

## Youth Justice Staff Perspectives on Psychological Resilience Interventions and Outcomes in Young People Who Offend

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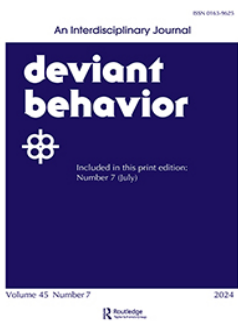
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# Youth Justice Staff Perspectives on Psychological Resilience Interventions and Outcomes in Young People Who Offend

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## ABSTRACT

Interventions aimed at increasing psychological resilience are an important factor in reducing recidivism in young people. However, little is known about how practitioners understand, apply, and assess the efficacy of the interventions they deliver. This knowledge gap is concerning as case workers are at the forefront of intervention delivery, where intervention success has wide implications for the young person and society. To provide some of the first evidence in this area, we conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with 12 Youth Justice case workers based in Wales (UK). We used reflexive thematic analysis to examine four pre-conceived key themes. The first theme involved understanding what resilience is in young people along with the psychological factors that promoted resilience and psychological factors that undermined it. The second theme revolved around intervention strategies used to develop resilience in young people. The third theme focused upon intervention delivery, and the final theme related to intervention outcomes that included behavioral and psychological changes. Our findings offer some of the first evidence into effective psychological based resilience interventions, methods of delivery, psychological and behavioral changes related to desistance from a case workers perspective. Potential future considerations for interventions relating to youth who continue offending are discussed.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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Youth crime statistics for England and Wales for the year 2022–23, revealed that there were just under 8,400 child first time entrants to the Youth Justice System. This was an increase of 1% compared with the previous year (but the first increase seen in the last 10 years).<sup>1</sup> Youth crime is a leading public health concern due to the adverse impacts of crime on victims and communities. Studies have highlighted several negative psychological and environmental risk factors relating to offending in youth. Psychological factors include poor management of emotions (Wolff and Baglivio 2017), defiance (Guebert and Olver 2014), low self-concept (Dumont and Provost 1999), low self-worth (Emler 2001) and sensation seeking (Ebstein and Belmaker 2002). It is important to note that from a dynamic developmental process (Cicchetti 2013), risk factors and protective factors interact upon the young person's psychological and behavioral outcomes. That is, the more risk factors experienced over time, the greater the likelihood of a negative outcome. However, the more protective factors a young person has at their disposal (despite risk factors), the greater the likelihood of a positive outcome (or at least a less negative one).

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/youth-justice-statistics>

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## Psychological resilience

The literature relating to youth who offend often presents resilience as a protective factor for reoffending (Hodgkinson et al. 2020). In this context, resilience is often described as “good psychological functioning and good behavioural outcomes despite adverse circumstances expected to jeopardize normative growth and adaptation” (Mukherjee and Kumar 2017:3). Resilience is often explored via compensatory and protective models (e.g., Fergus and Zimmerman 2005) that suggest the availability and utilization of protective factors such as psychological and environmental resources, can counteract the negative effects of risk factors associated with stress and trauma. Research has also highlighted that these resources can reduce the likelihood of re-offending in young people. For example, Stouthamer-Loeber et al. (2002) found high accountability, trustworthiness, ability to feel guilt, school motivation, and living in a non-disadvantaged neighborhood were protective factors in preventing serious delinquency for children aged 7–13. Further, factors such as high accountability and good relationships with parents were important for 13–19-year-olds. In addition, high problem-solving abilities (Dumont and Provost 1999), hope, internal locus of control, self-efficacy, and remorse (Bowen, Heron, and Steer 2008), developing alternative identities (LeBel et al. 2008), and having support from at least one reliable pro-social adult (Werner 1989) have all been shown to decrease the likelihood of re-offending.

The challenge model of resilience suggests that too much or too little adversity can impair the development of resilience (Fergus and Zimmerman 2005). This point is of particular interest in relation to youth who offend, as studies show most youths who offend have experienced higher than average levels of adversity. For example, reviews suggest that between 33% and 92% of youth in custody have experienced some form of maltreatment (Day, Hibbert, and Cadman 2008). This percentage is far greater than the general population average (which ranges between 3% and 14%; Cawson et al. 2000). Research has also found strong and positive correlations between the amount of childhood adversity experienced and persistence of offending (e.g., Baglivio et al. 2014).

## Youth justice case worker support

Although research has started to identify how psychological resilience interventions can lead to a reduction in re-offending (Hodgkinson et al. 2020), in the UK little is known about those who work directly with young people (e.g., case workers or other support staff), in terms of what they understand, apply, and how they assess the efficacy of psychological resilience interventions they may deliver. Recent research has also called for a better understanding of how to enhance resilience via intervention in diversion programs (e.g., Ozturk et al. 2022). It therefore seems important that research investigates this specific population to learn how targeted interventions may increase resilience and subsequently reducing re-offending.

With these issues in mind, the present study sought to investigate Youth Justice case workers' current understanding and application of psychological resilience-based strategies in the youths they work with. Youth Justice case workers in Wales and England provide 1 to 1 mentoring to help the child understand the impacts of their behavior on victims, communities, and their own future opportunities (similar to diversion programmes in the USA). This mentoring support is guided by “child-centered” assessment, planning, intervention, supervision, and is increasingly strengths-based focused. To explore case workers' understanding and application, we focused on four factors. First, we wanted to examine what case workers understood about resilience in young people. Second, we explored what intervention strategies case workers used to increase resilience. Third, we explored how these strategies were implemented, and our fourth line of questioning focused upon intervention outcomes.

## Method

### *Philosophical orientation*

Guided by a constructivist theoretical orientation (Creswell and Poth 2018), we aimed to identify overarching themes relating to how staff perceived the youth's levels of resilience, interventions

selected, intervention delivery, and their outcomes. Additionally, we sought to identify perceived psychological factors associated with both positive and negative outcomes (e.g., desistance or continued offending). We therefore adopted a relativist approach to data analysis, which proposes that knowledge is subjective (i.e., constructed from the lived experiences of individuals; Guba and Lincoln 1994).

In attempting to understand the phenomena being studied, we understood that views of how we create and give meaning to our social experience may involve “multiple realities” (Denzin and Lincoln 1998). In the current study, the researchers came from a variety of backgrounds including youth work, performance psychology, and social work. The multiple realities stemming from the backgrounds of the researchers meant we viewed data through different professional lenses allowing for greater depth in data interpretation (Smith and McGannon 2017). In addition, the complementary experiences and expertise of the researchers meant it was less likely that we missed vital themes during data interpretation and discussion, helping to reduce potential researcher bias.

### **Participants**

After obtaining University ethical approval, Youth Justice managers in Wales (UK) identified a purposive sample of 14 case workers in six selected Youth Offending Teams (YOTS) across Wales (out of a total of 17 YOTS). This provided a representative case worker sample across 35% of the YOTS. At the time of writing, there were 68 case workers in Wales who had a professional qualification (e.g., degree level). 12 of these Youth Justice case workers consented to take part in the study (two case workers withdrew due to workload). Two out of the six YOT's (containing 4 case workers) were based in rural areas. Seven case workers (58%) worked in North Wales and five case workers (42%) worked in South Wales.

Nine staff were female ( $M_{\text{age}} = 41.7$ ,  $SD = 11.03$ ) and three were male ( $M_{\text{age}} = 58.6$ ,  $SD = 5.85$ ). All identified as either White British ( $n = 7$ ) or White Welsh ( $n = 5$ ). Nine case workers were social work trained, three were probation trained and all had over five years' experience in the field of Youth Justice. No participants had extensive resilience training. The geographical spread of authorities in Wales enabled data collection from case workers working across urban and rural localities.

### **England and wales youth justice system**

There are three mechanisms through which young people will be referred to the Youth Justice Service (YJS). The first route is via a pre-court assessment where the child will be referred by a non-justice service agency (e.g., education and children services or parents) to the team if they display behaviors that could lead to crime (e.g., violence in school). The second route is also a pre-court assessment or “out of court disposal” if the young person has committed a low-level offense. Here they will be referred to the YJS by the police. However, this will only happen if the child makes full admission to the offense and victim agrees that the case can be dealt with without prosecution. The offending young person and their family will be required to work with the Youth Justice service for at least 12 weeks. The final route is via a court order where the YJS will support the young person throughout the court hearing and have responsibility to ensure all conditions of the order are complete or report back to court any issues with compliance/behavior. In all engagement with children, it is a primary responsibility for YJS case workers to develop strong trusting relationships, where effective participation and engagement is attained, and challenging conversations can occur. All YJS staff in Wales have a strengths-based “child first” approach to working with children and young people.

### **Interview schedule**

We chose semi-structured interviews as an appropriate way of describing, interpreting, contextualizing, and gaining in-depth insight into specific concepts or phenomena (Rabionet

2011). The semi-structured interview schedule asked staff questions regarding the background of the youth, psychological resilience profiles, interventions utilized, intervention delivery, intervention engagement, and post intervention psychological/behavioral changes. We used open-ended questions to elicit insights to allow respondents to use their own language, express their own views, and potentially discuss general issues related to the research questions (cf. Jamshed 2014).

### **Data collection**

After piloting the interview schedule with three Youth Justice Service (YJS) managers in Wales and adjusting as necessary, we interviewed the 12 YJS case workers. Interview duration ranged between two and three hours ( $M_{duration} = 148$  minutes,  $SD = 27.5$ ). The first author clarified to participants that the questions enabled discussions to develop in any direction, and that there were no right or wrong answers. In addition, at the end of each set of questions, interviewees had the chance to add more information if they wished. We recorded all interviews and used professional transcribers to transcribe the data verbatim, resulting in 1,230 transcript pages.

### **Data analysis**

As we focussed upon four areas of enquiry, we used a reflexive thematic analysis approach to code our data (Braun and Clarke 2012). A reflexive thematic approach was used as it allows for the systematic identification of patterns in the data from the participants across the four areas of interest. To help identify patterns across the perceptions of the case workers, data analysis comprised of several distinct phases. First, to gain an understanding of the data, the first author who conducted the interviews, subsequently read and re-read the interview transcripts. To build on our initial understanding of the data, she scrutinized the interview transcripts line by line, memoing the data, assigning preliminary initial codes, and noting developing areas of interest following each transcript. As thematic analysis also incorporates a reflective approach regarding assumptions and meaning of the data (Culver, Gilbert, and Sparkes 2012), the first author who experienced prolonged engagement with all participants, kept a reflective journal to avoid influencing the research process.

Second, drawing from Guba's model for identifying rigor in qualitative research, we chose the term "rigour," rather than "validity" or "reliability," which includes truth value, applicability, consistency, and neutrality (Guba 1981). Truth value refers to the fact that the data are rich, reflecting participants' knowledge. Therefore, multiple realities may exist depending on individual experiences (Noble and Smith 2015). To ensure credibility, we implemented several strategies. The first author coded all the data whilst holding regular "critical friends" meetings with the third author to discuss themes, analyze data, and agree on meanings. The critical friends' meetings were held between the first and third author to allow for appropriate check and challenge in regards perceptions and assumptions (Rossman and Rallis 2017). Chosen in place of inter-rater reliability, this approach allowed us to consider potential methodological bias by outlining personal experiences and perspectives that may influence our interpretation (see Rossman and Rallis 2017).

We then utilized directed content analysis to make sense of the data based around the four areas of enquiry (e.g., Hsieh and Shannon 2005). Here we analyzed the data using a thematic analysis approach to identify and create themes grounded in the data (Braun and Clarke 2006; Byrne 2021). Themes were then sense checked by the second author. For example, due to the overlapping content regarding low self-concept and low self-esteem, these themes were groups together. Finally, all authors revisited the data to reach saturation whereby no new themes emerged (Francis et al. 2010). All involved reached agreement regarding identified themes. As highlighted previously, engagement of multiple authors enabled an interpretivist approach through the different but complementary professional understanding of the researchers.

## **Credibility and rigour**

To enhance the trustworthiness (credibility) of the data, we used member reflection by asking participants to reflect on their transcript to confirm the credibility of the information and narrative account (Creswell and Miller 2000). This approach provided interviewees with an opportunity to reflect on our “synopses” of the interviews, as opposed to them needing to member check (read) the entire script verbatim (Braun and Clarke 2006). We chose member reflection as it considers several factors that member checking ignores (e.g., questions are context specific and people’s reality changes from day to day depending on mood; Smith and McGannon 2017).

## **Results**

Results broadly supported our four key themes and subthemes of enquiry consisting of (a) psychological factors that enhance or undermine resilience in young people; (b) type of interventions used; (c) delivery of the interventions; and (d) psychological and behavioral changes noticed in young people following their time with case workers. The four relevant themes are summarized in [Figures 1 and 2](#).

### **Theme 1: resilience in young people (Figure 1)**

#### **Low emotional regulation**

When speaking to case workers about their understanding of what resilience is, some spoke about negative characteristics they saw in the young person that undermined resilience. Nearly every staff member spoke of poor emotional understanding in the youths, which led to them being unable to successfully manage difficulties in their lives. For example, Case Worker 1 (CW1) explained that “They have coped, and they’ve demonstrated elements of resilience, but then often I find they’re maladaptive coping strategies. You’ve got the lack of emotional regulation; they will go wild when things aren’t going their way.” CW1 further reported, “A lot of young people will say, ‘*Oh, it’s not okay to be angry*’. But they will become angrier and more frustrated because they feel like they are doing something negative.”

Staff felt some youths “went wild,” perhaps in attempting to gain a sense of control over situations they perceived as difficult. The youths lack of ability to manage strong emotions, or their use of unhelpful coping methods such as anger and aggression, contributed to the offending behavior. CW6 reported “I think to some, aggression comes from a sense of being noble and loyal, and sticking by that person and doing right by that person. But then they inevitably get themselves into more trouble, which isn’t great.” CW 7 also reported that:

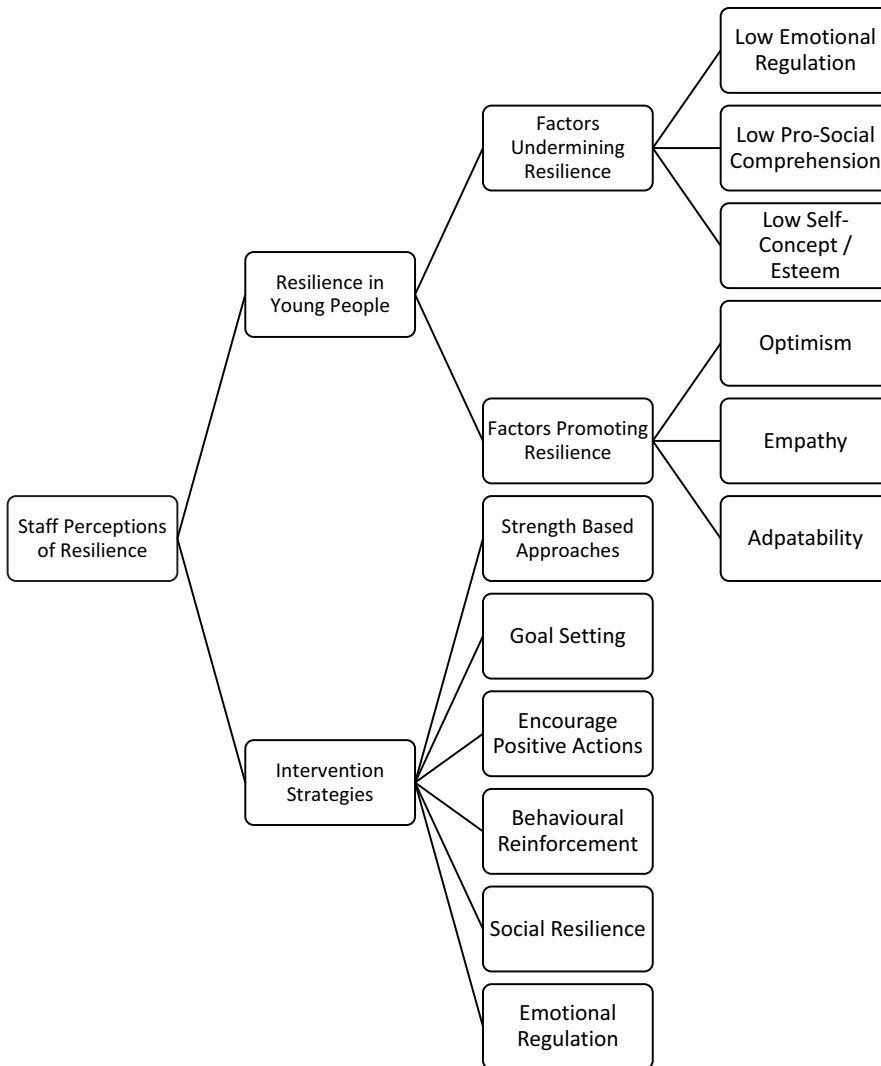
The immediate response is anger, do drugs, get so off that you commit crime. How do you deal with feelings? “*Oh, I punch walls, I kick doors*” . . . in the opposite way, positive emotions and feeling happy are met in the same way, going out and doing drugs.

#### **Low pro-social comprehension**

Staff perceived the youths to have extremely low understanding of appropriate social behaviors, language, and relationships. In addition, some of the youths were also largely unaware of which activities could get them arrested. CW3 reported that “Some don’t know where the line (appropriate social relationships) is, what is in public and what isn’t.” CW6 added:

I did one session and we had to really break it down, he didn’t really understand why you had to have a driving licence. So, it was going over the importance, the legislation around having a driving licence, how old you must be, how old you could be to have a provisional, you know, going through just very basic things.

CW5 reported that “There is a huge lack of, not necessarily responsibility but, understanding into the severity of the offense and the harm that’s been caused.”



**Figure 1.** Youth justice staff perceptions of resilience in young people and intervention strategies set to increase resilience.

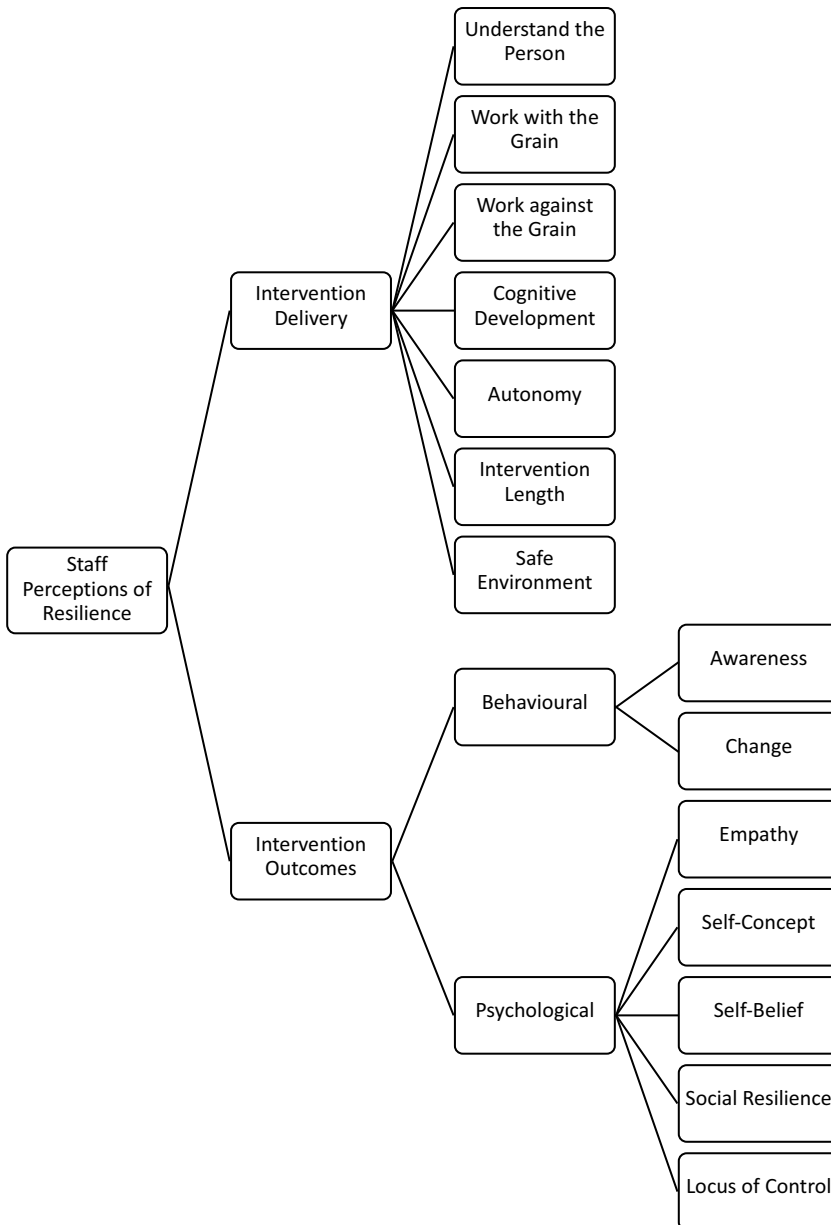
### ***Low self-concept and self-esteem***

Staff gave accounts of the youth's poor self-concept throughout the interviews, which they saw as another significant barrier to setting conventional goals and perhaps optimism. CW3 reflected on this by saying "They think, I'm not good enough, I didn't get any qualifications, I didn't do school, nobody is taking any interest, I'll never get anywhere in my life." Having low self-concept led to low levels of self-esteem. This low self-esteem contributed to the youth's negative expectations of the future and reduced their likelihood of identifying achievable goals. CW6 stated "A lot of these kids have got low self-esteem and self-worth and don't actually realize what they're good at, because they're always told what they're not good at, or what they've done wrong." CW5 explained that:

There is the possibility of failure isn't there if they set goals? If that's something that they have experienced quite a lot of, and believe that they will fail, why would you put yourself in the position where you could fail?

CW1 added "I think there is and remains a small culture of, I'm not good enough for that. I can't do that. They'd never give me a job kind of thing, so there are issues of esteem." While exact relationships





**Figure 2.** Youth justice staff perceptions of intervention delivery and intervention outcomes.

between low self-esteem and delinquency may not be well understood, Mier and Landy's (2018) meta-analytic review found that low self-esteem had a small, negative, and significant effect size on offending behavior.

### **Factors promoting resilience**

#### **Optimism**

Young people who were more optimistic seemed to be protected against low levels of self-concept and esteem. Research has identified that optimism is positively related to resilience (Panchal, Mukherjee, and

Kumar 2016). Further, self-determination, self-efficacy, and hope for the future are key factors in desistance (Maruna 2010). Staff expressed admiration for those youths who persevered and maintained hope for the future despite adversity. For example, CW8 stated:

It's about thinking to yourself that you can still get on, there is still a chance. You've got to have this thought inside you that you're not going to give up, I suppose. And just being able to do that every day, some days you can't, and some days, I suppose it's about optimism.

CW10 added that:

They want to be able to get a job and have normal things, a place to live. Some of them, despite what they might've grown up in, know that they don't want that - they know that they want something else.

CW9 added:

Some of them are so, so bright. They might not have the academic ability, but in terms of the more practical skills and the motivation, for going out and looking for a little job. Going out and handing out phone numbers to local chippies or cafés.

### **Empathy**

Staff believed the youths were more able to manage difficulties when they had some understanding of other people's needs or feelings, and of reasons for certain behaviors. Using a particular example CW1 reported "He fully understands his mother's mental health issues and he is empathic in terms of his mother in that situation."

CW9 reported:

I think the ones that stop are the ones that have seemed to have had a grasp of how their behaviours affect others. Like I say, thinking of some recent ones now, so maybe if they've been able to . . . stop and think, about the impact on other people.

CW3 reported:

I've had one kid have his windows smashed in, and he said, "*I don't feel safe in this house*". I said, you know that feeling of not feeling safe in your house? That's how you make your victims feel. I think the ones that stop are the ones that have seemed to have had a grasp of how their behaviours affect others.

Interventions targeting delinquent youth emotional development, including empathy, have successfully reduced the severity of re-offending (Hubble et al. 2015; Lui, Barry, and Marcus 2019).

### **Adaptability**

Staff spoke of youth who displayed positive coping skills such as recognizing opportunities to get involved in pro-social activities (including those provided by YJS) and having independence skills.

CW2 reported that:

A lot of the young people that we deal with are very resilient, they're survivors and can take advantage of opportunities. A lot of them are streetwise. If they've got the chance to engage in something that could be of benefit to them, they're going to take that opportunity. If they engage with us, there's a chance that they could do A, B and C. They see the benefits, and they have access maybe to a world that they've never had before, where people pay attention to them, listen to what they're saying, or want to help them.

CW4 reported that "In lots of ways they are very good at coping, they're very resilient, very resourceful, capable of . . . traveling around, things like that."

CW5 states:

I think you see young people who are more responsive to their own needs and not looking to other people to solve things for them . . . that self-efficacy, that feeling of ability to do and the resources to know, "*If I can't do it, I know who to ask*", and it to be a positive thing, not a "*I'm a victim*", you need to help me, more a "*I'm an assertive*

*person*” who is asking for you to help me. They’re feeling like they have some self-autonomy, and they can make decisions themselves.

## **Theme 2: intervention strategies (Figure 1)**

### **Strength based approaches**

Staff believed that low self-concept and low self-esteem highlighted in Theme 1 (factors undermining resilience) was a key barrier to intervention success and felt addressing these issues was important. Staff therefore typically adopted a strengths-based approach, identifying what the youth could do well rather than focusing solely on their negative behavior. CW10 stated:

We must do work upon it, but I think we’ve all found that if you just carry on constantly, constantly talking about their bad behaviour, the negative behaviour, then that’s not going to get anywhere, is it, really. And they feel ashamed, don’t they, and embarrassed, you can see that.

Staff found identifying what the youths were good at and their personal strengths, helped cultivate self-belief that they could achieve and therefore foster belief regarding better outcomes. For example, CW5 stated “In my work, it’s about getting them to recognize their strengths. I think that’s key really, because if they recognize their strengths I think, naturally, their confidence, their self-worth . . . their goals, their aspirations, everything else increases.” CW3 also focussed upon this approach by asking the young person “What are your strengths? *Strengths? Don’t know, none*’. When you come and meet with me in the centre, you’re always there, aren’t you? *Oh yes*’. You’re reliable, aren’t you? That’s a strength.”

### **Goal setting**

The youth’s low self-concept combined with little understanding of how they might achieve goals, led to staff providing targeted support to work toward pro-social (as opposed to anti-social) goals. For example, CW5 stated:

I think it’s because they don’t know what to do to change. They know what they want their end goal to be. But what’s your plan? How are we going to get there? *I don’t know*.” You want to reduce by half, what are we going to do to help you achieve that?

CW6 also reported:

With all young people whether you’re high-end or not high-end, I think looking at what you want from life and your aspirations and your goals, and then making those achievable, because if you say, I want to get a job, but you’ve got no qualifications, that seems like, *I can’t achieve that*”. But if we start breaking it down into small achievable bits, I think it motivates them because it is achievable. Your kind of empowering them.

### **Encouraging positive activities**

Another strategy staff frequently used to increase low self-concept and self-esteem was the encouragement of positive activities. For example, youths were encouraged to access community resources such as gyms and youth clubs or (as in goal setting) apply for a job. Staff felt this strategy also served to promote the replacement of antisocial or criminal behavior with more pro-social activities. CW4 reported that “It’s nice to try and talk about some of the things they like doing, that are more constructive, they’re not easy to find sometimes.” CW10 also stated:

Even some of the more prolific ones, we’ll try and get them engaged in things. Like there’s a football team which has been a positive thing, that a couple of the workers here have set up for lads in the local area, to go once a week. That has worked well.

CW6 added:

Some of the lads will say, *“I want to get my construction skills certification card,”* we do sessions here on training for it, and then we get involved in an outside agency that funds the projects. Because if you’ve got a legitimate income, you’ve got employment, you’re not bored, those things are going to desist you from offending, not keep

going over victim empathy, because yes, it's good for the young person to have knowledge of that, but it's not making changes.

CW7 reported that “If there are practical things that a young person needs to do, like register with a doctor or open a bank account, I quite like to incorporate those into the sessions to give them extra support.”

CW5 added:

We address a lot of welfare concerns here, and I think these kids see that “*Actually, I've come in for offending but . . . you've helped me get a job, you've helped me sort my benefits out, you're trying to sort things out at home, you're promoting the relationship with my parents*”.

### **Behavioural reinforcement**

Once the youths had engaged in an activity, staff were then able to focus on reinforcing on how well they had done, thus building on positive changes.

CW7 reported:

I usually do work with young people on their self-perception. I try to tell people what I recognise in them or what I've seen in them that's positive. It's also really good if they do work with other support members of staff, I can say, [staff name] said you did amazing the other day, or he said you worked really hard.

However, staff often needed to provide a lot of encouragement before the youth would take part in new activities.

CW4 reported:

At one point early on we were still going to the house, still building a rapport, we offered this young person a chance to go go-karting, so a colleague went and took him, it took him three goes to actually get him out to go and do it, but part of it's been, do this first with us, as an activity, and we'll leave those other things a little later.

### **Social resilience**

Adversity from social sources can be an antecedent to anxiety and depression (e.g., Rajaleid et al. 2015). To improve social resilience in social settings, staff felt that a focus on healthy and appropriate relationships was important, even if this factor was unrelated to offending. Staff believed social resilience was necessary to counteract the youths lack of positive role models. CW8 reported “We like to do a lot of that kind of work with them as well. What makes a good relationship, what makes a good partner, what makes a not so good partner.”

CW2 added:

I suppose that maybe some of it is about what they've learned growing up, what they've seen within their own family. If their parents haven't got the capacity to show them how to deal with social situations or emotions or whatever in a positive and productive way, we try to do it.

Staff also described youths who were socially awkward and lacked confidence in social situations. Methods staff used to address this included facilitating real-life situations to increase the youth's confidence. For example, CW6 stated:

I've done quite a lot of work with two specific people, who've got very low self-esteem, self-worth. They don't go out and they won't order their own drink or their own food or speak to anybody. So, we've done role modelling . . . I'll go to Costa Coffee and then I'll buy the coffees a couple of times and then it's like, well, you have a go now. I'll go with you, but you're going to order for us this time, and they engage in that social interaction. It can take a while sometimes.

### **Emotional regulation**

As noted above, staff believed that the limited understanding of self, and other people's emotions were often the cause of the offending, or poor behavior at school. To counteract low

emotional understanding, and frequent displays of anger, staff felt it was important to address the youth's emotional management. CW9 commented "And then, you know, exploring what you can. It's okay to be angry, everyone's allowed to be angry, being angry is good. Sometimes being angry gets things done. But what we do with that is the problem." CW8 added, "We have an emotional well-being worker over at the intervention center. I know one of my young people spoke about him before. He was asked to visualize what makes him angry and punch a punch bag and things like that." CW1 reported using questioning regarding emotional regulation:

How are you feeling when you do that? What might someone's body language or voice tone or facial expression be like if they were talking about that? I make them more aware of emotions and different emotions or feelings in the body. When you're feeling like that do you feel hot, do you feel shaky, does your heartbeat faster, do you feel sick? So, they're more aware of their own emotions and . . . other people's as well.

### **Theme 3: intervention delivery (Figure 2)**

#### **Understanding the person**

Staff felt that identifying with the youth's interests enabled delivery of interventions in ways that were meaningful to the youths, which had a positive influence on engagement. CW5 stated that:

I think that's the most important thing. As a practitioner, if you know that young person well you can guide them because you can, like I said, elicit that information from them using prompts and what you know of that young person.

CW1 added:

I downloaded colour pictures from the comics of Harley Quinn and the Joker and that's what I used to do knife crime with her. And we talked about what's in there, and she's like, "*That's abusive, that is*" . . . You must tailor your intervention. If you want them to engage, it must be something that they're invested in.

Staff said they also often used their knowledge of what was important to the youths going forward, and to ask the youths what impact their offending might have on this. For example, CW3 reported:

You try to see what their interests are and where they want to be in the future. Then you say, how are you going to get there in the future? If you keep on going the way you're doing . . . you'll be back in court, you're going to get another order and . . . a criminal record. Then you go for an interview to work on a building site, you've got your CSCS card, but what happens when they look at the young person who has got no criminal record and the one that has?

Knowing who was important to the youths meant staff could encourage the youths to reflect meaningfully on their behavior. For example, staff described a general lack of victim empathy and found this was often hard for the youths to develop. However, through knowing who the youths cared about, staff were able to encourage the youths to think more deeply about the effects of their behavior (consequential thinking).

CW6 stated:

When discussing motor offences, if you say, you could have crashed your car into somebody, you don't get anything. If I say, that could have been your sister on that street, somebody could have crashed into your sister, and then it's like, "*Oh, that's not okay*", How would you feel if that had happened? "*I'd be devastated. I'd have been upset*". That's when you get the emotion from them.

#### **Working 'with' the grain**

Staff described strategies they used in relation to the personality and views of the youths (cf. Hardy et al. 2017). Staff attempted to work "with" the grain when considering where to deliver the intervention, and whether the youth might respond better to formal or informal settings. CW8 found that:

Driving in the car is usually the best time to have difficult conversations with young people, to discuss and have conversations and think about things. It's that, no eye-contact . . . feeling less on the spot. Going for a walk, things like that.

While most youth responded well to informal settings, such as walking, or driving in the car, there were those that preferred a more formal setting. CW11 stated that "Some respond more to formal settings if they've had more education. So, with some of them, yes, let's talk in the office." CW11 also reported that some required a more direct route, "Because we've done it through the stealth route, some of them, they'll say, 'You've done F-all with me, you haven't done nothing.' So, there are those who want to be seeing things are being done to them."

### **Working 'against' the grain**

Additionally, staff often worked "against" the grain to directly challenge the youth's views and beliefs. For example, many youths believed crime was an acceptable way of earning an income, violence was supportable, and drinking to excess was normal. These beliefs and behaviors were often deeply engrained. CW6 reported that:

They make this world, this criminal world, seem amazing – They say to me "Why are you still here? You can earn that money in a night." But the difference is, I'm not paranoid, I haven't got to worry about when the police are going to come and arrest me, because they will be arresting you at some point, I haven't got to worry about grassing, I know who my friends are. Going through all that with them – really, is that a life that you want to continue living?

When a young person confided in their drinking habits, CW8 reported, "*I went and downed a bottle of vodka.*" "I'm like, That's not the normal way. Not in those words but just challenging that and going, you downed a bottle of vodka? You could have died. Not everybody does that." CW5 reports:

I don't often challenge directly. There's been one occasion recently where I have. He had said to the recreation facilitator, "*I didn't come in last week because I was tired, and I couldn't be arsed.*" I thought that attitude is not okay. I think you learn to understand what style suits them. Some young people respond well to the more direct approach, others don't. I had to take a sterner approach with this young person. He did apologise and has not missed an appointment since.

### **Cognitive development**

Staff ensured interventions were cognitively appropriate. For example, youths who were embarrassed about their spelling, or averse to sitting around a table often responded better to a walk, or an activity. For example, CW9 reported "We've got different programmes, that even if they're 14 or 15, these are aimed at 9- or 10-year-olds, so we can use those. Just because someone is of a chronological age, their level of understanding may be below that." CW11 reported:

He was a kid that was reluctant. Lived in a very rural area, a lot of effort to get into the office. By the time he gets into the office he's had enough. So, we walk the dog for an hour, and the kid is like "*Yes, I like this*". But the kid is doing more work, he doesn't think he's doing it.

### **Autonomy**

Staff believed a lot of the youths felt they had no control, especially those living in foster care, or children's homes. Staff therefore attempted to give those youths a degree of autonomy, for example by giving them a choice of where to meet. CW4 reported that "Pretty much, they're struggling for control, I think, they're not doing what they want to do, it's been taken away from them." CW10 added:

I think an important thing, to try and get them engaged in the first place, is to help them feel that . . . they're not so powerless. So, as opposed to going on, right, I'm going to see you every Tuesday. You must come here. I'll say, what is going to work for you? Where can we meet?

### **Intervention length**

The average length of time that case workers worked with the youths ranged from three to six months. Staff also only had one hour per week with each youth. However, if a youth had particularly complex needs, and needed more time to address these, YJS could use their discretion to extend the length of the order or intervention. For example, CW1 reported:

Even with a conditional caution, we should be looking at about three months really, that's the kind of guide. But it's not written in stone, and I will always advocate for any young person with difficulties that may take them a bit longer to grasp it all.

### **Safe environment for change**

YJS staff are in a unique position whereby a court order has required the youths to work with them (unless the order is voluntary). Staff were able to fulfill the role of a positive and trustworthy adult, and they felt most of the youths benefitted from and appreciated this. CW4 reported:

She said to me quite late on . . . "People here are nice", she was quite pointed the way she said that "Everyone here is nice." I think everyone she'd met, me, the staff at the place, whereas maybe where she lives every day there's always an edge of aggression.

CW8 added, "I think they all really appreciate us being here because we are a semblance of normality and a positive adult in their life that they don't have." CW5 commented, "You've built that trust. I think they feel it, so they can confide, and they can trust in you. If they need help and support, they come down here for it."

## **Theme 4: intervention outcomes (Figure 2)**

### **Behaviour awareness**

Through working with YJS staff, some youths went on to say they would never let their little brother/sister do what they had done. Others spoke of how they would treat their own children different to how their parents had treated them. However, the youth's development of alternative beliefs and behaviors often took time, and staff perseverance. In terms of behavioral awareness, CW3 commented that "He's recognized – this is not right . . . he considers his father a thug basically. He doesn't want to reflect the way his father is." CW1 also referred to changes in awareness:

I said, the thing is, you think it's okay to wind up security guards and get a chase off them and mess around with the police. You do understand that your anti-social behaviour will rack up and it will come up every time you commit an offence, "No!" I said, and do you know that anti-social behaviour can take you to court, and a prison sentence? Hasn't been any since because he's terrified of going to prison and he's terrified of being in court.

Youths who developed an understanding of the potential adverse effects of offending on their futures were more likely to make positive changes. However, believing they had something to lose was key. Those who valued their health were more likely to reduce their consumption of alcohol or drugs. Those who believed they could have a job, their own family, holidays abroad, or a driving license, were more likely to make positive changes. Regarding one youth's drinking habits, CW3 reported:

Their organs haven't even developed fully until they're 25, so they are destroying them before they've given them a chance. Likewise, with smoking cannabis . . . it attacks the lower part of the lungs like ordinary cigarettes, nicotine. So, I say to them, you said you want to do sport and go to the gym or go in the army, how are you going to do that trek, that run, to get passed for it? They hadn't realised.

## **Behaviour change**

In terms of behavior changes, CW8 reported:

He went back to college and he's doing well. Just constantly having those conversations. No, that's not right, that's not the way that you should be living; you shouldn't be having fights every week. You shouldn't be threatening to hit teachers over the head. You don't do that. I worked with him for 3 years.

CW10 reported, "It just changed for him. He got a job, he met somebody, they had a child, and for him, that was it." CW6 adds:

He's got a goal. Although it's not brilliant, he is massively on the police radar now, and we are targeting his behaviour through antisocial behaviour workshops. But he's not driving cars. It doesn't look like it's a positive because he's obviously still offending. However, he does want to get his provisional licence, and this is something that we can work towards.

CW11 comments, "We've given him accreditations around carpentry and bricklaying. He's going to college. We're taking him every day and now he's getting the bus."

## **Psychological changes**

### **Development of empathy**

Giving the youths the opportunity to reflect on their behavior, and consider the victim, enabled some to develop empathy. Staff saw this psychological factor as key in subsequent behavioral changes. For example, CW10 mentioned "I think the ones that stop are the ones that have seemed to have had a grasp of how their behaviours affect others." Increased empathy may be pivotal in decreasing the likelihood of antagonistic behaviors toward others (Lui, Barry, and Marcus 2019). However, with youths who may have experienced trauma, staff believed they sometimes needed to develop empathy in relation to themselves first. CW2 reflected:

We look at the victim, and we then look at the young person as the victim. It's something they've never thought about before, and they can identify the emotions they would go through themselves if it happened to them. We say, well, how do you think the victim felt when it happened to them . . . and they've never connected.

### **Increased self-concept**

Self-concept encompasses how individuals see themselves, and how they feel others see them. Staff described how identifying strengths, and encouraging positive activities enabled the youth to have a more positive self-concept. For example, CW5 reported:

He had a Detention Training Order, so he's been in a youth offending institute. He was quite prolific in nature, but he did this exercise and he said, "*An offender, that's what I do, it's why I'm here, isn't it?*" Then when we started to explore it . . . actually, you've got a mum, so you're a son. You've got your brothers, so you're a brother yourself. Your brothers have got children, so, you're an uncle. How good do you think you are at these roles? When he thought about it, he was like, "*Ah, yes, actually I am.*" Where it started off is like, 75% offender, it just got smaller and smaller and smaller, until he realises that's only a very, very small part of his life.

CW9 added:

I think you would see young people becoming more confident, more positive about themselves, feeling like they belong in some way, shape or form, whether that's because they've got into some training . . . or engaging with a service that is meeting their needs in terms of substances.

### **Increased self-belief**

Staff described several youths who went on to engage in training, or gain employment, and how this appeared to stem from increased self-confidence and the belief that they could achieve, and that they deserved what others had. CW9 added:



Some of those young people might leave us and then might come back, I'm thinking of young people who come back sometimes and say, "*I'm trying to get my construction skills certification,*" it might be like five months after they've left us.

CW2 added:

If they've managed to get a job, it's their self-confidence, their self-esteem. When they're on an order and somebody's giving them positive reinforcement, such as you are worth it, you are valuable. You deserve what other people have got; you can achieve it. They think, "*Yes, I can.*"

### **Resilience in social settings**

A key adaptive coping strategy staff noted was the youth's increased ability to trust others. Staff felt having a positive experience of YJS support, and developing good relationships with YJS staff, meant some youths were then more willing to accept support from other services. Others became more willing to talk to other adults, including their parents. CW7 reported that:

Going to college, for him, was the making of him. Just his confidence in coming in and speaking to reception staff, his whole appearance, the way he held and carried himself and looked after himself. He'd made friends for the first time in years, got a girlfriend.

CW6 comments:

One young person started hanging around with another young person because his dads got a building site. So, he's done a bit of work through that. He's got a bit of money coming in and they've developed a friendship from that.

CW8 added to this line of change:

"They've gone through this support, and it's been positive, so they'll be like, '*Oh yes, maybe I do need.*' . . . They're more willing to be transitioned on to other things then." Finally, CW10 confirmed behavioural change because of being more socially resilient in that, "A lot of them will say, '*I'll think about things more. I'll talk to my family more about.*' . . . because they're used to talking in here, with us . . . That seems a small thing, but that's quite significant, really."

### **Locus of control**

Staff described youths who had gained a sense of perceived control, and how this seemed to relate to improved self-confidence. CW9 added, "I think you see young people who are more responsive to their own needs and not looking to other people to solve things for them. They're feeling like they have some self-autonomy, and they can make decisions themselves." If necessary, staff offered continued support on a voluntary basis, meaning the youths were able to decide when they were ready to leave. This choice may have contributed to the development of an internal locus of control in some youths. For example, CW2 reported:

If we see somebody's finding it a little difficult and panicking about their order coming to an end "*What am I going to do now? Who will I talk to?*" or whatever. We say, you can come back on a voluntary basis. Your order has finished. A lot choose to do that, but not for long . . . They come back a couple of times until they're feeling more confident and say, "*Right, I can cope.*"

## **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to better understand how YJS case workers' influenced resilience in the young people they work with. Therefore, we assessed their insight of what resilience is (or isn't) in young people; their rationale for intervention strategies selected; intervention delivery; and how their interventions affected psychological and behavioral outcomes. Even without specific resilience training, staff were able to enhance resilience in young people leading to positive psychological and

behavioral outcomes. In other words, staff were able to promote “good psychological functioning and good behavioural outcomes despite adverse circumstances expected to jeopardize normative growth and adaptation” (Mukherjee and Kumar 2017:3).

### ***Resilience and intervention strategies***

Staff described several key psychological risks (i.e., low levels of emotional regulation, social comprehension, and self-concept/esteem) and protective factors (i.e., adaptability, optimism, and empathy) relating to resilience. Case workers perceived that optimism aided behavioral change, and therefore sought to encourage a positive future focus in the youths. Encouraging positive activities appeared as one of the most discussed strategies used by the case workers. However, this necessitated first addressing the youths frequently cited negative low self-concept and low self-esteem. Understanding negative self-concept as a risk factor for offending is consistent with previous research (Maruna 2010). Thus, case workers often addressed the youths’ perceived and often insurmountable differences between their present self (e.g., offender) and future self (e.g., employed, being in successful relationships etc., e.g., Oyserman and Markus 1990). Our data suggested that improved self-concept/esteem occurred largely via strengths-based approaches including positive actions (e.g., improving their job prospects), behavioral reinforcement (e.g., via positive feedback), and increasing social resilience (e.g., via leisure activities; see also Gray et al. 2005).

Low emotional regulation was addressed via increasing emotional management, comprehension, and empathy. Addressing emotional regulation was also a highly discussed theme. To be able to challenge antisocial behaviors, case workers felt that youths often needed to develop empathy for themselves (they were also often victims) as well as their victims. Staff utilized their knowledge of what was important to the youth to develop their empathy, such as asking those engaging in dangerous driving to imagine how they might feel if a fast car had harmed a loved family member or examine their beliefs regarding knife crime. Previous research has also found that increased empathy relates to reduced offending (Bottoms and Shapland 2010).

### ***Intervention delivery and outcomes***

Its perhaps not surprising that intervention delivery revolved around understanding the young person’s background. Understanding the person was also a highly discussed area. For example, case workers considered individual interventions by using pro-social modeling, direct or indirect approaches, working with and against the grain, challenging beliefs, and cognitive development (Bonta 2007). Staff also identified the youths’ individual strengths and provided positive feedback to reinforce such strengths (e.g., punctuality or life skills). Previous research has also found that interactions between solution focused approaches (focusing on the solution rather than the problem), staff persistence, and their belief in the ability of the youth to change for the good, were key to intervention success (Nugent 2015).

The data also suggested that increased self-concept/esteem particularly related to the development of a more positive future focus (e.g., optimism) in youths. Possible positive and negative behavioral outcomes were frequently cited to the young person in the belief that developing awareness influenced future decision making. For example, motivation to reduce offending appeared to relate to the extent to which the youths believed they could gain employment, own their own car, or have a successful relationship but that these opportunities might get lost if they had a criminal record. However, data suggested believing they had something to gain required the youths to be confident that they could achieve their goals in conventional ways. Therefore, YJS case workers involved the young person in a carefully tailored goal setting intervention.

Goal setting is also inextricably linked to the theory of hope (i.e., Snyder 1994). Therefore, case workers in the current study were providing young people with hope by identifying positive pathways via goal setting (Snyder 2002). Hope has also been associated with a sense of empowerment (Munoz,

Brady, and Brown 2017), self-control, and optimism (Hellman and Gwinn 2017). A hopeful mind-set has also been shown predict recovery after childhood trauma where resilience has not (Munoz et al. 2020). In their study examining the relationship between hope and resilience in a sample of adults entering diversion programmes for the first time in the USA, Ozturk et al. (2022) found that hope predicted 17.2% of the variance in resilience. Future research would do well to replicate these findings in a youth justice setting.

Case worker interview data also suggested that goal setting (or hope) increased an internal locus of control (i.e., the youth's believed that they could affect their own outcomes). Research relating to child resilience identified locus of control as a consistent positive factor, even when socio-demographic factors were controlled (Luthar and Zigler 1991). Internal locus of control has also been shown to be significantly and positively related with hope (Munoz, Brady, and Brown 2017). Therefore, interventions derived around goal setting (or hope), seem to promote an internal locus of control and a degree of self-belief. Therefore, the current findings make a strong case for interventions that encourage goal setting and hope.

A final intervention theme that was discussed in some detail related to the development of autonomy. Autonomy forms part of Deci and Ryans' (2000) self-determination theory where autonomy, relatedness with others, and competency drives intrinsic motivation. Although case workers did not refer to self-determination theory per se, they did perceive that fostering opportunities for the young person to implement personal choices, self-direction, and control were important life skills to develop. Recent research has also examined the adaptability of self-determination theory in exploring future aspirations of male adolescents transitioning out of juvenile detention (Tracey and Hanham 2017). These authors found that the need for autonomy and competence were important factors for successful transitions back into the community.

### ***Psychological changes related to behavioural changes***

Behavioral changes were most likely to occur via psychological changes. For example, increased comprehension of potential consequences of their behavior, and increased understanding of the law, were key interview themes relating to greater likelihood of positive outcomes. Previous research found that an individual's comprehension (of themselves, others, and the world around them) is a central component of resilience (cf. Kumpfer and Hopkins 1993), and our data are consistent with this finding.

### ***Case worker relationship***

The experience of a positive relationship with their case workers appeared to increase the youth's likelihood of seeking other forms of social support (e.g., peers and family). A recent review of resilience studies concluded that "resilience rests, fundamentally, on relationships" (Luthar and Brown 2007:780). Staff's demonstration of positive regard to the youth appeared to be a contributory factor in the youth's improved self-concept/esteem. Social bonds, social support, and a positive relationship with an adult are key themes in empirical research relating to desistance and positive outcomes (e.g., Werner 1989).

### ***Applied implications***

Staff felt interventions that were successful were those that sought to replace negative with more positive behavior, such as by drawing out the youth's strengths, and working with them toward constructive leisure or employment goals. Thus, we recommend that YJS staff focus more on strength-based approaches. Relationship building as the establishment of trust with the young person was central to effective engagement and positive outcomes. An

individualized approach enabled staff to consider the personality and interests of the individual to achieve meaningful engagement. Knowing the youths also allowed staff to challenge directly or indirectly the youth's beliefs and inclinations, thus raising their awareness and understanding of their own responses and behaviors. As such, it appears paramount that staff spend time developing trust to better focus on individual needs. Finally, increased awareness and confidence in the youths appeared to relate to reduced offending via increased motivation to change (Hodgkinson et al. 2020).

### **Implications for research**

Research should fully explore the fundamental differences in youths who failed to develop the psychological resilience relating to positive outcomes, compared to those that did (despite experiencing similar levels of adversity). It would also be extremely useful to interview the youths themselves, and perhaps their families, to identify their views on YJS interventions. For example, what aspects of the intervention they felt benefited them the most and whether there might be additional approaches that would further increase intervention efficacy. Finally, targeted training for YJS case workers using tools and techniques specifically designed to increase constructs of psychological resilience such as self-efficacy (self-belief), optimism, and emotional regulation may be a useful development. Future evaluations of such resilience and strengths-based approaches in comparison to control groups are necessary to draw any firm conclusions in this area. As the YJS moves toward a more resilience-based approach, implementing empirical evidence that informs such changes are paramount.

### **Limitations**

This research was not without limitations. One of the limitations was that we did not interview the youths themselves. Doing so may have allowed us to gain valuable insight into the thoughts of the young people who receive such support. Although the YJS does conduct exit interviews with the young people, there appears to be a lack of consistency in how this data is gathered and used. Further, it appears that once the young person has finished with their case manager, all contact may come to an end hence long-term outcome variables are rarely assessed.

### **Conclusion**

Research into what works to increase positive outcomes such as reduced offending in Youth Justice is abundant, global, and has identified numerous contributory psychological and environmental factors. It is therefore unlikely a single model of intervention would be able to provide everything needed to elicit change for the better as this would likely depend on individual risks and needs. We would therefore fully recommend an individualized approach. Our comprehensive analysis of interview findings, and the importance of emphasizing strengths and pro-social activities, in addition to addressing risks and needs, was key in initiating positive change. This can be utilized by those developing future services and policies to increase the prospects of youths and increase the likelihood of positive psychological and behavioral outcomes.

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## Compliance with ethical standards

University ethical approval was granted, and all participants consented to take part.

## Data availability statement

Due to the sensitive nature of the data, releasing full transcripts in the public domain may allow some participants to be identified. Therefore, full transcripts are not published online. However, please contact the first author should you require more details.

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