



Experiential Peers Cultivate a Participation Culture in Youth Justice

Journal:	<i>Safer Communities</i>
Manuscript ID	SC-07-2022-0024.R3
Manuscript Type:	Practice Paper
Keywords:	Desistance, Lived Experience, Legitimacy, Narrative Scripts, Redemption, Youth Justice, Care Experience, Child First

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Manuscripts

MANUSCRIPT DETAILS

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ABSTRACT:

The aim of this viewpoint paper is to explore the concept of experiential peer support, which involves individuals who have lived experiences of using care and justice services. This paper discusses whether experiential peer support can contribute to developing a participatory culture in youth justice practice.

This viewpoint paper will critically evaluate the relational power of experiential peers. Particular attention will be paid to the key components of relational practices by reflecting on ways to enhance the voice of the child within participatory and child first approaches. The paper draws on a range of evidence and research to explore whether inclusion of a lived experience perspective can foster participatory cultures.

Experiential peers can create a participatory youth justice culture, which can positively impact on desistance for justice involved children.

Further research needs to be undertaken to extrapolate the key characteristics of effective experiential peer support. This includes discussion on whether recruitment of wounded healers into professional youth justice roles can enhance participation in youth justice settings and construct conditions for social growth to develop in youth justice practice.

CUST_PRACTICAL_IMPLICATIONS__(LIMIT_100_WORDS) :No data available.

CUST_SOCIAL_IMPLICATIONS__(LIMIT_100_WORDS) :No data available.

The author of this viewpoint paper has personal experience of care, youth incarceration and professional experience of youth justice participation practice, providing a unique vantage point and contribution to the desistance and rehabilitation literature.

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Purpose

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Design/methodology/approach

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Findings

Experiential peers can create a participatory youth justice culture, which can positively impact on desistance for justice involved children.

Implications,

Further research needs to be undertaken to extrapolate the key characteristics of effective experiential peer support. This includes discussion on whether recruitment of *wounded healers* into professional youth justice roles can enhance participation in youth justice settings and construct conditions for social growth to develop in youth justice practice.

Originality

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3 The author of this viewpoint paper has personal experience of care, youth incarceration and
4 professional experience of youth justice participation practice, providing a unique vantage point and
5 contribution to the desistance and rehabilitation literature.
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10 **Key words**

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14 Desistance, Lived Experience, Child First, Legitimacy, Narrative Scripts, Redemption, Youth Justice,
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16 Care Experience
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23 **Introduction**

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25 This reflection and viewpoint paper draws on the author's extensive career within youth justice,
26 predominantly taking lead on and co-producing participatory practice with children and young people
27 within youth justice services (YJS). Firstly, the paper discusses the concept of participation and then
28 proceeds to review the evidence base behind the effectiveness of this approach with children involved
29 in the justice system. It then outlines why collaboration with children is a central tenet of 'child first'
30 which has become a guiding principle as part of the Youth Justice Board's strategic plan 2021–2024
31 (YJB, 2021). This paper will then seek to evaluate the contribution of lived experience peers within
32 youth justice practice; exploring whether the inclusion of the lived experience perspective can help to
33 nurture a participation culture in youth justice within a child first context. It is worth noting that the
34 terms experiential peers and lived experience professionals will be used interchangeably. Throughout,
35 the paper will examine the barriers to the inclusion of experiential peers into statutory services such
36 as youth justice and probation, utilising the author's book and memoir of the transition from prisoner
37 to youth justice practitioner as a point of reference. The paper sets out to provide insight into how
38 micro-aggressions can be experienced within the workplace by prison experienced professionals as a
39 minority and vulnerable group. The paper will then draw on desistance literature in order to critically
40 evaluate the strengths and limitations of employing professionals with lived experience as 'wounded'
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3 healers' (LeBel et al., 2015 p.109). The paper concludes with recommendations for future research
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5 and practice development in youth justice.
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10 11 **Participation**

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14 Participation can be described as a method of practice that seeks to include the voices of children into
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16 the development and design of youth justice services (Smithson & Gray, 2021). However, giving voice
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18 to this group of children is a relatively recent development in the policy arena due to justice involved
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20 children historically being primarily defined by their 'risk to society' status (Creaney, 2020 p.3).
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22 Participation is an approach that seeks to elevate the voices of justice involved children wherein they
23
24 are part of decision-making processes (Case, et al., 2020). Research suggests that developing a
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26 participation culture within youth justice places the child as an expert in their own world and improves
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28 practice from the child's perspective (See Case & Haines, 2015). Participation and collaboration with
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30 children are one of four key tenets of the child first evidence base that sets standards for children in
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32 youth justice (MoJ & YJB, 2021). A tenet that evidence suggests is effective when embedded into
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34 practice and policy along with other tenets such as seeing children as children, developing a pro-social
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36 identity for positive outcomes, and promoting diversion from the justice system to reduce stigma (See
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38 Case & Browning, 2021).
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44 The author of this paper has led on developments such as the 'Clear Approach Group' and 'Challenge
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46 and Raise Expectations (CARE) Group'. These initiatives were voluntary programmes that elevated the
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48 voices of children with experience of both the care and youth justice systems. The participation
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50 approach that was adopted helped to facilitate children's participation in decision making processes.
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52 The work was recognised as good practice in both an inspection report, and in the independent review
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54 of the over-representation of children in care and care leavers in the justice system (Laming, 2016).
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56 The author also has lived experience of the justice system to the point of incarceration prior to
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58 becoming a youth justice practitioner. As a result of this unique dual perspective, this paper will seek
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3 to provide further evidence to empirical studies that have demonstrated that utilising the lived
4 experiences of offenders or ex-offenders can become desistance in practice (Buck, 2017) and
5 enhances a participatory culture in youth justice. Moreover, it is argued that this unique perspective
6 derives from lived experience – often a distinctly different point of reference than that of
7 professionals, which tends to have been acquired from training and practice (Creaney, 2020).
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18 **Participation Through Lived Experience**

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20 In the participation groups the author helped to facilitate, there was a commitment to create non-
21 hierarchical relationships between practitioners and children. It is worth noting that there was no
22 mandatory requirement for the children to attend. There was a focus on capitalising on lived
23 experience as an experiential peer, to build a relationship that had a shared vantage point of how the
24 justice system impacts on clients in both positive and negative ways. This led to a *we* language about
25 how *we* could better improve the services from the lived experience perspective and recognise the
26 children as experts in line with child first principles. Furthermore, there was emphasis on sharing the
27 skills that developed whilst navigating the justice system which established a positive self-narrative of
28 social changers for the entire group. The principles that underpin participatory practice are “power
29 sharing and valuing authentic understandings and lived expertise” (Smithson et al., 2021 p.359), and
30 recognising the skills of children and young people in conflict with the law which requires a strengths-
31 based, trauma responsive approach (Peer Power / YJB, 2021). As the facilitator of the groups had
32 circumnavigated similar spaces as a justice involved children, the skills obtained were more likely to
33 be appreciated and understood (See Lenkens et al., 2021). One main goal was to develop collaborative
34 understandings of the road into and out of crime as *wounded healers*, which can create “recovery and
35 treatment communities” (Maruna et al., 2004 p.146). The groups being facilitated by an experiential
36 peer led to an overall more recovery-orientated perspective with a specific focus on system change
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3 rather than reduction of risk. These are principles which are closely aligned with the child first strategic
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5 objective of the Youth Justice Board (Case and Haines, 2021).
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8 Lived experience has been defined as “direct personal experience of a social issue/issues; ‘lived
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10 expertise’ as insights gathered through lived experience; and ‘experts by experience’ as change-
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12 makers who seek to use their lived experience to inform the work of social purpose organizations or
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14 social change work” (Buck et al., 2022 p.823; See also Sandhu, 2017 p.5). Lived experienced
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16 Professionals (LEPs) are people that have “lived experience of a service or institution that are later
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18 employed by that particular service or institution, equal or commensurate to their colleagues”
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20 (Brierley, 2021 p.109). In a youth justice context, these individuals have been described throughout
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22 the work of Lenkens et al., (2019; 2021) as experiential peers or in Maruna’s (2001) work around
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24 desistance and self-narrative scripts as *wounded healers*. There are anecdotal lived experience
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26 contributions to literature that illustrate why capitalising on this is likely to develop legitimacy;
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28 simultaneously creating a sense of community from the perspective of justice involved children and
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30 supporting them to make steps towards desistance (Brierley, 2019; Brierley, 2021; Weaver, 2008).
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32 There seems to be little research focus or evaluation on the strengths and limitations of recruiting
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34 LEPs into the youth justice system commensurate to their colleagues. Although, there is evidence to
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36 suggest that the mentor/mentee relationship does influence desistance due, at least in part, to the
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38 mentee mimicking the behaviour of the mentor (Buck, 2017). This paper questions whether the
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40 appetite of youth justice to embrace participation is an opportunity to capitalise on this mimicking of
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42 behaviour by including people that have ceased offending as professionals.
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52 **We are not Hard to Reach if we’re Invited In**

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55 Many of those involved in anti-social and criminal behaviour are often described as a population that
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57 are hard to reach or difficult to engage (Lenkens et al., 2019). In their book *How to Reach Hard to*
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59 *Reach Children*, Pomerantz et al., (2007) argue that “using a term such as ‘hard to reach’ or ‘at risk’
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3 emphasises that the client (child or family) has the problem, rather than focusing on the institutional
4 structures that create and maintain inequality” (P.8). These labels are a stigmatising and demeaning
5 way to describe a population within society that are often excluded from employment within the very
6 institutions that claim they are hard to reach. A feature of this paper is to indeed explore whether the
7 hard to reach can ever truly develop into positions where they are employed to do the reaching.
8 Research does indicate that for many involved in criminality, their involvement tends to peak in late
9 childhood and early adolescence, whilst the desistance process of those most engaged in criminality
10 begins in early adulthood (Farrington, 1986). In contrast, evidence also suggests that there are life
11 course persistent offenders who make up a large proportion of the adult criminal justice system
12 (Moffitt, 1993). This is evidence that although some continue to offend, most desist as they mature
13 into adulthood.

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15 An empirical study demonstrated – through interviewing what the researchers described as *at-risk*
16 youth and emerging adults - that this *hard-to-reach* group of young people and children often refuse
17 support from professionals that they feel have little understanding of the unique intricacies of their
18 social barriers and lived realities, often described as social identity formation (Lenkens et al., 2019).
19 These interviewees were inadvertently or deliberately stating that they believe having professionals
20 who better understand those lived realities would increase the likelihood of their engagement in
21 support services. Previous empirical studies have provided evidence demonstrating “that people are
22 more likely to help others believed to be members of the same community or to share similar
23 attitudes” (Levine et al., 2005 p.444; Hogg, 2018 & Postmes et al., 2005). This seemed to be a key
24 feature of the authentic relationships developed within participatory practice with those under
25 supervision and authentic connections that were developed with justice involved youth throughout
26 the author’s career. Furthermore, there is now an emerging body of literature that illustrates the ways
27 in which experiential peers can indeed provide ‘hooks for change’ and construct a culture that
28 provides the conditions for non-offending identities to form through role modelling (Brierley, 2021;
29 Buck, 2017; Buck et al, 2022; Creaney, 2020; LeBel, 2015; Lenkens 2019; Lenkens, 2021; Maruna, 2001;

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3 Nixon, 2020). Giordano (2002) explains ‘hooks for change’ as a symbolic interaction of social factors
4 that provide the individual involved in offending the opportunity to cease involvement in crime
5 through cognitive transformation. However, most of the discussion around peer influence in
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10 criminology seems to focus on how justice involved peers shape behaviour negatively (McGloin et al.,
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12 2011), which may influence how children view services.
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18 **Constructing Legitimacy**

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21 A large proportion of children that enter the youth justice system have experienced poverty, abuse,
22 and neglect (Glendinning, 2021; Chard 2021). The children interviewed in Lenkens’ (2019) study
23 demonstrated that they failed to recognise the justice professional’s legitimacy, or right to exercise
24 power which has been identified as an essential component to govern (See Tankebe, 2013). This
25 seemed to reflect life experience, not qualification, knowledge, or social status. Given the children
26 stated that they did not believe professionals understood their lived reality, an approach to obtain
27 legitimacy of this group could be to employ staff that they believe do understand and resonate with
28 their relational associations, barriers, world views and perspectives. Indeed, this would require a
29 reimagining of the way support services including youth justice services connect and work alongside
30 the disadvantaged communities that the *hard to reach* and *at-risk* individuals belong to. Developing
31 trusting and authentic relationships with just one professional adult within a justice organisation,
32 could develop legitimacy and become “a first step away from criminal behaviour and towards
33 desistance” (Lenkens et al., 2021 p.549). However small that step, this legitimacy can become a vital
34 step towards desistance in youth (McMahan et al., 2018; Brierley, 2019).
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56 **Breaking Down Barriers**

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3 In the foreword of the author's memoir, the Head of Service stated that before recruiting someone
4 with lived experience of prison and persistent offending, Human Resources were clear that "this is a
5 risk – a big risk and if you take this risk Jim you are accountable for your decision" (Brierley, 2019 p.7).
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7 This meant that the organisation placed this risk on the Head of Service as an individual who was on a
8 successful career path as a senior leader of a large justice organisation. This inevitably creates a barrier
9 to employment for those with prison experience within the criminal justice system unless individuals
10 like Jim take this risk. Although the YJS advocates on the behalf of justice involved children to receive
11 second chances post offending, expecting this value is followed by other services and organisations,
12 they seemingly failed to uphold their commitment to their own cause. Inevitably marginalising a
13 potential resource that evidence suggests could be vital for providing 'hooks for change' and
14 developing desistance in youth (McMahan & Jump, 2018), while also legitimising the YJS through
15 participation and inclusion (Duke et al., 2021). This risk driven culture may have lost sight of seeing
16 the human element and communities that sits behind any assessed risk. As a result, humans are being
17 defined by their worst moment, even when the evidence suggests desistance is the more likely
18 outcome.
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37 Throughout the transition from being a care experienced, heroin addicted prisoner to a Youth Justice
38 Specialist, there were many challenges to overcome, once the YJS (or Head of Service) took the risk of
39 employing someone with prison experience. One of many challenges was trying to navigate
40 discussions with professionals that merited theory and evidence over lived reality and experience.
41 Having real-life experiences disregarded and turned into anecdotes continued a feeling of isolation,
42 triggering the pains of alienation and incarceration. Focussing on individual choices of children, while
43 failing to recognise childhood trauma, neurodiversity (see Day, 2022b), and that the "constructing of
44 a new identity that is key to the process of desistance is not just internal or inner change but is
45 influenced by broader social contexts which determine if new identifies are available" (McMahan &
46 Jump, 2018 p.13). Most of these challenging discussions took place in 2007 - 2010, shortly before the
47 YJS developed an understanding of the link between childhood trauma and youth crime, receiving
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3 training around trauma-informed practice (Wright et al., 2016). This was a principle or type of practice
4 that the author was inadequately trying to illustrate to colleagues. Arguments that youth crime is
5 simply a matter of poor choices by children is too simple an explanation and makes children
6 responsible when the causes are often outside of any child's control. It has been argued that reducing
7 risk factors through assessment and intervention can be "harmful to children due to its labelling and
8 interventionist tendencies and neglects and even breaches requirements of international children's
9 rights instruments such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child" (Haines & Case,
10 2018 p.133). Although, the author was unable to articulate this at the time, or back it up with research
11 or evidence due to a lack of primary and secondary education and school exclusion.
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24 This experience triggered strong personal emotions, creating an overwhelming feeling of frustration,
25 dysregulation, and stigma. Stigma can arise when an individual or group is identified as being deviant
26 or having a spoiled identity (Ahearne, 2021). Admittedly, the author did not always respond well while
27 navigating through the YJS with little understanding of how to articulate the negative impact of the
28 care experience and childhood trauma to others. The powerful emotions of stigma, family dysfunction,
29 the care experience, heroin addiction and youth incarceration can require sensitivity from colleagues.
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31 A lack of sensitivity or over challenge on personal subjective realities of these experiences can impact
32 on psychological resilience during the experience (Türk-Kurtça, 2020). This was an everyday
33 occurrence whilst in prison. It was a challenge to continue to navigate this tension while becoming a
34 justice professional. Having individual perspective disregarded as a minority in the workplace is a
35 central tenet of micro-aggressions (Basford, 2014). Microaggression is defined as "everyday verbal,
36 behavioural, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that convey hostile,
37 derogatory, or negative slights and insults toward members of oppressed groups" (Galupo, 2016
38 p.271).
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56 Although extremely challenging and triggering at times, the author learnt to contribute in constructive
57 ways within challenging conversations and still stay true to core values and principles. Holding a strong
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3 belief that lived experience perspective would contribute to the youth justice narratives around
4 desistance and present alternative viewpoints. It was also imperative to understand that lived
5 experience viewpoints can be enhanced through learning from colleagues and literature. This was a
6 process, as was developing a sense of belonging to the professional table. At times it could feel
7 isolating and unsafe in a sea of imposter syndrome which “increased levels of stress, burnout, and
8 decreased job performance and satisfaction over time” (Hutchins & Rainbolt, 2017 p.195). It was
9 imperative to remain driven by a belief that lived experience inclusion would develop legitimacy from
10 younger peers and help children and young people to see beyond offending and provide a visual
11 example of a crime free future. The author sought a sense of community from the children and young
12 people in challenging times. Allowing one to feel that although crime and everything associated had
13 been left behind, there remained contact with others that related to that past which made the
14 transition a little less daunting.

Inclusive Practice Leading to Transformational Change

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36 The lived experience - professional tension inevitably led to healthy debates within the youth justice
37 office that involved the lived experience perspective. The difference found in these circumstances
38 from being a prisoner, was an equal level of social status and authority to speak on the justice
39 responses to justice involved children. Challenging the risk deficit reductionist narrative did not lead
40 to an increase in the author’s assessed risk levels or being labelled as aggressive. These professional
41 debates often take place in the absence of justice experienced individuals as they are not being
42 recruited into the office space due to risk being a barrier. This means there is a limited exchange of
43 knowledge from the world view of those that believe there is a lack of real-life understanding within
44 statutory justice organisations. This argument applies even more so with considerations to the barriers
45 in place for those that have experienced incarceration, addiction or would have been described as
46 career criminals, persistent offenders, hard to reach or at-risk. Recent policy shifts in youth justice
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3 present an opportunity to move away from the risk driven culture. This means there is scope to be
4 innovative and advance a research agenda that seeks to explore the strengths and limitations of
5 employing LEPs with proven track records of desisting from crime.
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10 Child first is a practice and policy shift in “redefining ‘youth offenders’ as children in trouble who
11 present with unmet needs” (Case, 2021 p.10). There has been a seismic shift from a risk management
12 culture to a ‘child friendly’ one with collaboration and participation as a central theme. The principal
13 argument of the author here is to draw attention to the evidence that lived experiential peers can
14 assist the YJS in all areas of child first principles in practice, cultivating a participatory approach to
15 children in trouble. Research indicates that assistance may be required as moving from a risk paradigm
16 to a child friendly system has led to confusion at the “macro, meso and micro levels of youth justice”
17 (Day, 2022a p.5). This is a likely contributing factor to the risk culture continuing to dominate front-
18 line practice (Hampson, 2018). If there is not a mobilising of all stakeholders, including the lived
19 experience voices, academics, policy makers and practitioners to a common understanding of child
20 first – it is likely that a “risk culture cloud will loom heavily over the emerging child first world” (Day,
21 2022 p.16). The lack of action and inclusion of lived experience commentary is evidence that these
22 perspectives are not of value to the justice system, and obtaining legitimacy is not a key priority. It
23 may be argued that this ideology of devaluing the lived perspectives of justice involved children may
24 contribute, at least in part, to young people engaging in (further) offending behaviours (See Hazel, et
25 al., 2021).
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46 A benefit for the inclusion of LEPs is that they can become what is described in the recovery world as
47 ‘community connectors’ as a community asset and a potential link from disadvantaged communities
48 to support services (Best et al., 2017). In the author’s experience, there was an organic exchange which
49 led to a transformation within the service too. The author qualified in youth justice and became a
50 specialist for looked after children, being responsible for developing strategies that safely divert this
51 vulnerable group away from the YJS all together (Laming, 2016). After 15 years of service, there was a
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3 validation and integration process which became a 'rite of passage', inevitably bringing a wealth of
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5 lived experience insight into the YJS. The knowledge exchange seemed to be a two-way reciprocal
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7 relationship. An enhancement in critical thinking, academic knowledge around justice, crime, and
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9 desistance; and the service professionals were able to reflect, whether consciously or unconsciously
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11 on their practice by having an ex-prisoner work alongside them. The recognition of experiential
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13 expertise has been implemented in mental health and substance recovery services for some time
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15 (Lenkens et al., 2019). Offender to professional books like that of Alan Weaver's *So You Think You*
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17 *Know Me* and others (2008; See also Brierley, 2019), clearly demonstrate the benefits of inclusion of
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19 lived experience into service delivery and knowledge exchange. Presenting evidence that there are
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21 lessons the criminal justice system can learn from health and recovery services (Lenkens et al., 2019).
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23 A systemic review of experiential peer support in a custodial setting for example can have beneficial
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25 effects for the prisoner's emotional well-being (Bagnall et al., 2015). If this is the case for high-risk
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27 situations such as custody, the use of justice-experienced mentors in both youth and criminal justice
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29 community settings should be developed to use the skills of mentors to support mentees through the
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31 desistance process (Creaney, 2020). Evidence of the benefits of Service User Involvement (SUI) in
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33 Probation indicates that employment barriers for those with service user perspectives should be
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35 reduced to include the wisdom and expertise of those receiving justice services and transitioning
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37 through the desistance process (HMIP, 2019).
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47 **Risk and Person-Centred Practice**

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50 A central principle of the breakdown between the minority lived experience perspective and youth
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52 justice colleagues was a belief that an overly formal and risk-based approach actively disengaged
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54 youth (Case, 2015); against many practitioners' perspectives that held true to their training that
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56 focussed on what was described as effective practice through a Risk Factor Prevention Paradigm
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58 (RFPP) (See Case, 2007). A risk driven approach that likely contributes to research findings that indicate
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3 ex-offenders within justice services can find themselves on uncertain ground. Although trying to
4 construct a new identity as helper and no longer offender, there can be justice “colleagues who do
5 not validate this identity” (Nixon, 2020 p.52). This is evidence of an internal conflict or dichotomy
6 between person and child centred practice and risk driven approaches. Indeed, Probation and Youth
7 Justice Services have recently attempted to integrate a blended risk management approach with
8 desistance theory and child first principles, holding a belief that they are naturally compatible
9 (Kemshall, 2021).

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12 However, there are many youth justice scholars that have reservations as to whether this holds true
13 for children (See Case, 2021; Day, 2022a; Hampson 2018). Desistance takes individual stories seriously,
14 recognising social context, social networks, and subjective interpretations as key to understanding
15 long term change (Maruna & Mann, 2019). In evaluating the effectiveness of Peer Mentors in justice
16 services for example, it has been highlighted those mentors can create positive relationships built on
17 trust. However, the research also found that it was hard to see how these functions would be valued
18 in a performative and process driven justice system (Buck, 2018). Meanwhile relational practice and
19 care ethics are key to achieving desistance within probation and justice practice (See Dominey &
20 Canton, 2022). These findings suggest that risk management processes and performance measures
21 may be taking priority over relationships, hope and inspiration which are key features for practitioners
22 to support desistance (Graham & McNeill; Nixon, 2020).

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25 The author’s personal transition into youth justice is an example of this tension. More research is
26 required to ensure that when LEPs overcome significant barriers, they are supported in the workplace
27 to have their perspectives and identities valued and acknowledged. When it comes to social inclusion
28 in the workplace, “individuals have a need to belong, to be appreciated, to be treated fairly, and to be
29 acknowledged from whatever source or basis they derive their identity from” (Nair, 2015 p.26).
30 Therefore, there are not only clear barriers to being truly inclusive of experiential peers, but there are
31 also requirements of a culture change that needs to take place to retain LEP when they are recruited
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3 and not cause “fear and uncertainty” (Nixon, 2020 p.60). Students are encouraged to develop critical
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5 thinking skills. However, being critical as a prisoner or former prisoner of the justice system can
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7 develop into confrontational responses from justice practitioners which needs further exploration.
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9 The justice system as with any system has limitations. Limitations of the justice system do not need to
10
11 be defended by practitioners to those of us that have had those limitations imposed on our lives.
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13 There are enough barriers between justice practitioners and people that have offended to disregard
14
15 the lived reality of the “pains of imprisonment” (Warr, 2016 p.305). This was a point recently made by
16
17 a leading desistance researcher in highlighting that people involved in offending are often “denied all
18
19 of the usual tools of storytelling, and instead forced to rework their stories through the muzzle of
20
21 responsabilisation” (Graebisch & Maruna, 2022 p.251). Not having to rework stories in this way may
22
23 explain why mentor to mentee relationships are “non-judgemental, available, caring, and trusting”
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27 (Kirkwood, 2021 para.7).
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33 **Experiential Peer Facilitated Desistance**

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36 McNeill (2012) suggests six central themes to be considered with desistance focussed interventions:
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38 individualized interventions, motivation towards *hope*, developing resources to overcome social
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40 barriers to desistance, encouraging and respecting self-determination and interventions that focus on
41
42 constructing self and social capital. Experiential Peers offer a unique perspective of the road out of
43
44 criminality, towards desistance in a tangible way that illustrates a visual example of how to develop a
45
46 “script for the future” (Maruna et al., 2007 p.120). This can be described as an advantage when
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48 explaining how to obtain social capital from such a challenging predisposition and doing so within
49
50 authentic connections that provides hope (Brierley, 2021). This is an experiential tool which is a
51
52 significant and effective instrument for promoting desistance as a ‘hook for change’ (Giordano, 2002;
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54 Kirkwood, 2021; Nixon, 2018). Although having this experience can be helpful, it is just one tool and
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59 does not inadvertently mean those without this tool cannot be effective practitioners in a justice
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3 context. It is simply a matter of creating the conditions to allow social bonds to create social capital
4 through the generative act of being concerned for the next generation (Goffman, 1963). Furthermore,
5
6 as argued by Weaver and Weaver (2013), the criminal justice system can enhance the knowledge of
7
8 desistance with an inclusion of experiential peers in practice, policy, and research. The practice
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10 element was emphasised to be the case in an evaluation of a 'peer support' support programme in an
11
12 Australian prison (Hinde & White, 2019). The evaluators explain that "peer support is an ideal
13
14 opportunity to take on a new positive role while serving time" (p.322) which highlights that the
15
16 generative exchange is reciprocally beneficial.
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21 In his Liverpool Desistance Study (LDS), Maruna (2001) presented two self-narrative scripts:
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23 condemnation script for those that felt they were condemned to criminality due to forces outside of
24
25 their control; and redemption script which was those involved in persistent offending that desisted.
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27 These individuals developed a self-narrative script of personal agency that could psychologically
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29 separate their identity from their previous behaviour. Evidence from lived experience literature has
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31 shown that experiential peers can support the development of a positive self-narrative and can
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33 construct a non-offending identity by role modelling that change, which can inspire hope for others
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35 that feel condemned to a life of offending (Brierley, 2019; Weaver, 2008). This involves providing a
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37 'hook for change' (Giordano et al., 2002) and supporting those involved in prolific offending to
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39 deconstruct a self-narrative script that enables desistance (O'Sullivan et al., 2015). Criminologists have
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41 highlighted that "if helping others has adaptive consequences, then an argument can be made to make
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43 opportunities to engage in reciprocal processes of mutual support more widely available to former
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45 prisoners" (Lebel et al., 2015 p.118).
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51 52 53 54 **Limitations of Experiential Peers**

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57 As with any justice approach or intervention, the implementation of experiential peers as a policy has
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59 limitations that needs further research, exploration, and consideration. Lenkens et al., (2021) highlight
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3 that research needs to be undertaken to extrapolate which characteristics are required to prevent the
4 experiential peer becoming overburdened. Moreover, an important risk that needs mitigating is that
5 experiential peers may not denounce criminal behaviour or may even project the notion that the
6 behaviour is acceptable. Deliberation needs to be placed on the client's stage of the desistance
7 process. It is difficult to accurately assess when a 'hook for change' (Schinkel, 2015) is likely to be more
8 effective. It may be that having an experiential peer could become that very hook. In an evaluation of
9 a mentoring scheme, capitalising on lived experiences of mentees and mentors, Wong et al., (2021)
10 found that supporting individual agency, whilst avoiding dependency is a tricky balance within this
11 framework. It was suggested that the balance towards dependency is something that is unlikely to be
12 effective and empower clients. This does indicate that researching the characteristics of effective
13 experiential peers, such as Brierley (2019) and Weaver (2008) have done, is a key component to
14 developing and implementing experiential peers into youth justice practice and policy. Buck (2018)
15 also found that not every person leaving crime behind will want to become a mentor. It is important
16 to note that many that do, may not have the acquired skills to be a mentor or operate within a
17 professional environment. This was something the author clearly struggled with in the early stages of
18 transition. However, with the right support from colleagues, an inclusive space, and a focus on his
19 client relationships, this was a barrier that was overcome.

20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40 41 42 43 44 45 **Conclusion**

46
47 There is empirical and theoretical evidence that experiential peers can positively contribute to the
48 youth and criminal justice system in practice, policy, and literature. Notwithstanding the limitations
49 that have been explored within this viewpoint paper, the benefits of recruiting, training, and educating
50 people with personal experience of the justice system, who have desisted, is likely to improve the
51 experience of children involved in offending travelling through the system. Evidence also suggests that
52 having a similar experience and desisting from offending provides an insight into personal challenges
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3 of navigating services that can develop into hooks for change for children within a child first
4 framework. This approach aligns closely with desistance principles as experiential peers can use their
5 skills and tools to demonstrate that there is *hope* beyond offending behaviour. Experiential peers have
6 practically used specific tools to develop a positive self-narrative script, and these can be shared with
7 current justice involved children. This can develop pro-social identities and enhance a participatory
8 approach to youth justice, which is a key tenet of child first principles adopted by the YJB (YJB 2021).
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12 The limitations can be overcome through quality supervision, training, and education. Experiential
13 peers are likely to face specific challenges that need to be considered during employment which may
14 require further research. Policies and frameworks developed to implement experiential peers in youth
15 justice will also require detailed consideration to ensure continuity of high-quality supervision. This
16 will need to be established by lived experienced professionals such as the one developed by Webster
17 (2021). If the culture of employing experiential peers becomes the new 'normal', and such peers
18 become managers, the culture itself can mitigate the limitations and enhance the strengths. This was
19 alluded to by Weaver and Weaver (2013). Indeed, an upskilled lived experienced workforce can
20 contribute to desistance literature, extend the knowledge-base and lead to progressive and inclusive
21 practice-based responses. This includes a move towards an understanding that desistance can be
22 contagious and cascade down through relationships. Therefore, the youth and criminal justice system
23 can create the conditions for this social movement by moving away from individualism and towards
24 collective activism which has been predicted as the natural next step for the desistance movement
25 (Maruna, 2017).
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Safer Communities