

Experiences of youth justice workers critical in shaping policy for preventing youth offending

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People working with children who have offended or are at risk of offending are spending less time on the front-line helping youngsters and

more on paperwork because of conflicting narratives from different Government departments, new Keele University-led research has found.

Writing in the *Youth Justice* journal, Dr. Anne-Marie Day, a criminology lecturer at Keele University, researched the recent shift in youth justice central policy narratives in England and Wales, and the impact it is having on youth justice practitioners who work with some of the most vulnerable and complex children in society.

Dr. Day, a qualified Probation Officer, who has worked in the community, courts and prison, believes a clear and consistent narrative from [decision makers](#) is required to tackle the current difficulties staff are facing, and has called for the perspective of youth justice practitioners to form a central role in informing national policymaking moving forward.

The paper explores the confusion between whether practitioners should prioritize managing risk or adopt a "child first" approach that focuses more on welfare than offending behavior. This confusion is compounded by the Youth Justice Board's focus on child first, and HM Inspectorate of Probation's emphasis on risk management, the paper adds.

"Child first" is a rights-based approach to youth justice, whereby children coming to the attention of the Youth Justice System are seen as "children" rather than as "offenders." Under the [risk management](#) approach, however, the focus is shifted away from children's needs and more towards managing the risk they pose to society.

In the paper, Dr. Day highlights recurrent themes from interviews with staff showing how youth justice practitioners are feeling caught between the two methods, causing major challenges for their work with children on the front line.

Dr. Day said: "Youth [justice](#) practitioners report that they are struggling to find a balance between the two approaches of working with children. They feel that trying to satisfy the demands of an inspection framework that prioritizes [risk assessment](#) and management means that they are spending more time filling out paperwork. This is reducing their time to work with children face-to-face which could ultimately be more beneficial for both the children and wider society in the longer term.

"The research highlights the importance of central Government departments speaking directly to practitioners who work with children. The perceived continued prioritization of inspection frameworks on the management and assessment of risk is taking gifted and talented practitioners away from a group of children who have some of the most complex needs in society and putting them behind a desk, filling out assessments and plans. Until a clear and consistent narrative is developed from the center, these difficulties will persist."

More information: Anne-Marie Day, 'It's a Hard Balance to Find': The Perspectives of Youth Justice Practitioners in England on the Place of 'Risk' in an Emerging 'Child-First' World, *Youth Justice* (2022). [DOI: 10.1177/14732254221075205](#)

Provided by Keele University

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