked were often about satisfaction with services and incidents of crime, antisocial behaviour or fear. More in-depth views were enabled to be elicited when researcher used more innovative and creative methods with CYP. For instance, User Voice (2011) used rap and lyric workshops and HLPR (2010b) used drawings by CYP to collect data. These methods were seen to be more relevant to CYP and a means by which they could more readily express themselves. Of course, this kind of data poses challenges for the (usually adult) researcher when trying to interpret CYP voices.

Many researchers have identified barriers to the participation of CYP. Many of these barriers are common to research with any group of people, but are far more pronounced when working with CYP. In order to facilitate future research with CYP, it is important to learn from the experiences of researchers who are involving CYP routinely. Gatekeepers to research are particularly salient in research with CYP. Practitioners, parents, and carers can be wary of researchers' intentions and even where committed to the research aims, sometimes 'choose' the CYP they think will be most suitable, rather than ensuring all CYP can participate if they want to. Practitioners often misunderstand what participation involves, and vary in their commitment to it. Staff cultures in services mean that the participation of CYP is often not a priority (and often seen as a luxury), and indeed there are usually no performance measures or accountability for ensuring participation. Sometimes this can be due to a political ambivalence about the right of CYP (particularly offenders, and those in the secure estate) to have a right to express their views. Research commissioned by HLPB has identified this as a consistent issue in their work. In addition, staff and researchers often lack the skills and knowledge to engage CYP effectively and work with them in a way that is appropriate to CYP. National Youth Agency (2010) recognised this, and one of the outputs of their research was a training package for Youth Offending Team staff on how to engage young people and work in a participatory way. This all helps, not only for research specifically, but in helping to generate and sustain a culture where participation is a central concern. Furthermore, research is often not funded adequately to facilitate suitable methodology and skills for conducting research with CYP in a participatory way. There are examples of good participatory research with CYP involving partnerships between different sectors who share knowledge and skills (e.g. McCarry 2012; Youth Justice Board 2007; Marfleet 2008). Studies conducted by national charities are those that are seemingly having the most impact on policy and practice, as they are very visible in their campaigning based on their research with CYP.

This review has identified the current position of CYP in research into the criminal justice system in the UK. The evidence shows that there has been a genuine progression over the last decade in terms of ensuring the participation of CYP. Nevertheless, this involvement often does not consist of any more than CYP as respondents. This is not necessarily a negative feature in itself, but it is clear that opportunities for more participation by CYP are often not considered. If appropriate participation is enabled, this can lead to more meaningful, relevant and beneficial research for all those involved, including CYP. In considering the involvement of CYP in research, it is important to be aware that recent evidence posits that their participation does not have to happen at all levels, all the time, but should happen where it seems relevant and appropriate, particularly for the CYP (McCarthy 2012). CYP are usually highly visible in the criminal justice arena, but often in a negative way due to media and public perception:

Within the community, young people are highly visible and therefore more readily stigmatised and marginalised. At the same time they tend to be, paradoxically, *invisible* in terms of research, service delivery and policy (HLPB 2005; p.4).

Participatory research would seem an effective way of ensuring CYP can challenge these perceptions, stimulate change and become visible in a positive manner. This research,

however, needs to be clear in its focus and purpose, and provide opportunities for CYP to engage in a meaningful and relevant way, in order that it can enhance their well-being and be mutually beneficial. In this way CYP can become active and empowered citizens in their own communities and beyond.

### ***Key recommendations***

- Researchers should examine their motives for enabling CYP participation, as they shape the approach that they take to the research, the driving ethos that they adopt and, therefore, the way in which they ask questions, which, in turn, influences the results that they get, and the knowledge that is produced.
- Researchers should form partnerships in order to learn from each other in terms of approach, rationale and methodology, and to ensure that research is accessible to a broad audience, including CYP.
- Although research has included a broad mix of CYP (in terms of age, gender, ethnicity) in order to gain their views, researchers must ensure that their voices are appropriate, representative and proportional.
- There has to be certain elements in place that can help make participatory research work. It is about us thinking differently and creatively and about the appropriateness of what we can do with CYP. It is about offering creative solutions and respecting differences. CYP have different ways of doing things, and can offer different and valuable perspectives, and it is about building on that as a strength rather than a problem to be overcome. The offender population generally, as we know, has low levels of literacy, educational achievement and attainment and poor verbal and communication skills. Methodologies which have a participatory element, combined with creative approaches such as using visual research tools could be more appropriate?
- Research should include a stage of reflection, in order to gain the views of CYP about their experiences of participating in a study. This may then enable us to be more effective at ensuring CYPs participation and ensure that participation is valuable and meaningful to them. We need to know more about how CYP experience research and be asking the question 'how was it for you?', 'what did you get out of it?'. Such questions as these are rarely asked, and consequently the answers are missing and we face the danger of falling into the trap of involving CYP in research because it is 'the right thing to do'.
- Feedback should be given to CYP about actions arising from the research findings. Ideally, this could include CYP themselves having input and involvement in decision making and dissemination.
- There is a need to think carefully, and collect evidence from YP about 'when' it is appropriate to involve young people in research, and 'which' young people. Although CYP are sometimes seen as 'experts' in their lives, there are times when they are aware that their voice should not be the only one taken into account. Just as adults, there are also times when it may be inappropriate for them to take part in research, or speak on behalf of others. Researchers should not be afraid to

tackle these thorny issues but think about participation in a different way. It should not be hierarchical, with full participation in designing, planning, executing and disseminating research the ultimate aim on all occasions, but their involvement should be appropriate to the task and topic in hand.

- In order to conduct participatory research effectively, funding must take into account the need for development time to engage CYP, up-skilling of research staff and CYP, and building relationships.
- Where participatory research works well, and is robust, it has usually involved researchers of different backgrounds working in partnership, sharing their ethos, goals and knowledge. This is a practice that should be encouraged.

## References and external links

- Barnardo's (undated) *NE Young People's Regional Advisory Group, 'Speaking out about knife, gun and gang crime'*. Essex: Barnardo's.
- Boulton, M.J., Trueman, M. and Murray, L. (2008) Associations between peer victimization, fear of future victimization and disrupted concentration on class work among junior school pupils *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 78, 473–489.
- The Children's Society (2006) *Just Justice: A study into black young people's experiences of the youth justice system*. London: The Children's Society.
- Hart, D. and Thompson, C. (2009) *Young people's participation in the youth justice system*, London: National Children's Bureau.
- HLPR (2005) *Once upon a time in the west: Social deprivation and rural youth crime*. London: The Howard League for Penal Reform.
- HLPR (2010a) *Life inside 2010: A unique insight into the day to day experiences of 15-17 year old males in prison*. London: The Howard League for Penal Reform.
- HLPR (2010b) *Life Outside: Collective Identity, Collective Exclusion*. London: The Howard League for Penal Reform.
- Marfleet, M. (2008) *Why carry a weapon? A study of knife crime amongst 15-17 year old males in London*. London: The Howard League for Penal Reform.
- McCarry, M. (2012) Who benefits? A critical reflection of children and young people's participation in sensitive research, *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 15:1, 55-68.
- National Youth Agency (2010) *Voice and influence in the Youth Justice System*. Leicester: National Youth Agency.
- Pain, R., Panelli, R., Kindon, S. and Little, J. (2010) Moments in everyday/distant geopolitics: Young people's fears and hopes *Geoforum*, 41, 972–982.
- United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989. UN General Assembly Resolution 44/25. Retrieved December 22<sup>nd</sup>, from <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/crc.htm#art12>.
- User Voice (2011) *What's your story? Young offenders' insights into tackling youth crime and its causes*. London: User Voice.
- Young NCB (2010) *Children and Young People's Fear of Crime Survey 2010*. London: National Children's Bureau.
- Youth Justice Board (2007) *Groups, gangs and weapons*. London: The Youth Justice Board.



## The Connected Communities

Connected Communities is a cross-Council Programme being led by the AHRC in partnership with the EPSRC, ESRC, MRC and NERC and a range of external partners. The current vision for the Programme is:

*"to mobilise the potential for increasingly inter-connected, culturally diverse, communities to enhance participation, prosperity, sustainability, health & well-being by better connecting research, stakeholders and communities."*

Further details about the Programme can be found on the AHRC's Connected Communities web pages at:

[www.ahrc.ac.uk/FundingOpportunities/Pages/connectedcommunities.aspx](http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/FundingOpportunities/Pages/connectedcommunities.aspx)

