



**Challenges to providing culturally sensitive drug interventions for Black and Asian minority ethnic (BAME) groups within UK youth justice systems.**

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3 **Challenges to providing culturally sensitive drug interventions for Black and Asian minority ethnic**  
4 **(BAME) groups within UK youth justice systems.**  
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8 **Abstract**  
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10 **Purpose:** To explore how substance use practitioners intervene with ethnically and culturally diverse  
11 groups of young people in contact with the youth justice system  
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13 **Design/Methodology:** Telephone, face to face interviews and a focus group were conducted. Data  
14 were analysed thematically using a frame reflective theoretical approach  
15

16 **Findings:** Practitioners tended to offer individualised interventions to young people in place of  
17 culturally specific approaches partly due to a lack of knowledge, training or understanding of diverse  
18 cultural needs, and for practical and resource reasons.  
19

20 **Research Implications:** Practitioners reject the official narrative of BAME youth in the justice system  
21 as dangerous and in need of control, viewing them instead as vulnerable and in need of support but  
22 report they lack experience, and sufficient resources, in delivering interventions to diverse groups.  
23

24 **Originality/Value:** There is little information regarding how practitioners respond to diversity in their  
25 daily practice. This paper is an exploration of how diversity is framed and responded to in the  
26 context of youth substance use and criminal justice.  
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30 **Keywords:** youth justice; BAME; substance use; practitioners; intervention; UK  
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35 **Classification:** Research Paper  
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38 **Disclaimer**  
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## INTRODUCTION

This paper reports on findings from a larger study exploring substance use interventions aimed at young people within the youth justice system and focuses on the views of practitioners working across these arenas in terms of the need for, and their ability to deliver, culturally specific interventions to Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) young people. The study presented here uses the framing approach as described by Rein and Schon (1993; 1994) and van Hulst and Yanow (2016) to explore the frames applied by professionals working with diverse groups of young people through youth justice and substance use services and how these can be placed within the context of policy and practice frameworks. This paper focuses on the following research questions;

1. How are young people from diverse ethnic backgrounds framed by practitioners working within drug interventions and the youth/criminal justice systems in the UK?
2. How do practitioners respond to the needs of BAME young people using these services?
3. What are the challenges identified by practitioners to engaging with, and supporting, BAME young people who use their services?

## BACKGROUND

In 2015-16, 18% of 16-24 year olds in England and Wales reported having used an illegal drug in the past year, a similar proportion to that of the previous seven years (HM Government, 2017). At the same time the number of young people being prosecuted through the courts for drug offences has been steadily declining since 2007 with most being given supervision or community orders instead of custodial sentences (YJB, 2018b). Most drug offences are detected through police stop and search which can result in immediate custody, a fine, caution, warning or a conditional 'out of court' disposal order (Shiner *et al.*, 2018). Out of court orders usually entail some form of police caution and mandatory attendance at a youth offending service (YOS) who provide substance use interventions alongside mental health support and education and training. The aim of the YOS intervention is to prevent further criminal behaviour and avoid custodial sanctions.

In the year to March 2017, 28% of all arrests of 10 to 17 year olds, in the UK, were of individuals from BAME backgrounds (18% of population) while 84% of all arrests in this age group were male (51% of population) (YJB, 2018). Recent reviews of the youth justice system suggest that young black males are nine times more likely to receive a custodial sentence for a drug offence when compared to white males in the same age group (Lammy, 2016; Shiner *et al.*, 2018). This suggests a disproportionate number of BAME young people are not being offered community based sanctions that include substance use services through YOS teams, although in many cases ethnicity is not accurately recorded (YJB, 2010).

Numerous reports have shown that there are ethnic disparities in how young people are processed through the youth justice system (e.g. Lammy, 2010; Shiner, *et al.*, 2018; YJB, 2010; 2018). This can create an aura of mistrust among young people from BAME backgrounds who are referred to services that are part of the justice system such as substance use interventions delivered by Youth Offending Teams [1] (YOTs). Previous investigations have indicated a lack of clear guidance or training on providing culturally appropriate substance use services within the youth justice system,

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3 however the perceived need for culturally specific services amongst professionals and young people  
4 is mixed (YJB, 2010).  
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6 Research from the field of cultural psychology highlights the need to consider the influence of  
7 cultural traditions, social norms and beliefs on the drug using patterns of young people and any  
8 subsequent health impacts. This research cautions against assuming interventions developed for one  
9 minority group will be effective for other minority groups (Burlew, et al., 2013). Other research  
10 reports that those from minority ethnic communities lack trust in the confidentiality of substance  
11 use services and perceive services to be lacking in cultural competence (e.g. Fountain, 2009; Gray  
12 and Ralphs, 2017). Overall, the literature suggests the need for culturally sensitive staff who can  
13 adapt to the needs of the individual young person whilst also understanding the potential influences  
14 of cultural factors that may impact on engagement, effectiveness and outcomes.  
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17 When asked about preferences for drug education and intervention programmes, some BAME  
18 individuals favour those delivered by people from their own communities with experience of  
19 problematic drug use (Beddoes, 2010). Previous UK government strategies have noted a need to  
20 ensure diversity amongst the workforce in drug interventions to help encourage greater  
21 engagement in services across ethnicities and cultures. However, it is not possible to determine the  
22 ethnic or cultural background of those working in youth justice substance use services from currently  
23 available workforce data (MoJ, 2017). A study by the Youth Justice Board, which included interviews  
24 with 93 BAME young people involved in the justice system, found that there was no preference for  
25 ethnically matched key workers among young people and just 22% thought having others of their  
26 own ethnicity was important in group-based interventions (YJB, 2010).  
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30 Within the research on BAME adult use of substance use services, perceptions of a lack of cultural  
31 diversity and sensitivity among service providers is seen to act as a barrier to help-seeking (see  
32 Fountain, 2009). While also citing cultural stigma as a further barrier, this research found that many  
33 from BAME communities find services difficult to engage with individually and have a desire for  
34 more family involvement in their treatment, an approach which was not usually made available to  
35 them (Fountain, 2009; Fernandez, 2015). This research does not differentiate between older and  
36 younger generations however, and it is not clear if, or by how much, young people's preferences for  
37 substance use intervention differ from those of adults.  
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41 Literature from the US has called for cultural variables to be considered as part of the young  
42 person's life experience when determining how to approach prevention or treatment of substance  
43 use (Castro and Alarcon, 2002; Steinko-Fry, *et al.*, 2017). However, the focus within this literature  
44 tends to be on standard models, or programmes, of treatment (e.g. Cognitive Behavioural Therapy)  
45 and lean towards treatment for those with addiction problems. In the UK, YOT delivered substance  
46 use interventions tend to have a more generalised wellbeing, harm-reduction approach as young  
47 people present with multiple additional social problems that need to be addressed (Authors  
48 anonymised for peer review, *et al.*, under review; Thom, *et al.*, 2017) making comparisons in  
49 outcomes between the two countries difficult.  
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52 Much of the adult literature and the US literature cited above primarily report on outcomes for  
53 those in the voluntary treatment sector. Compulsory, or coercive, treatment as experienced by  
54 young people referred through the youth justice system may lead to problematic engagement of  
55 young people in the service, lower commitment to reducing or stopping substance use and issues of  
56 trust between the young person and practitioner.  
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3 Within the voluntary substance use treatment sector, it has long been acknowledged that BAME  
4 individuals are under-represented compared to their white counterparts in both young people and  
5 adult services (Fountain, 2009). While there are some good practice examples of these approaches  
6 within the voluntary adult sector (e.g. Fernandez, 2015) there is little UK based research that focuses  
7 on young people within compulsory substance use services or from within the youth justice system.  
8 What is available is of varying methodological quality and the literature is inconsistent in its use of  
9 definitions of ethnic groups and drugs included (Beddoes, et al., 2010). At present we still know little  
10 about the importance of considering cultural factors in delivering substance use interventions to  
11 young people who are referred to services through police, or court, ordered directives or how  
12 professionals in these services meet the needs of young people from ethnically and culturally diverse  
13 backgrounds.  
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## 16 17 **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

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19 Van Hulst and Yanow describe framing as ‘...the interactive, intersubjective processes through which  
20 frames are constructed’ (2016, p. 93). Frames are similar to cognitive schemas (as described in the  
21 psychological literature) that influence the ways we process and understand social, political and  
22 policy relevant information. Rein and Schon (1993) propose three processes involved in the  
23 construction of frames; naming, selecting and storytelling. Policy actors use naming to focus on  
24 aspects of a situation/problem that is reflective of their own understanding (e.g. ‘vulnerable’ young  
25 people; ‘criminal’ drug users) and which allows them to select only these features and draw  
26 attention away from other aspects creating a story that is coherent and understandable.  
27  
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29 Van Hulst and Yanow (2016) see framing as a means of sense-making of problems, situations, or  
30 contested issues that occurs when individuals engage in a conversation with them. They add to  
31 Schon and Rein’s framework of framing/frame-making by including two further concepts; sense-  
32 making and categorising. Sense-making is described as the evaluation of a situation/problem in the  
33 context of prior, or existing knowledge or training, and the determination of what future action to  
34 take which can also be influenced by personal and professional backgrounds. Whilst categorising  
35 occurs in conjunction with naming and selecting to identify important information and/or discard  
36 that which is thought to be irrelevant.  
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39 They expand on the storytelling aspect of Rein and Schon’s framework by describing the ways that  
40 each of the individual elements of framing are woven together through a ‘narrative frame’ that;  
41 ‘...frame their subjects as they narrate them, explicitly naming their features, selecting and perhaps  
42 categorizing them as well, explaining to an audience what has been going on, what is going on, and,  
43 often, what needs to be done – past, present, and future corresponding to the plot line of a policy  
44 story.’ (p. 100)  
45  
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47 Such frames that may be applied by practitioners can be constructed by the individuals or  
48 institutions themselves but may also be those imposed through policy or practice requirements that  
49 are subsequently absorbed by practitioners or adapted to meet the needs of particular service user  
50 groups.  
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## 53 **DATA AND METHODS**

54  
55 The results reported in this paper come from 19 individual interviews and one focus group (N = 6)  
56 with professionals who work with young people through the youth justice system and substance use  
57 interventions. The individual interviews were conducted face to face (N = 5) or by telephone (N =  
58 14), the focus group was conducted for ease of scheduling within the service setting by request of  
59 the service manager. An earlier scoping of current interventions aimed at reducing or preventing  
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3 substance use in young people within the youth justice system revealed a lack of targeted  
4 interventions aimed at this group (Thom *et al.*, 2018). The services identified through this scoping  
5 work were all invited to take part in the research study and interviewees self-selected through this  
6 invitation. The interviews aimed to gain a broader understanding of: the types of interventions  
7 currently being offered to young people; the causes and wider contexts at play as perceived by  
8 professionals in bringing this group into the interventions; the frameworks or approaches thought to  
9 be most useful and; the challenges experienced by professionals in engaging young people and  
10 working within these systems.  
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13 Interviews lasted between 40 minutes and one hour, with the focus group lasting one and a half  
14 hours. All were recorded and later transcribed for analysis. Interviewees were employed within  
15 youth work, youth justice, substance use services, and commissioning and were based across the UK  
16 including, London, the South East, Midlands of England and Scotland. Ethical approval for this study  
17 was granted by **Middlesex University Health and Social Care research ethics committee.**  
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20 Early in the data analysis process it became apparent that diversity (including ethnicity, culture,  
21 religion and gender) among service users was an important theme that would benefit from further  
22 investigation alongside analysis of the interventions themselves. Therefore, the focus of this paper  
23 is on issues of delivering appropriate drug interventions to an ethnically and culturally diverse  
24 population of young people within the criminal justice system and the challenges experienced by  
25 professionals in aiming to achieve this. As we had not intended to focus on issues of diversity initially  
26 this demographic information relating to the professionals interviewed was not collected.  
27  
28

## 29 **FINDINGS**

30  
31 Whether diversity was considered a major factor that affected interventions or ways of working with  
32 interviewees or not was related to the geographical area in which the practitioner was based.  
33 Reflecting the population in London, these services had a more diverse service user base compared  
34 to those in the midlands or Scotland which have predominately white populations. This impacted on  
35 their levels of experience with BAME young people and how they adapted services to meet different  
36 cultural needs. The diversity of service users that practitioners had experience of working with  
37 included established populations in the UK such as Black Caribbeans, more recent migrant  
38 populations including Eastern Europeans, Romany Gypsies and religious minorities (e.g. Muslim).  
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41 Similar to findings reported by the Youth Justice Board in 2010, there was acknowledgement of  
42 differences amongst ethnic groups in terms of the substances most commonly used, patterns of use  
43 and a need for more culturally sensitive training. Some practitioners, whose service users were  
44 primarily white and working class, focused more on the impacts of social and economic disadvantage  
45 experienced by young people they worked with and felt that this was of more immediate concern in  
46 impacting on the interventions they provided. While practitioners identified diversity as an  
47 important issue of concern within their services, not all services had the same experiences which  
48 were influenced by their local demographic profiles.  
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### 51 *Framing current and emerging needs of diverse groups*

52  
53 Practitioners had awareness of the diversity of young people living in the areas they worked in, but  
54 did not see this reflected in the demographic profile of young people being referred to them through  
55 the youth justice system. Attempts at sense-making, in the ways described by van Hulst and Yanow  
56 (2016), raised questions about both the services themselves and the systems within which  
57 practitioners worked, but did not lead to identified future actions;  
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3 *...it's still predominantly white males that we do see within our service and is that a case of because*  
4 *that's how our services are made, that's how we're tailor made to work with that group,*  
5 *subconsciously we have perhaps an unconscious bias that we're not aware of, or is it because that*  
6 *that's just what comes through the system? (Regional manager, commissioned provider)*  
7

8  
9 Selecting and categorising cultural beliefs to create an understanding of the differing needs of  
10 diverse young people was also evident in the way that some professionals identified influences on  
11 young people's use of substances. The narratives constructed by practitioners around the specific  
12 needs of culturally diverse young people referred to the different types of substances used (or  
13 expected to be used) by different groups rather than differences in approaches likely to be needed  
14 or broader influences of culture or ethnicity;

15  
16 *We do seem to be getting a lot more younger people coming through now...celebrating the fact that*  
17 *they're completely abstinent from alcohol, but...within the young person's population, it's probably*  
18 *45/55% BAME community. So obviously that will have an impact because they come from South*  
19 *Asian communities, so their culture will be that they don't drink (Service manager, commissioned*  
20 *provider)*  
21  
22

23 Both storytelling (through explaining why some groups are likely to present to services in the future)  
24 and sense-making (through predicting future needs) were evident here;

25  
26 *I think steroids is going to increase, particularly again BAME communities, a lot of young Asian males*  
27 *being quite petite and slim using steroids to build them up and what goes with that is the cocaine use*  
28 *as they get older...I think image enhancing stuff coming through is a bit of a concern for me. (Service*  
29 *manager, commissioned provider)*  
30  
31

32 Professionals reported that future provision of services may need to adapt to appropriately support  
33 young people from the diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds in their own localities. However,  
34 none of those interviewed reported putting in place culturally specific approaches or interventions  
35 that would meet these needs when required. In van Hulst and Yanow's framework they were not  
36 engaging in 'sense-making' by using their understanding of these needs to create future actions or  
37 plans.  
38

#### 39 *Responding to diverse service user's needs*

40  
41 The need for flexible approaches to working with diverse young people was highlighted across  
42 services and practitioners and was framed by some through a narrative of both vulnerability of  
43 young people accessing services and their presenting complex needs. Depending on the local  
44 population, some services categorised young people's needs not only by their ethnic diversity but  
45 also by additional diversity factors including gender, poverty and educational needs  
46  
47

48 *When you put in kind of all the diversity factors, which is not just gender and ethnicity but whether*  
49 *they are looked after [i.e. in the care system], what their backgrounds have been, when you take*  
50 *special educational needs, all that lot, any material that is just inflexible just won't work now. (Focus*  
51 *group, YOT manager)*  
52  
53

54 Within the focus group there was much discussion around these common issues experienced by  
55 young people that the team worked with. They spoke at length about the need to have access to a  
56 range of materials available that could be adapted easily For this team, it was important to be able  
57 to provide support to the diverse range of young people who were referred to the service without  
58 having to construct new interventions each time.  
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3 Other services had begun to work in collaboration with outside organisations as a way of trying to  
4 meet the needs of young people of different faiths and of ensuring that services were  
5 communicating in ways that they were familiar with;  
6

7 *What we've also done is...we work with...the Islamic College for Imans and we brought the Imans in.*  
8 *These were young people from probably about the age of 17, 18, 19 and we re-wrote foundations of*  
9 *recovery with Islamic faith slants. (Service manager, commissioned provider)*  
10

11 For others, it was not always obvious that their interventions could be inappropriate for some  
12 service users but they were keen to express a willingness to consider how some interventions may  
13 benefit from being adapted; in some cases this could lead to a re-framing of young people's needs  
14 and a greater awareness of the multitude of ways that culture can affect how services are  
15 experienced;  
16

17 *So, for example...we've had an away-day today and I think I've got about 20%/30% of my staff are*  
18 *from BAME communities and when we were there we did what we call a...Gong Blast, so it's*  
19 *music...obviously music in some faiths is not as accepted as it is in within other faiths and I hadn't*  
20 *even thought about it...I think those are some of the cultural issues that we need to be considering*  
21 *when we're delivering interventions, particularly if we're using some of the dramatic art stuff as well*  
22 *as expression. (Service manager, commissioned provider)*  
23  
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26 For most services, however, they were still contending with materials and intervention approaches  
27 that some viewed as outdated and unresponsive to the diverse needs of young people they work  
28 with. This suggests that while professionals may be open to changing their frames, or  
29 categorisations, of young people, the act of storytelling becomes frustrated when they are bound by  
30 the limitations of what is available to them to engage with diverse groups;  
31

32 *...whoever the young person is in your head that you are thinking of, that person doesn't really exist.*  
33 *Like to us every child is so different...If you look at the census for [place] there's like 100 different*  
34 *ethnicities and...languages...So, something that only works for a white group is pointless to us and*  
35 *you know it's not right is it? The world has moved on, but so much of stuff is still based around that*  
36 *(Focus Group, youth worker)*  
37  
38

39 In reality, the most common response to the diverse needs of service users among practitioners was  
40 to provide 'bespoke', individual interventions depending on what they viewed as being needed by  
41 that young person.  
42

43 A lack of experience with and knowledge of the needs of diverse groups of young people as  
44 expressed by many of the participants influenced their ability to make sense of the support needs of  
45 these groups. When combined with the categorisation of service users as a primarily vulnerable  
46 group of young people, this led to the selection of individualised, or bespoke, approaches to  
47 intervention for each young person they worked with.  
48  
49

#### 50 *Challenges within practice*

51 Reductions in funding, staff and other resources are common issues raised across public services in  
52 the UK and some of our interviewees talked about how they can impact directly on a service's ability  
53 to offer interventions to a diverse client base;  
54

55 *In terms of the materials we use, how do you have a bank of materials that are okay for a white lad*  
56 *from [local area], as well as someone who has got Roma heritage, someone who has got Caribbean*  
57 *heritage, someone who has only just come here from Somalia. You know we get all these lads,*  
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3 *different lads and we can't afford to buy interventions for every single group... (Focus group, YOT*  
4 *manager)*  
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6 The process of sense-making of diverse young people's needs, and how they can be difficult to  
7 incorporate into practice was evident when professionals also spoke of reduced workforces for their  
8 services and how this can leave them with limited experience and knowledge of cultural diversity  
9 amongst staff. Issues of engagement of young people within the frame of their cultural backgrounds  
10 were also raised, where there was a sense that family attitudes can influence how a young person  
11 works with the service;  
12

13  
14 *...a couple of years ago, we had...only small numbers, but quite an influx of lads that we think were*  
15 *Roma heritage...But at that point that was kind of 'how are we going to connect with these lads*  
16 *really?', because they really are outside of the education system and you have got multi-*  
17 *intergenerational views on particular topics and things like that. I don't know how that plays out in*  
18 *terms of substance misuse... (Focus group, YOT case worker)*  
19

20  
21 A further challenge discussed by some practitioners was being constrained to working with those  
22 who are referred to them when they have no control over this part of the process. This can lead to  
23 an undermining of relevant knowledge and hampers attempts to engage with diverse communities  
24 on a voluntary basis as well as those referred through youth justice services;  
25

26 *But we do struggle with BAME referrals. That's an area that we are always trying to work on and*  
27 *how we can engage better with the BAME community...I think they are areas that we could develop*  
28 *into, but it's a bit of an unknown what is going on in those communities, because we're not really*  
29 *getting referrals from them. (Team leader, commissioned provider)*  
30  
31

32 Other narratives focused on the young people's attitudes towards criminal justice and how they  
33 framed their interactions with services they view as being aligned to institutions they had little trust  
34 in. This could be a particular challenge when working with BAME young people who are more likely  
35 to have had negative experiences with the justice system compared to white youth (Lammy, 2016;  
36 Shiner, *et al.*, 2018). This issue of trying to counter-act young people's own categorisation of  
37 youth/substance use workers was raised as a challenge by some practitioners who felt they needed  
38 to convince the young person to re-frame their perspectives on substance use services and was a  
39 source of frustration for many;  
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41

42 *...obviously they are already wary of criminal justice, so sometimes they assume that we're working*  
43 *in collaboration with the police, or you know like drug enforcement agencies. They can sometimes be*  
44 *quite subdued and wary about the workers and the information that they're actually telling us. So*  
45 *sometimes it takes a little bit of, like a lot more skill to actually extract a truthful and honest, candid*  
46 *engagement with them. (Substance use worker, commissioned provider)*  
47  
48

49 While most practitioners stated that they had received no training in cultural diversity, instead  
50 focusing on being able to adapt to individual needs, those who had, talked about the benefits of  
51 having different perspectives on the experiences of the young people they work with. One spoke of  
52 attending training that gave him insight into the emotional conflict that can occur in young people of  
53 mixed race who may feel they are being forced to identify with one culture or the other. While this  
54 would not directly impact on how a service is offered, it provided a means to understand the frames  
55 within which a young person was trying to navigate their lives and could potentially help to inform  
56 ways of engaging with them. Training such as this, however, was sparse across the services that  
57 interviewees came from despite many stating a desire to access it.  
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## DISCUSSION

Since 1995, UK drug strategies have tended to frame drug use as a criminal, rather than a public health, concern (Duke, 2006; Monaghan, 2012) which can be seen in the series of strategies produced by successive governments up to the present. These strategies have created a government stance that equates higher crime rates with certain 'problematic' groups in society who need to be targeted to reduce their drug using (and thereby criminal) behaviour (Monaghan, 2012). As such it is not unusual for a young person to receive a court order that requires them to attend substance use treatment as part of their sentence to be spent in the community.

Previous literature has shown that those from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds respond best to tailored and culturally sensitive substance use prevention and intervention approaches (Burlew, *et al.*, 2013; Steinka-Fry, *et al.*, 2017). Policy and guidance on providing such services do not acknowledge these differences nor do they require services to respond to the cultural needs of their service users. The limited research that is available that directly asks young people of BAME backgrounds for their views has found that they have no desire to be culturally or ethnically matched to case workers and they view the ability of case workers to build a trusting relationship with them as most important in helping them to reduce drug use and future offending (YJB, 2010).

As found by Castro and Alarcon (2002) practitioners in this study adapted available interventions to meet the needs of their diverse service users but had no way of knowing if these adaptations were the most appropriate or if they increased or reduced the likelihood of positive outcomes. Ethnic minorities are not homogenous; coupled with a lack of reliable and valid data available in the UK on substance use across ethnicities, it is inherently difficult to develop tailored support packages for such diverse young people (Wanigarantne, *et al.*, 2003). As mentioned by some of our participants, across drug treatment services there are 'new' ethnic minority populations such as Eastern Europeans who are now presenting more frequently to services that are not prepared to meet their needs for culturally appropriate treatment approaches (Fernandez, 2015). Some practitioners also perceived family norms to impede engagement of young people, perhaps inadvertently using cultural stereotypes to explain why they struggle to effectively intervene with some minority groups.

Van Hurst and Yanow (2016) argue that individuals can become so aligned to their frames, or those that they are comfortable and familiar with, that frames become part of that individual's identity which means the process of re-framing becomes difficult and emotionally charged, where identities are 'enmeshed in the sides they have taken in intense policy controversies' (p.105). Professionals in this study reported multiple views on what diversity means within their own service contexts (including gender, religion and economic disadvantage) which influenced their categorising and sense-making of the needs of young people from diverse backgrounds. When facing challenging budget restraints in addition to a lack of training in cultural differences, services are struggling to both understand how to respond to BAME young people and develop interventions that are likely to be effective.

A lack of trust between BAME communities and the police and criminal justice system has long been recognised and could impact on willingness and motivation to engage with intervention services that are perceived to be part of this system (Amnesty International, 2018; Lammy, 2016). While many of the practitioners we spoke to are aware of this and make efforts to separate themselves from the justice system, best practice guidance on how to address this issue is not available, neither is an official recognition that this is likely to be a barrier to full engagement of young people in substance use or other wellbeing services. In response, the practitioners in this study concentrated on offering

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3 individualised interventions to all young people as a means of meeting support needs and of creating  
4 their own 'frames' of service users that do not always match with official, policy discourse.  
5

## 6 **CONCLUSION**

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8 Both the UK Drugs Strategy (HM Government, 2017) and the Serious Violence Strategy (HM  
9 Government, 2018) make explicit links between violent crime and drugs reinforcing the narrative of  
10 young black males as dangerous and their drug use and/or criminal involvement as inevitably gang  
11 related. Preventing or reducing drug use is itself often framed as a means of protecting the safety of  
12 society, and amongst younger people, of protecting the safety of 'vulnerable' youth. If the accepted  
13 narrative of non-white substance using youth is that of the dangerous, risky gang member it is  
14 unlikely that interventions to reduce the individual harm of substance use will be tackled with  
15 empathy or with genuine reference to the needs of this population. This is evident in substance use  
16 services that are accessed through the youth justice system where guidance on culturally and  
17 ethnically appropriate approaches is not offered despite the awareness of such a need amongst  
18 practitioners.  
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22 While some prominent individuals have raised the disparities in stop and search, arrests and  
23 custodial sentencing of BAME young people (e.g. Lammy, 2016; Amnesty International, 2018) other  
24 minority groups are frequently ignored in such debates. Practitioners working across the bounds of  
25 youth justice and substance use are themselves aware of the changing demographics of the young  
26 people accessing their services but are not currently offering culturally sensitive or adapted  
27 interventions. At present the best they can do is to continue to offer 'flexible' interventions that  
28 attempt to offer individual services without adequate training or awareness of the differential  
29 impact of cultural nuances that would make interventions most likely to be successful for different  
30 ethnic groups.  
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## 34 **NOTES**

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37 1. Youth Offending Teams (YOTs) work with young people when they encounter the youth  
38 justice system, they are overseen by local councils and work in collaboration with the police,  
39 courts, social services and schools. They provide intervention with the aim of preventing  
40 further involvement in crime within the community.  
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