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'Safe spaces and places': the value of design-led methodologies in developing online narratives

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ABSTRACT

This paper considers the value of a design-led methodological approach, adopted during the COVID-19 pandemic to facilitate online interviews with young people (aged 15–17) who had been involved in crime and violence in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, UK. The development of an original digital workshop and set of exercises (referred to as a tool) using interactive methods engaged criminalised youths online and gathered qualitative data regarding their experiences of crime and violence. The research demonstrated how principles of design can be used to empower participants, overcome communication barriers, obtain rich data through online methods, and move away from a traditional 'interview' experience, creating a safer space for more genuine accounts and narratives. Thus, this paper suggests that researchers of youth crime and violence, and social scientists more broadly, may wish to consider how adopting design-led methodologies can allow places and spaces for participants' narratives to develop.

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Introduction

The social sciences encompass many multidisciplinary fields, covering different facets and topics and highlighting the importance of using diverse research methodologies. Knowledge of the social world can be gained from rational and rigid research procedures, but also more imaginative processes of intuition, fiction, and feeling (Jacobsen et al., 2014). This paper will suggest that social research could greatly benefit from seeking inspiration from the innovative endeavours and practices of other disciplines, by demonstrating the value of design-led methodology when collecting the narratives of participants online.

In early 2020, a group of UK-based researchers secured funding from the Youth Justice Board to analyse the Newcastle-upon-Tyne youth justice landscape, distinctive amongst core cities in England and Wales in having a comparatively high rate of young people entering the youth justice service (YJS) for the first time, but with relatively few progressing to commit serious youth violence (SYV).[1] The project aimed to explore the reasons for this, including considering the role of YJS interventions in reducing the likelihood of first-time entrants escalating to SYV. It also sought to increase understanding of the background and experiences of first-time entrants as well as the small number of young people involved in SYV in Newcastle, by collecting their narratives around pathways into and out of offending. Following traditional social science methodologies, focus groups, workshops and one-to-one interviews, all of which involved interactions face-to-face with

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YJS users and other stakeholders, were planned. To collect YJS users' narratives, face-to-face 'creative days' were intended, which would adopt design thinking (DT) and storytelling approaches, with the aim of encouraging participants to tell their stories where they owned the narrative. This approach was important, as many of the young people were involved with multiple professionals from Youth Justice and Social Services, who developed a narrative of the young people's lives, based on their perceptions and interactions. The research, therefore, was trying to develop an approach that put the young person's voice, rather than that of the stakeholders, as the primary focus. Early into the research project however, the COVID-19 pandemic emerged, resulting in these elements being unable to be conducted as initially planned. Advantageously the multi-disciplinary research team for this project brought together criminologists, analysts and design researchers, allowing for the development of an original digital workshop and set of exercises (referred to as a tool) to engage young service users online.

The paper will begin by outlining the nature of youth crime and violence in the UK and the traditional social science methodologies used to research this area. It will then detail how a DT approach led to the creation of a digital tool to investigate these issues with participants online. Demonstrating the value of design-led methodology, the paper will explore how the digital tool created places and spaces to collect the narratives of criminalised youths. Finally, the paper will reflect upon the strengths that DT can offer social sciences research.

The multi-dimensional nature of youth crime and violence

Official statistics demonstrate significant decreases in overall levels of youth crime in the UK. Although the COVID-19 pandemic inevitably contributed to these decreases, in the ten years preceding the March 2020 lockdown, the number of children who received a caution or sentence fell by 82% and the number of children in custody fell by 68% (Ministry of Justice, 2021). This crime drop has been attributed to the increasing use of early intervention strategies and an emphasis upon diversion and minimum intervention with young people who commit crime (Griffiths & Norris, 2020; McAra et al., 2015; Wilson & Hoge, 2013). Consequently, those who remain in the youth justice system are reported to be the most persistent and serious offenders, who are the most difficult to rehabilitate (Taylor, 2016).

SYV is defined by the Youth Justice Board as any drug, robbery or violence against the person offence that has a gravity score of five or more. Loeber and Farrington's (1998) research identified that young people involved in serious violence represent a distinct group, tending to start their offending early and continue late. Youth violence has been associated with being NEET (not in education, employment or training). NEET youths can be drawn into county lines drug-dealing activities which present high risks of being both a victim and perpetrator of violence (Densley, 2013; Home Affairs Committee, 2019; RECLAIM, 2020). Youth violence is also associated with adverse childhood experiences and looked after children. Youths who have been the victims of abuse, neglect or have experienced household dysfunction are more vulnerable and more likely to be drawn to and exploited by violent and/or drug dealing gangs (Association of Directors of Children's Services, 2019; Dobash et al., 2007; Hobart, 2018). Consequently, the relevance of the wider environment to understanding the behaviours of those who commit SYV needed to inform the methodological approach taken in this study.

Traditional research methodologies in youth crime

Though a relatively young field of study, the criminological discipline has a well-established set of methods which provide avenues for rigorous research exploring crime, justice and other complex social phenomena (Brent & Kraska, 2010). In terms of the methods associated with researching youth crime and delinquency, the Chicago School of Sociology has had considerable influence. Indeed, early studies of youth offending arose in the US in sociology, and theories elevating to

prominence sociological explanations of crime – including the influence of inequalities, social networks and geographical location – emerged (Cohen, 1955; Park & Burgess, 1925; Shaw & McKay, 1942; Sutherland, 1947). The research conducted by the Chicago school was concerned with capturing the narratives and understanding the lifeworlds of marginalised 'others'. Classic examples include Thrasher's (1927) The Gang and Foote Whyte's (1943) Street Corner Society. These studies have been influential in how social researchers now study 'youth crime', with their main methodological commonality focused on the individual lives of others as meaningful sites of sociological and criminological analysis. They highlight the value of qualitative and ethnographic methods and stress the importance of empathy, reflexivity and grounded theory (Brent & Kraska, 2010).

Decades later, many investigations into youth crime rely upon these traditional social science methodologies, such as interviewing, collecting self-narratives and ethnographic work, where the face-to-face encounter is prioritised as conduit for the generation of rich qualitative data (see Carlson, 2013, Haigh, 2009; Harding, 2020; Inderbitzin, 2005; Oswald, 2022). Indeed, it was initially assumed in the project that is the focus of this paper that only in-person methods could gather detailed narratives of pathways into and out of crime and violence from YJS users.

Using a design thinking approach to investigate youth crime and violence

The COVID-19 restrictions necessitated that the project be adapted to run on online platforms. A key element of this involved the development of a 'digital tool' which acted as an engagement device during online interviews with criminalised youths. This was created using principles and practices from DT. Collecting the stories of young people involved and impacted by crime and violence was paramount in this project, and collaborating with design researchers provided the innovation required to achieve this via digital methods.

Design thinking: what is it and what is its value?

Kimbell (2011) describes three different understandings of DT: a cognitive style; a general theory of design and DT as an organisational resource. The practices and behaviours associated with DT are typically drawn from studies of how good designers think, act, and work and the nature of the problems they address (Cross, 2006). Brown (2009) and Martin (2009) positioned DT as a valuable means for organisations to address challenges and strategic change. DT is not a prescribed path; it is an approach – a mindset - which enables whoever adopts it, not just designers, to engage in a dynamic, constructive, and solution-focussed approach. However, DT is frequently described through general phases of activity, aiming to represent the output related to this particular cognitive style. Many different process models of DT exist, one of the most frequently cited presents 5 key 'modes' of activity; empathise, define, ideate, prototype, and test (School, 2010). Although this is presented as a process model, designing progresses through iteration, the stages are intended to be non-sequential.

The nature of the problems which DT addresses can be characterised as open, complex, dynamic and networked (Dorst, 2015). They are 'wicked problems' with many interconnected factors, dependent on incomplete information with ever-changing, ambiguous requirements (Buchanan, 1992). DT empowers practitioners to effectively operate in ambiguity. Using abductive reasoning together with a solution-focussed approach, designers function with incomplete information and ill-defined problems, operating on assumptions and hunches (Dorst, 2011). With this method, problems and solutions co-evolve, allowing areas of inquiry to be thought about differently and new and innovative solutions to be developed (Dorst & Cross, 2001).

Central to DT are the attitudes that practitioners hold and the human-centred practices that generate insights with end-users acting as the focal point (Michlewski, 2015). Human-centred design can be defined as a 'creative approach to problem solving [. . .] that starts with people and

ends with new solutions that are purpose-built to suit their needs' (IDEO Design Thinking, n.d.). Core to this process is need-finding, which ensures that developed solutions are effective in addressing the points of tension felt by end-users. This is achieved by the use of empathy. Although critique exists (Heylighten & Dong, 2019), empathic design practices support designers to better understand users and the variety of cultural and individual differences that factor into their perceptions and experiences (Kouprie & Visser, 2009; org, 2015).

Using a design thinking mindset within the Newcastle Project

The research team accepted two orientations for design in this research. The first related to the scale of the research which sought to better understand the distinctiveness of the Newcastle youth justice landscape. The design orientation at this scale was 'what might design knowledge and design practices offer to our understanding of the difficulties and ambitions for enhanced future youth justice landscapes?' This orientation sat outside of the research scope and its funded remit. However, it framed the second orientation for design which was the challenge 'to develop an engagement with the study's young participants that would help reveal insights into their relationship with and experience of the system of services in Youth Justice'. Framed using the concept of DT, this second orientation supports the DT mode of Empathy. There were a set of uncertainties which offered a starting point for the team. Amongst these uncertainties were:

(1) Based on a research design using singular participant engagements, how long might a high-quality engagement last;
(2) To what extent can this duration of quality engagement be extended by the nature of the social and material elements of the encounter;
(3) Can an engagement be created that offers participants greater agency to shape the direction and timing of the discussion;
(4) How might a digital tool be used off or online and allow participants to communicate by constructing visuals instead of or to complement verbal language;
(5) How might the existing literature on SYV inform the development of an interactive engagement tool?

The creation of a digital tool

It was very important that the tool would assist in achieving the aims of the study; a crucial aspect of which was to draw out a young person's voice and cultivate a deep understanding of their experiences of crime and violence, as well as youth justice services. Many criminalised youths have experienced adverse childhood experiences and past trauma, and these are often central to understanding their offending behaviours (Liddle et al., 2016). Consequently, it was important that the tool was designed to explore sensitive topics with young people carefully. Furthermore, a disproportionate number of criminalised youths are neurodiverse, and have difficulties with concentration, social communication, and language and narrative skills (Kirby, 2021). As a result, the tool also needed to be robust and dynamic and reflect the interests and demographics of participants to hold their attention.

The tool was developed through four distinct iterations of prototyping-testing. However, there was a significant limitation with the process utilised. Ideally, the development and refinement of the tool would have included testing activities with the target user groups. While this was possible with the facilitator group of YJS practitioners it was not possible with the young person participant group. This was because the number of young people eligible for the study did not permit access to a group for development of the tool without reducing the target for participation in the research. Engaging with suitable young people from a different city was a possibility but not pursued within the project's timeframe. To reduce this limitation the team made use of the expertise across the

research team and Newcastle YJS. The first version of the engagement materials were produced as a response to the uncertainties set out above and were subject to testing and review from a youth justice and criminology research perspective; a second iteration was debated and developed in response to a review session with a group of criminal justice professionals; a third iteration was tested as part of a training session for YJS practitioners who would facilitate the research discussions; a final iteration of the tool was refined from feedback and observations of use during and reflection on the training session. This process helped ensure the tool was designed around the needs of complex youths. An overview of each exercise on the digital tool that young people were asked to engage with is provided below:

Exercise one – mobile app

The opening exercise acted as an icebreaker, as well as providing a window into the participants' media environment – content and relationships that could be associated with a range of cultural and social priorities, values and ideas. The participant was encouraged to identify his/her top apps installed on their phone and explain how they used these using the stars and emoticons provided. The facilitator could then try to better understand what role the apps and content played within the life of the participant.

Exercise two – build your foundation

In this exercise the participant was encouraged to use the building blocks provided and/or to populate the blank ones to lay their own foundation. Some pre-populated 'bricks' were informed by criminological literature identifying risk and protective factors for involvement in violence and offending (e.g. drugs, alcohol, as well as education, employment). The exercise created a representation; a hierarchy of importance as built by the participant. The facilitator could then try to establish how dynamic, stable or unstable the participant believed their foundation to be.

Exercise three – your journey

This experience mapping exercise aimed to model when on a timeline the participant remembered interacting with different people (roles and services) during their journey through the youth justice system, as well as judging the value of the interaction on a spectrum from the most to the least helpful. This created a visual representation of a path of helpfulness built from memorable interactions with people, places, and services.

Exercise four - hypothetical scenarios and decision-making

The final exercise utilised provocative hypothetical scenarios in the format of [Person + Action = Reaction]. Many of these scenarios were informed by literature on violence and youth crime e.g. 'Best friend + Joined a Gang = Reaction'. Considering the likelihood of these scenarios and the impact they would have on the participant allowed researchers to better understand the factors and dynamics influencing their lives.

Figure 1. illustrates the engagement materials that the young people were asked to navigate, with the support of a facilitator. The young participants were able to interact with the tool using a digital whiteboard, and (subject to their permissions) online software was used to capture a recording of these interactions as well as the audio of young people's discussions surrounding the four exercises with their facilitator. On average, use of the digital tool took between 30–45 minutes for the young person to complete.

Newcastle YJS practitioners were invited to be the facilitators of this tool and discussion with the young people in this project. Because of the constraints of the ongoing pandemic, there would be scarce opportunities for researchers to meet YJS users to build rapport and familiarity before conducting interviews. Rapport is important when seeking to gather rich, qualitative data from any participant, but is essential when these are criminalised youths who understandably, given the frequency in which they are questioned by individuals who have control over their lives (police,

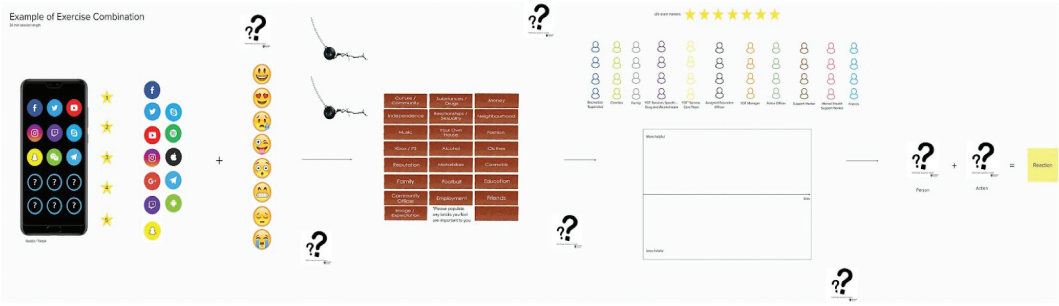

Figure 1. SYV Engagement Tool (source: authors).

social workers, teachers for example), can be mistrustful and hesitant in disclosing information to others. Practitioners necessarily have built an existing relationship of trust with their clients, and therefore it was concluded that this would be the best method to promote engagement and minimise disruption to the young people. The research team provided online training sessions for practitioners to ensure that they understood the aims of the research project and how to use the tool. Practitioners were also supplied with written instructions and an interview schedule to aid in facilitating the tool and discussion. To create a more relaxed environment, there was a 1:1 ratio between facilitators and participants.

Any young person who was at the time of this research under the supervision of Newcastle YJS was eligible to be included in the project, although the research team aimed to interview as many young people who had been involved in SYV as possible (accepting that the numbers were very small). Digital and technological poverty issues were not evident; due to the constraints of the pandemic, the YJS had already ensured that all service users could engage with them online.

Approval for this project was gained from the University's Ethics Committee. User-friendly information sheets and consent forms were created for young participants, with language used at an appropriate level for youths with complex needs, to ensure that their informed consent was gained. As all participants were under the age of 18, written consent was also obtained from a parent/guardian. High standards of anonymity and confidentiality were used throughout the research process. Due to the nature of the data being collected, researchers were aware that disclosures around crime and drug use might occur, as well as potential discussions of sensitive topics. An advantage of YJS practitioners facilitating the online tool, was that they – necessarily due to their job role – are experienced in trauma-informed practices and risk management.

How a design-led approach created 'spaces' and 'places' for online narratives

Ultimately, researchers were able to capture ten youths' engagement with the digital tool. Aged between 15–17, nine participants were male, one was female. Four were first-time entrants, the remainder had previous recordable offences. Four participants were involved with the YJS due to knife/weapon offending, making this the most common offence type in the sample. One participant had committed several SYV offences in the past, the gravest of which carried the maximum gravity score of 8. Five participants were known/had been known to Children's Social Services, reiterating the connections between crime and vulnerability detailed above.

The data collected from these interactions demonstrated the value of design-led methodologies in creating both places and spaces for online narratives. This can be summarised as i) creating a new and safe space for private storytelling, ii) reducing the dominance of hegemonic narratives and iii) uncovering complexities in participants' accounts.

I) creating a new and safe space for private storytelling

During the online session, the tool presented an opportunity to create a new space for participants' narratives. The various exercises provided the necessary structure to help young people explain their stories and experiences. Whilst it may be contended that interviews seeking to elucidate self-narratives work best with minimum interference from the interviewer/facilitator, giving the participant maximum freedom to present their story in their own words (Presser, 2010), some participants may lack the confidence or communication skills to tell their stories without prompting. Design has knowledge and practices that can develop activities to aid participants' storytelling, without detracting from the authenticity of their accounts. Many of the youths in this study had been disengaged from formal education for significant periods, and several had a history of learning difficulties; yet the visual, interactive tool ensured that those with limited literacy skills could still express themselves during the research encounter. Including visual symbols in the various exercises such as 'emoticons' particularly helped young people communicate their feelings and experiences as these are frequently used in their online communications with peers. A number of participants struggled with concentration and motivation; however, the interactive methods were more engaging for these young people. The tool as a semi-structured engagement device for exploring a participant's lifeworld through making and talking helped to move away from the traditional 'interview' experience. Indeed, practitioners reported young people who are usually quite shy and guarded during their YJS appointments expressing themselves more openly and discussing topics during the encounter with the digital tool that they had not mentioned previously. Young people themselves commented that the exercises were different from what they had done before and 'got them thinking'.

The introductory exercise demonstrated that researchers had a genuine interest in the life and background of each participant, and the persona of the individual could be built and scoped as they progressed with each exercise on the tool. The design-led approach therefore created a caring and safe space for private storytelling. This is demonstrated in the personal narratives collected from participants –

Important bricks are my Mum; I tell her everything and I trust her. She's been through a lot of trauma in her life and has brought me up to defend myself if I need to . . . My daughter, she is my world and I love her and want to keep her safe . . . I don't want a relationship brick in the foundation of the wall as that is not a stable part of my life. (Service user 7)

I just think, whatever I'm thinking, even if it's wrong, god's put it in my mind for a reason, so must be for a greater good . . . you've got to follow your gut. (Service user 8)

Most of my friends' family and friends have been in a gang at some point . . . it is really scary now as people are being stabbed all of the time . . . We can't say dead in our house we just say the 'd word'. . . My parents and other relatives have been victims of assaults from gangs and stabbed other people . . . My relative stabbed someone 27 times and is still in jail. (Service user 7)

Also helping to create a safe space and calm environment, participants controlled the movement of and interactions with the digital whiteboard; they could decide how they would engage with each task, how long to spend on each exercise, they could skip exercises they felt uncomfortable with, and they could from the outset see the entirety of the content of the tool. Topic changers were also included throughout, that young people could use to change the course of the conversation should it become difficult for them. Thus, the digital tool transferred ownership of the session from the facilitator to the participant and allowed them to guide the research encounter.

II) avoiding hegemonic narratives

Criminalised youths, much more than other young people their age, are used to 'telling their story' in interviews. They frequently account for themselves and their actions to various professionals, such as police, teachers and social workers (Gardner, 2010). Consequently, a real risk when

interviewing criminalised youths is that they may have already formed a self-story that presents them positively, that they regurgitate to all 'officials' they meet. They have learnt what various state professionals want and need to hear from them and so this way of presenting themselves is ingrained. This was of particular concern in this study due to the tool being facilitated by YJS practitioners – one of the professionals which young people have a vested interest in presenting a favourable self-story to, as these individuals naturally have influence upon the measures young people are subject to during their supervision by the YJS.

Nonetheless, the digital tool, because it presented a very different method of engagement, reflecting the interests and demographics of the young participants, reduced the risk that young people would tell the story in interviews that they had learned the various interrogators in their lives wanted to hear. By providing participants with the opportunity to take control of the research interaction themselves, and asking them questions in a visual, interactive manner in which they have not been questioned before, it therefore created an environment more conducive to genuine answers, and made it less likely that youths would feel compelled to tell the 'master narrative' that they relay to all professionals.

Indeed, this can be seen in young people's candid discussions of their use of illegal drugs during their engagement with the digital tool, despite this conversation taking place with a YJS practitioner. Several participants, when engaging with the second exercise on the tool, labelled 'cannabis' as one of their bricks in their foundation in life. As a youth described –

I wouldn't say highly important, but I will admit I do smoke it, but obviously it's like to help us when I'm depressed or, like . . . I know I shouldn't be smoking it because it's not, it's illegal and obviously like I try not to . . . some people do get like violent, but with me I'm relaxed and that. (Service user 3)

The 'Build your Foundation' exercise revealed how young people normalised their use of cannabis in their accounts, which was more often described as a medicine or important coping mechanism, rather than a recreational activity. Likewise, some young people admitted during the online discussion not believing education was important, and strongly disliking teachers and police officers, again indicating that in this safe space they did not feel compelled to present a 'pro-social' narrative to YJS practitioners. Furthermore, the 'Hypothetical scenarios and decision-making exercise' engendered more open discussions around crime and violence. Because young people were not (necessarily) talking about their own experiences in this element of the discussion, they could discuss drugs, gangs, and other aspects of serious crime in a way that lessened the associated stigma. As seen in one young person's responses to the scenario 'Friend + offers you cocaine' –

I'd take it, sniff it up me nose, nah I'm joking, I'd take it and sell it, just make money out of it. . . you could take it and mix it with flour and then sell it, or paracetamol or something. (Service user 6)

The safe space that the methodology created in this study not only helped mitigate the risks of young people presenting to YJS practitioners the pro-social narrative that they assumed they wished to hear, but also lessened the dominance of certain 'culturally prescribed' meta-narratives. Criminalised young males may espouse hegemonic male working-class ideals of masculinity, such as 'toughness' and 'strength' and 'machismo' for the purposes of self-preservation and to distance themselves from notions of weakness or vulnerability (Connell, 1995; Ghaill, 1996; Price & Spencer, 2021). Most participants were young males in this study and so there was a risk that portrayals of 'male bravado' might overshadow and shape the self-narratives gained from the research encounters. However, the digital tool was designed to engage children, and so allowed young people to explain their stories and experiences without needing to act 'hard' or 'streetwise'. As one young male openly expressed in response to the scenario 'Best friend + joined a gang' –

They think it makes them like big, like showing off, but why would you do that if you know that someone's going to be coming after you? Cos it's not a joke when it's a gang, people need to take it serious. (Service user 5)

Likewise, one young man freely admitted, when accounting for the bricks he had chosen to build his foundation for exercise 2, desperately wanting friends to be part of his foundation in life but

explaining that he needed to keep them at a distance because he was ashamed about his prior involvement in gangs.

III) uncovering complexities in participants' accounts

The design-led research methodology in this study was also effective at uncovering some of the complexities in participants' narratives. As explained above, the youths in this study have many places and opportunities in which to share their self-stories. However, youths remaining in the criminal justice system in England and Wales today – and particularly those who are involved in SYV – have the highest levels of vulnerability and many multifaceted needs. Their self-stories are therefore complex ones, and whilst they may be collected and used by various agencies, these will only be selected aspects, and therefore there may be insufficient room for their complexities to be fully explored.

Using the digital tool, some of the myths, nuances and commonalities of experiencing crime and violence in Newcastle were exposed. In particular, the exercises revealed the centrality of community, identity and status to young people in Newcastle, which serve both as pathways into and out of violent crime. Through exploring young people's lifeworlds in their various interactions with the tool, it became clear that participants felt an overwhelming pride in being from Newcastle and in many cases particular areas of the city, which fed into their status and identity. However, it was also identified that this pride could be a catalyst for violence, as participants described the existence of 'postcode rivalries' - disputes between groups of young people (gangs) living in different areas of the city. In a discussion in relation to the 'Friend + carried a knife' scenario, one young person explained –

They say that they are like NE4 or NE, like postcodes sort of things and for some reason they try to like assault each other. . . if someone does threaten them I'm guessing they'll just try and scare them off with a knife. (Service User 2)

'Proving one's self' and building status and reputation in their community, even if through violence, was very important to young people. Indeed, when partaking in exercise 2 of the digital tool, some youths selected 'reputation', 'neighbourhood', 'clothes' and 'image' as key building blocks in their foundation in life. The importance of status, even if violence is required to protect it, is demonstrated in a discussion with one young person around his choice of 'reputation' as a fundamental brick –

> Service user 8: Obviously I can't let people walk all over me, innit? So if I let someone ruin my reputation I'm going to look like an idiot, then everyone's going to try and do it
>
> Interviewer: What lengths would you go to to protect your reputation?
>
> Service user 8: Any means possible. . . if someone's going to fight me I'm not going to sit there and not fight back cos I think I'm going to get kicked out of college. . . if I don't fight back I'd look weak.
>
> Interviewer: Even if that would jeopardise other things in your life?
>
> Service user 8: Yeah, and I know that that sounds stupid like . . . My wall is strong but reputation is the thing that might ruin it.

Conversely however, the exercises in the digital tool also revealed how the desire for status and belonging in their local areas could be a 'hook for change' for young people and assist in pathways out of violent crime. Exercise 3 of the tool, where participants mapped their interactions with different individuals and services during their journey through the youth justice system, indicated that young people were more receptive to interventions which had a strong place/community focus. Young people were open to engaging in more positive and constructive activities (where available) that could prevent further involvement in crime, if they felt these gave them an 'anchor' to their community. Examples of prosocial anchors included team sports and other community-based

activities, where the comradery associated with the activity gave a sense of belonging that was otherwise lacking (particularly those who have experienced adverse childhood experiences).

Also apparent when considering the value of the digital tool in uncovering complexities that might be difficult to unpack fully in conventional interviews, was the insight it gave into participants' virtual world. Indeed, YJS practitioners' uncertainties around the virtual aspects of their clients' lives was highlighted during this research, and the digital tool was identified as a useful device to explore young service users' engagement with online communities. Exercise 1 revealed the importance and centrality of social media to participants. Young people used the mobile phone and app/star/emoticon icons on the digital whiteboard to visually illustrate their involvement with a range of different social media platforms and what these meant to them. These interactive elements demonstrated how young people varied the apps they used depending on their mood, what sort of people they wanted to socialise with and where they wanted to 'learn what's going on in the world'. Many young people expressed that they would be 'anxious' to be without their smartphone or a similar device – 'life would be very bad' (Service user 6) - as they would lose connections with friends and were unsure how they would keep themselves entertained.

However, discussions facilitated by the digital tool also revealed that social media could be a source of tension, bullying and harassment and linked to organised fights, county lines and grooming, with one young person proposing – 'You might not want to suggest a phone to certain people. . .like if someone's done something bad, I wouldn't suggest them getting a phone' (Service user 8). Likewise, as one young interviewee stated – 'I wouldn't use Snapchat, it's all about drugs, guns and causing fights' (Service user 7). Throughout these conversations, several young people explained needing to 'block' others who were causing problems for them online. Social media could heighten the tensions between youths living in different areas of the city and the aforementioned 'postcode rivalries', resulting in young people perceiving a need to carry knives to feel safe. As one young man described – 'people crop up, haters, out of nowhere' (Service user 5).

Overall, using a design-led approach in this project allowed the research team to collect complex, multi-layered accounts of crime, violence and experiences of youth justice from participants. Through a range of interactive, visual exercises, which were designed to allow the participant to construct the interview narrative, and explored various aspects of participants' lifeworld involving unconventional questions that they may not have been asked before, this project revealed the centrality of community (both physical and virtual), status and identity to understanding routes into and out of crime and violence in Newcastle (for more detail on these findings see Soppitt et al., 2022).

Discussion and conclusion

This research project demonstrated the considerable value of utilising a design-led approach to gather the narratives of participants online, and the research team would encourage social scientists to consider how adopting such approaches might enhance their research. Social researchers face many challenges throughout the research process and DT could potentially provide the 'outside the box' thinking to overcome some of these. For instance, utilising engagement materials that encourage playful interactions can help engage participants for a longer period; especially where participants are children and/or have limited concentration capacity. Furthermore, consideration of sense-making in different mediums can bypass certain communication barriers experienced during social research and can be more inclusive of participants of varying ages and mental capacity. DT and design-led methodologies can also provide innovative ways to transfer agency to participants to direct and shape the research encounter. This is in contrast to a traditional interview, where the power dynamic is heavily weighted in favour of the interviewer, an imbalance which necessarily influences research outcomes (Stanley ., 2018). Social researchers may wish to explore how collaboration with designers and design researchers can provide the ingenuity required to achieve a greater level of control

and input from research participants, which can create a safer space for more genuine accounts and narratives.

Research based upon gathering the narratives of participants is occurring with greater frequency in social science, across a wide-range of fields – such as psychology, sociology, political science, social work and education – referred to more generally as the 'narrative turn' in social inquiry (Maruna & Liem, 2020). Social scientists need to consider the extent to which the methods presently used can fully explore the contradictions, nuances and complexities in the stories of their participants, in particular where these are from marginalised groups, from whom we do not commonly hear, central to which are methodologies which have both safe spaces and places. Narrative scholars may wish to explore the benefits of DT, which as demonstrated in this paper, can provide the creativity required to create spaces for and capture narratives from hard-to-engage populations. The typically one-directional interviewing techniques used extensively within traditional social research methodologies create *places* for narratives, but not necessarily *spaces*. Innovation through principles of DT can help ensure that hegemonic and culturally prescribed narratives do not dominate research encounters and can provide a non-judgemental context for participants to discuss their stories and the realities of their experiences, including sensitive subjects, without stigma.

Indeed, methods which offer a degree of interpersonal distance between researcher and participant can be beneficial when gathering the narratives of marginalised populations, such as those who have been criminalised. It is not easy for participants who have engaged in behaviours that are widely condemned in society to discuss these frankly with researchers. The assumed judgement of and divergence in positionality with the researcher can lead to participants being unwilling to engage or withholding/misrepresenting crucial information (Lee, 1993). However, as demonstrated in this study, the digital tool created a channel for youths to discuss drugs, gangs, and other aspects of serious crime in a way that lessened the perceived stigma. Other researchers of stigmatised populations may therefore wish to explore the value of design-led approaches to create judgement-free spaces for their participants. These might involve the use of online methods, even in post-covid era.

The research into SYV during a global pandemic detailed in this paper illustrates how a design-led approach can allow for online methods to be utilised which can still obtain rich, qualitative data. Research literature on interviewing methods prioritises face-to-face interviews, emphasising the importance of non-verbal cues in contextualising participants' responses and the need to be physically present to build rapport with interviewees (Bakken, 2022). Yet, meeting participants face-to-face is not always possible, and this paper demonstrates how a design mindset and solution-focused approach can make online tools for communication with research participants more viable. Furthermore, there may be instances where embracing online approaches is preferable, even in a world without social-distancing restrictions. Much research – including this project – demonstrates the extent to which individuals (particularly those under 18) have become embedded in a virtual world and have become comfortable communicating in this sphere. There is a need for methodological approaches that can help social scientists understand the virtual world that so many spend their lives invested in. Embracing a design-led approach might be beneficial therefore for researchers to engage with the latest generations of research participants with a clear awareness of the importance of place and space.

Overall, we hope that this paper will inspire other social scientists to explore the advantages of design-informed methodologies and expand the methodological toolbox beyond what appears in traditional social research textbooks.[2]

Notes

1. Newcastle's five-year average first-time entrant rate: 49 per 10,000 population of 10–17-year-olds, compared to a five-year national average of 25. Newcastle's five-year average SYV rate: 2 per 10,000 population of 10–17-year-olds, compared to a five-year national average of 6 (Soppitt et al., 2022).
2. All resources from this research are available on the Youth Justice Resource Hub, for use by practitioners, researchers and other stakeholders - https://yjresourcehub.uk/practice-based-evaluations/item/1034-serious-youth-violence-and-first-time-entrants-to-the-youth-justice-service-in-newcastle-upon-tyne-serious-youth-violence-pathfinder-april-2022.html.

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Ethics

High ethical standards were adhered to throughout this research. This research received approval from the Northumbria University Ethics Committee.

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