

# Is faith and “on road” youth work intertwined?: Examining the experiences of “on road” practitioners

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – Research pertaining to young people, frontline work and faith is fairly limited. This qualitative article proposes that often faith and “on road” youth work are intertwined. This paper aims to explore the experiences of nine frontline practitioners, those who work with young people in a range of settings. The crux of the discussion is focused on how the religious and cultural views of practitioners impact their frontline practice, as it relates to supporting the young person’s needs. The authors suggest that understanding frontline practice as it relates to faith is imperative to our ability to effectively engage with young people “on road”.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This paper took a qualitative approach, where semi-structured interviews were analysed using thematic analysis. This allowed the formation of the following three core themes: incarceration, religiosity and “on road” youth work; the nuances of religion and identity “on road”; and the “pains of ‘on road’ youth work”.

**Findings** – The findings within this paper suggest that faith and “on road” youth work are intertwined. In that frontline practitioners’ personal religious views, and importantly the understanding they have regarding the array of religious identities adopted by young people (YP) is helpful in engaging YP across the board. This paper highlights the complexities between identity, faith, faith-based support and hard-to-reach communities.

**Research limitations/implications** – This paper explores the complexities between faith on “on road” criminology/“on road” youth work. This area of study is fairly under-researched. This paper seeks to build on existing research surrounding YP, further exploring religiosity from a UK context.

**Practical implications** – This paper aimed to explore the lived experiences of frontline practitioners in Birmingham UK, many of whom work with YP from Black, Asian or minority backgrounds. Therefore the findings cannot be generalised.

**Social implications** – This paper’s intention is not to stereotype YP, but to raise awareness of the subjective experience of faith and religiosity on the frontline.

**Originality/value** – To the best of the authors’ knowledge, there are few studies that explore the concept of “on road” criminology and “on road” youth work. Therefore, findings from this study are important to develop further understanding.

**Keywords** On road, Youth work, Frontline, Faith-based support, Desistance, Young people, Practitioners

**Paper type** Research paper

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## Introduction

Day (2020) states “Criminology neglects the subject of religion just as religion scholars neglect criminology” (Day, 2020, p. 204). This study seeks to explore “on road” perspectives from a criminological context, albeit through a frontline, faith-based lens. Previous studies highlight the significance of religion and spirituality “on road” (Deuchar, 2018; Reid, 2017; Robinson-Edwards and Pinkney, 2018). This paper argues that the interconnect between religion, youth work and “on road” perspectives can build upon existing “on road” literature.

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Religion is often understood as a “Eurocentric concept” (Possamai and Blasi, 2020), one central to humanity’s quest for understanding of “the non-visible and afterlife” (Possamai and Blasi, 2020). In the main, it is agreed that there is no universally agreed definition of the term “religious” (Barker, 2014), and thus opinion on what this term embodies is often challenged. Nevertheless, the terms faith, spirituality and religion are often used interchangeably. Religion is described as “the belief in a divine being, which is worthy of worship and obedience [...]” (Al Qaradawi, 2010, p. 2). Spirituality, on the other hand, is a broad term which refers to “ [...] lifestyles and practices that embody a vision of human existence and of how the human spirit is to achieve its full potential” (Sheldrake, 2012, p. 1). Ronel and Yair (2017) state “religion in general, and spirituality both represent human faith in the Supreme and a quest for ultimate meaning” (2017, p.2). Nevertheless, Schroeder and Frana (2009) argue that religion and spirituality are separate concepts and careful distinctions must be drawn between the two. The term faith is complex and can be described as the complete trust or confidence in someone or something (Smith, 2014). In addition, faith and spirituality are understood as a sense of meaning, purpose and hope (Peres et al., 2007), which can often be used as a coping mechanism (Ozcan et al., 2021).

To put this into context, in 2019, most of the population in England and Wales identified as Christian, an estimated 51.0%, which has fallen by 8.3 percentage points since the 2011 Census [1] (ONS, 2020). Notably, religion, culture and race are important factors to this discussion. Most participants in this study work in Birmingham, United Kingdom. Areas include but are not limited to Alum Rock, Aston, Handsworth, Highgate, Lozells, Nechells, Newtown and Sparkbrook. It is thought that during the post-war period, ethnic minorities settled within Birmingham (Abbas, 2008). The notion of ghettoising ethnic minorities has been an observation put forward in various works (Abbas, 2008, p. 5). Birmingham has seen many ethnic minorities settling within it during the post-war period. Referred to as the city “purposely ghettoising” ethnic minorities, “ [...] Sparkbrook has become a largely Pakistani area, the Handsworth area is the Caribbean centre of Birmingham, with the Soho area overwhelmingly Indian” (Rex, 1987). Soho Road which is located on the “fringes of the Lozells neighbourhood” encompasses an array of religious and cultural artefacts embedded within communities (Harris, 2011). Evidently, religion and culture play a part in diverse communities; therefore, academic research into race, immigration and ghettoisation has been conducted (Jones, 1976; Rex and Moore, 1967; Rex and Tomlinson, 1979). To appreciate “on road” perspectives as it pertains to young people and faith-based intervention, the historical contexts of the environment must be acknowledged.

To explore this area of study, it was imperative that the voices of those who work directly with young people were articulated. Glynn (2015) eloquently refers to “on road” criminology, influenced by his time in the community, in self-professed urban inner cities where people use the term “on road” to refer to issues that take place on the streets in the communities they reside. In a similar vein, the term “on road” and specifically being “on road” can also refer to elements of Anderson’s (1999) “Code of the Streets”, where hierarchal positions, respect, strength, loyalty and fearlessness are essential traits. Therefore, masculine resources are often demonstrated for the individual to be part of a criminal community (Anderson, 1999). In essence, “on road” criminology is concerned with bringing criminologist into the community to provide solution and action. Frontline practitioners work with some of the most vulnerable and disaffected youth in society, often dealing with problems and conflicts which require an immediate response to complex and sometimes violent activities. Therefore, “on road” criminology asserts that it is about understanding and applying a “social remedy” to the encounters faced when engaging with the community and young people. Simply put, understanding their complex, yet unique experiences and importantly having the knowledge and ability to signpost individuals accordingly.

## Literature review

### *Religion and desistance*

This paper seeks to contribute to the literature relating to youth studies, religion, desistance from crime, faith-based interventions (FBIs) and “on road” perspectives. FBI is not a new phenomenon, rather faith-based social services programs have existed long before the term faith-based was coined (Cnaan and Boddie (2002)). Typically FBIs are theoretically grounded and use doctrinal information within the intervention (Myers, 2001), relying significantly on volunteers or workers from a particular “faith tradition” (Peterson and Seligman, 2004). On a macro scale, a significant proportion of research which looks at religion and offenders stems largely from the USA and arguably focuses upon criminal justice organisations in this national context (Armour *et al.*, 2008; Hallett and McCoy, 2015; Koenig, 1995; Sumter and Clear, 1998). Nevertheless research from a UK context has been conducted looking at faith-based units in England and Wales (Burnside, 2008), religion and therapeutic intervention (Robinson-Edwards, 2022), youth violence and the mumpain (Bakkali, 2019) and Islam and desistance (Robinson-Edwards and Pinkney, 2018).

The beneficial outcomes of the role of religion as it pertains to young people is documented (Koenig *et al.*, 2012). Young people are reportedly less likely to partake in substance use or abuse (Johnson *et al.*, 2008), less violent (Salas-Wright *et al.*, 2014) and show a decrease in antisocial behaviour (Baier and Wright, 2001). While literature uncovers the benefits of religious acceptance and participation, there are several drawbacks. The effects of religiosity on crime is documented in relation to the fear of supernatural sanctions (hellfire) and strong social bonds which promote conventional behaviour (Johnson and Jang, 2011). Nevertheless, the fear of supernatural sanctions does not always promote conventional behaviour. Some embrace religion but they are not necessarily ready to change. Research suggests that individual’s perceptions of their “religious selves” is what they seek to emulate in adulthood; consequently, some have no clear intention to leave behind a life of crime in their youth (Robinson-Edwards, 2022; Robinson-Edwards and Pinkney, 2018). The notion that “more religion” means “less crime” is naïve, as the transition is not simplistic (Topalli *et al.*, 2013). Therefore, the positioning of religion when engaging with the young person on a daily basis should be considered. Can the embrace of religion really be one of the most impressive “second chances” in modern life (Maruna *et al.*, 2006). Our understanding of frontline practice as it relates to the young person, religion and “on road” perspectives is limited. Nevertheless, insights into religiosity, religion and desistance provide a sound foundation to build upon.

### *“Road life”*

The terms “on road” and “road life” are used interchangeably depending on the context. Joseph and Gunter (2011) assert that “on road” refers to a street culture in open public places visible to others. This includes housing estates and the “street corner” where people choose to spend a considerable amount of their time. Arguably “on road” is an umbrella term that considers several intersections and interactions. Specifically the “road” for some signified “the streets they lived in, or near [...]” (Young and Hallsworth, 2011, p. 60). However, Hallsworth and Silverstone (2009) suggest that it does not solely relate to where one spends their leisure time, rather it is a place where violence and its threat is everywhere (Pinkney *et al.*, 2018). Practitioners who work with young people in the self-professed “urban inner cities” (Glynn, 2015) are aware of issues pertaining to young people, gangs and “post-code” wars (Densley *et al.*, 2020 and Pitts, 2020).

“Road life” is often understood from a UK-specific context which acknowledges street cultural formation (Bakkali, 2018, 2019; Reid, 2022). “Road life” is a continuum (Gunter, 2008) where a minority of young people, most notably young males, “immerse themselves into the world of badness” (Gunter, 2008, p.352). “Road life” is fluid in a sense, meaning

that young males “continually travel back and forth between the centre and the margins of Road culture” (Gunter, 2008, p. 352). This illustrates that “road life” is not solely centred on rebellion, violence and criminality, rather some aspects of life “on road” incorporate social encounters such as “hanging on Road” (Gunter, 2008), friendships and structure/routine (Gunter, 2004) and entry into an alternative community (Young and Hallsworth, 2011). This is important to the present study as often frontline practitioners and young people occupy spaces “on road”, one which can begin with “hanging On Road”, then shift to dealing with “badness”.

### *“On road” criminology*

More specifically, the concept of “on road” criminology is examined by Glynn (2014, 2015). It provides compelling insights into “on road” perspectives and academic research. Important to this is the acceptance, approval and permission from sections of the community who occupy the world of the “streets” (Pinkney *et al.*, 2018). Glynn further articulates, the “on road” criminologist has unprecedented access to spaces, and being “on road” refers to accessing environments that are deemed dangerous and hard to reach, often using ethnographic and phenomenological accounts of subjects through lived experiences (Glynn, 2014, 2015 and Pinkney *et al.*, 2018).

Youth work and outreach depends on practitioners who build relationships with young people in a variety of settings “[...] such as youth clubs, community centres and on the streets” (de St Croix, 2018, p. 1). Yet, “on road” youth work considers the specific context of where and how youth work takes place. The interactions between practitioners and the young person are imperative; therefore, engaging with young people in hard-to-reach communities is not simplistic, rather there are certain settings that require a level of trust to gain entry. “On road” youth work encompasses intersections of youth work and criminological theorising; locating the sight for critical enquiry within an environment which is urban, disorganised and in need of contemporary understanding. Through this process, one gains acceptance, approval and permission from sections of the community who occupy the world of the “streets”. Engagement is not constrained to the usual working day, and often practitioners oversee issues that take place outside of work hours, in communities they live in or with young people whose case they currently or previously oversaw. For effective practice, “on road” youth workers operate from an insider perspective (Pinkney *et al.*, 2018) to understand the lived experiences of those concerned.

The “on road” approach in and of itself is not a new phenomenon, rather how and what we apply it to sheds light on how we can successfully navigate “on road”. For example, the term “on road” youth work is fairly new (Pinkney *et al.*, 2018); nevertheless, the foundation of this builds upon a body of established works (Whyte, 1943; Glynn, 2014; Bakkali, 2022). Whyte's (1943) ethnographic study “Street Corner Society” has been “highly praised” in American Social Science (Andersson, 2014, p. 74), which explored social interactions, networking and everyday life among Italian-American men in Boston's North End (Andersson, 2014; Whyte, 1943). Additionally, “road” capitals is explored (Bakkali, 2022) as it pertains to forms of capital valued in the street field and its role in the “attempt to achieve a more included social status” (Bakkali, 2022, p. 420). Theorisations of “road life” have been important to the body of sociological and criminological literature. While it is evident that religion, identity and “on road” perspectives are referenced in some works (Reid, 2017), this, however, is not specifically explored from a practitioner, “on road”, faith-based perspective. Equally it is important to understand practitioners' lives and how they navigate and operate “on road”, much of which is under-explored from an academic, UK perspective.

## *Frontline and desistance*

Although the correlation between age and crime is reported within criminological research (Gottfredson and Hirschi's, 1990), it is not enough to hope that YOUNG PEOPLE will eventually "age out" of crime. Especially when research shows that many continue offending into their adolescent and adult years before the decline stage (Graham and Bowling, 1995; McAra and McVie, 2017). Although some may age out of crime whilst they are in the community, there are increasing numbers of YOUNG PEOPLE committing serious crimes in their teenage years, which often results in life in prison. The case of Keon Lincoln (15) where five teenagers were found guilty of his killing (Perrin, 2021) and the brutal murder of Derlarno Samuels (17) who was viciously attacked, the perpetrator in this case was (19) and received a life sentence (Bagdi, 2022) is testament to this. This illustrates that it is imperative that preventative methods are focused on. On the one hand, McMahon and Jump (2018) suggest that late adolescence is the time when some individuals "start to stop" or at this stage have desisted from crime (McMahon and Jump, 2018, p. 3). Nevertheless, understanding relating to desistance in adolescence is limited (Mulvey *et al.*, 2004). The following questions underpin the findings generated from our research on faith and "on road" youth work. What role does religion/religiosity play in the young person's desistance process? What role do practitioner's faith-based knowledge and personal practice have on the way they engage and understand the needs of young people? How can we acknowledge the fluctuation of reoffending that takes place within a young person's life-course? In essence, there is a lack of academic research on the experience of those on the frontline, particularly exploring how faith and frontline practice often intertwine.

## **Methodology**

This paper seeks to explore practitioners' professional and religious identities and the way these may (or not) intersect with "on road" frontline practice. The narratives of frontline practitioners of whom engage with young people in often hostile and violent situations is explored. Research relating to "on road" youth work, religion and young people is not simplistic; it is complex, and is in need of further understanding. The respondents were chosen for this study as they all work with young people on the frontline. For this paper, we felt it appropriate to explore the experiences of individuals who came from a range of occupational backgrounds. This study used semi-structured interviews, and thematic analysis was the appropriate method for data analysis, a technique used for generating theory. The research questions were as follows:

- RQ1.* What is your job title/role?
- RQ2.* Do you identify with a particular religion, faith and way of life?
- RQ3.* In what capacity do you work with young people on the frontline?/Are there any challenges?
- RQ4.* In what ways do you support young people?
- RQ5.* What role does your religion/faith/way of life play in your profession?
- RQ6.* Do young people discuss their religion/faith/way of life?
- RQ7.* In your opinion what role does it play in their life?
- RQ8.* What support do frontline practitioners need?

This helped to guide the study and explored an array of topics which are reflected in the Findings and discussion section.

## **Sample**

This study explores the experiences of nine frontline practitioners who work with young people in a range of capacities. This study's approach was that understanding was only

possible from the subjective perspective of those involved. Snowball sampling in the main was used; the authors were keen to explore the experiences of frontline practitioners pertaining to faith and religiosity on the frontline. Respondents came from a range of professional backgrounds; for example, youth workers, teachers at Pupil Referral Units (PRUs) and youth offending officers. The respondents' experiences encompass the multifaceted role of work with young people. It is acknowledged that a sample of  $N = 9$  removes the ability to generalise the findings of this study. Nevertheless, this study presents insightful perspectives that are worthy of consideration (Table 1).

### Data collection

The authors identified a range of people who wanted to partake in the study. All face-to-face interviews took place at a public location. Importantly, because of the COVID-19 pandemic and the restrictions that were in place, many online interviews took place. All respondents were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the research process at any time. Participants were all given pseudonyms and interviews were recorded with consent and transcribed at verbatim.

### Data analysis

Although personal accounts were unique, there were also similarities and shared experiences. Thematic analysis was used within this study; this method allowed the authors to understand the main themes pertaining to the subject (Braun and Clarke, 2022). Several themes were analysed, and the development of core themes was crucial to collective understanding. The first phase involved the listening and reading of transcripts; this allowed understanding and familiarisation. The second phase involved highlighting themes or contradictions which arose within the research. Notes included frontline work, faith, Islam and youth work. The third phase involved the overall interpretation of data and the formation of core themes. Analysis included referring to the semi-structured interviews, alongside regular discussions between the authors.

### Findings and discussion

Religion, faith, culture and race are terms which raise numerous debate in relation to their meaning. Throughout this paper, the terms religion and faith are used interchangeably; predominantly the authors use the term religion; however, respondents use terms based upon self-identification. The analysis of semi-structured interviews allowed for the formation

**Table 1** Participant demographics

<i>Respondents</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Religious background</i>	<i>Occupation</i>	<i>Frontline experience</i>	<i>Interview with young people</i>
Asiyah	27	Female	Muslim	NEET Reduction Youth Worker	5 years	Online
Maryam	24	Female	Muslim	Youth Violence Intervention Practitioner	5 years	Online
Gabriella	31	Female	Christian	Teaching Assistant/Mentor PRU	3 years	Face-to-face
Harpreet	36	Female	Sikh	Youth Offending Officer//young people	14 years	Online
Idrees	35	Male	Muslim	Youth Worker, Researcher and Consultant	15 years	Face-to-face
Jacob	35	Male	Christian	Youth and Community Worker	5 years	Face-to-face
Kaleb	40	Male	Spiritual	Personal Advisor Children's Services	12 years	Online
Saarah	34	Female	Hebrew Israelite	Youth Worker	5 years	Online
Yaqoob	24	Male	Muslim	Teacher PRU	2 years	Online

of the following three themes: incarceration, religiosity and “on road” youth Work, the nuances of religion and identity “on road” and the “pains of “on road” youth work”.

### **Incarceration, religiosity and “on road” youth work**

Personal and professional encounters form a crucial part of narratives and stories that people construct about their lives. Jacob is a youth and community worker and has personally served time in prison; Jacob argues that this experience has had a direct and profound impact on how he navigates “on road”. Jacob states “I come from a criminal background as-well it is just normal for people in my family to go prison [...]”. Although Jacob has turned his life around, he reflects upon his past criminality and the normalisation of prison. Jacob expresses “So, if my dad was a doctor, I would have been a doctor”. This is a poignant statement which illustrates the importance of positive role models and opportunities. The discussion relating to young people and positive role models is documented ([Beam et al., 2002](#); [Hamilton and Darling, 1996](#); [Hirsch et al., 2002](#)). Jacob’s experience is influential to his practice, and his desistance trajectory personal, yet relatable. Jacob expresses “I just sat down to myself and thought how can I kind of make my criminal offence work for me because it can be a hinderance”. Jacob was put in touch with a faith-based charity which was a “life-changing moment” Jacob explains, “Then he told me about a course and that was the eye opener [...] It was exploring who you are and where your values lie [...]”. Jacob’s narrative is somewhat unique as he is the only respondent in this study to have gone to prison. Jacob uses his experience as a young offender in his frontline practice. His work is now viewed as a means of giving back to his community, like that discussed in the literature pertaining to desistance and generativity ([McNeill and Maruna, 2007](#)).

In addition, Jacob’s encounter with religion influences his work “on road”. Although Jacob self-identifies as a Christian, there are some aspects of his religious “walk” which are challenging. Jacob explains “In regard to churches I still have a slight issue, I got trust issues with people you know what I’m saying especially in that sort of realm”. The institution of the church is not viewed favourably by Jacob and he argues that there appears to be a disconnect between current societal issues and the role of the church. Jacob articulates, “So, you know people can go to churches and the heads of the churches are not kind of clued up to what is going on in society now they are very old fashioned”. Jacob goes on to express “and some of them aint real if you ask me”. This refers to individuals in positions of religious authority not being genuine; this limits Jacob’s church attendance and consequently impacts his view of religious institutions. Nevertheless, Jacob is mindful that he often bridges the gap between young people “on road” and religious institutions, often working with young people from all faith backgrounds. Therefore, his personal experience of being misunderstood is described as an aspect that many young people “on road” relate to. He is able to navigate through past experiences and advise and support young people accordingly.

### **The nuances of religion and identity “on road”**

#### ***“On road” youth work and Salafiyyah***

Idrees’s religious identity is described as an essential part of who he is, which plays a key role when working “on road”. Idrees is a youth worker and consultant and identifies as a Muslim who is upon Salafiyyah [2]. Idrees states “ [...] I choose to follow the religion to the best of my ability to the most authentic way possible”. Idrees is “visibly” Muslim; he wears a thobe [3] which comes above his ankles and has a beard. The visibility of Muslims has been noted in the past research ([Awan and Zempi, 2020](#); [Zempi and Awan, 2017](#)) alongside the debate relating to “Muslimness” ([Walker, 2022](#)). Idrees’s positionality is significant and influential as it pertains to working with young Muslim men. [Pinkney et al. \(2018\)](#) argue that

clothing is a significant attribute of “on road” youth work and influential to the acceptance and perceptions of the practitioner. Clothing is a “symbolic language” (Pinkney *et al.*, 2018) and often young men who have some form of connection with Islam are able to engage more freely with Idrees. Notably, this is impacted by his credibility, visibility and vested interest in the community he serves. Thus, the combination of external outlook and credibility allowed him to emerge in the community before attempting to engage “on road”.

Idrees presents several thought-provoking accounts when discussing his personal encounters with Muslims and non-Muslims. Not all Muslims identify as Salafi [4] and at times Idrees is perceived negatively. Idrees states, “For those individuals who don’t want to follow it (Islam) the most authentic way then they will look at me as an extremist”. This is an important conversation and critical dialogue is needed in this area. Is there an acceptable form of Islam that is tolerated on a mainstream level? Idrees suggest there is:

I think those things need to be said and I think based on people's rights and people's freedom of expressions I think it is important that we understand and acknowledge that and have more critical dialogues about it (Idrees).

Idrees’s personal experience, his identity and how he navigates in his personal and professional life are important to his practice and engagement with other practitioners. Importantly, his identity is significant when engaging with young Muslim men. For example, often the young people will start a conversation by saying *As-Salamu Alaikum* [5], which is then responded to with *Wa-Alaikum [6]-Salaam*. Thus, the connection and perceived understanding they have based upon their religion often warrants an almost instant mutual respect.

### *Religious practice*

Saarah, Gabriella and Harpreet discuss religiosity and the “potential” of religion in supporting one’s desistance trajectory, one which goes beyond self-identification. Saarah, a youth worker, refers to young people who mainly identify as Muslim and states:

When asked why not become better now by stopping or reducing offending behaviour many of the young men feel that their youth is the best time to explore (Saarah).

Although they identify with a particular religion, their younger years reflect a time where religious duties are not upheld. There is a future-focused stance in that lives will be better in the future, when they commit to practice the religion they profess to follow. A similar point is echoed by Gabriella who states, “many students grow up in Christian or Muslim families, but they are not practising, and their lifestyles and choices go against their beliefs”. Harpreet, a youth offending officer, also discusses the notion of families and religion and explains, “it depends how much they know, understand, and follow the tenets. Some Young People only belong to a faith because their family does or that is just what they have been told”. In this study, the geographical location of where practitioners work presumably had an impact on their perception of faith on the frontline. There is diversity amongst young people in terms of religiosity. Where even those who identify as religious do not necessarily practice the religion they profess to follow. Additionally, religious beliefs are often thought to form a part of a stable religious identity; this should be approached critically, as often religious identity is rooted in the fact that some young people have adhered to the religious and cultural practices of their parents, sometimes neglecting to understand and practice their religion in the ways that are prescribed in scriptural text such as the Bible and the Qur’an. Therefore, often down to personal interpretation.

### *So, after the Shahādah then what?*

It is too simplistic to understand religiosity based upon self-identity alone. Rather, the key point here is that there are many people who self-identify as Muslim, and, however, do not

practice Islam in accordance to the five Pillars of Islam [7]. One may take their Shahādah [8]; however, this is not followed with sincerity and actions that are usually associated with this way of life. In some aspects, religion is a fundamental part of one's identity, Gabriella explains, "I believe it is a part of their identity but not enough to make them change yet" (Gabriella). Idrees discusses the Shahādah and states:

So, for example a young man comes out of prison, everybody's happy that he has embraced and took his Shahādah [...] So, after the Shahādah then what? the community once they acknowledge that someone embraces how do they continue to support that person throughout the desistance process.

Idrees, a Muslim man, argues that there needs to be more faith-based support post release. Idrees provides another perspective on this in relation to young people who identify as Muslim. Idrees articulates:

[...] one of the things I find with a lot of individuals that embrace faith (in prison) is that when they return back to the community one of the difficulties that they have is living this new life with the baggage of the things they've done in the past.

The term "road mentality" refers to a mindset often adopted predominately by young men which is governed by "Street Codes". This further adds to the complexities and "baggage" of navigating "on road". Here elements such as respect, toughness, fearlessness, intelligence, spontaneity and loyalty are the benchmarks for measuring one's capability and competency to navigate the streets, within an urban context. Young people who have committed crimes and then embraced religion embody similar characteristics of what Du Bois coined double consciousness (Du Bois, 1897, 1903), a sense of a dual identity, which they are consistently trying to renegotiate. On the one hand, they have committed a crime, some are even in prison, and, on the other hand, they have restructured a new faith-based identity; the two are constantly challenged. When the young person goes to court or engages with frontline practitioners, they are encouraged to recognise and acknowledge their offence/s. When they are in faith-based spaces, the focus is on their religious development and identity. Some challenges of faith-based support are explored. Idrees expresses, "Once they leave prison they go back to criminality, now I wouldn't say that's due to the faith, I would say that's due to what I call after care [...]". Embracing a religious way of life is important to some young people, but those in this study suggest that life "on road" requires consistent guidance to support young people in a holistic manner. Simply put, young people do not reoffend because there is a lack of religious guidance, rather the lack of support and after-care is thought to be a crucial factor. Although there are organisations that support young people, a wider range of support services across the board is needed. Idrees articulates further, "Are they supported sufficiently, are they given appropriate housing, how do the community receive those individuals back into the community".

A multi-agency approach is essential; one aspect cannot be addressed in isolation, rather a community, government and policy approach is needed. A community stance is imperative, one that is in line with Glynn's (2015) "on road" approach. Idrees explains " [...] I think we should use faith-based interventions more as the Christian community use it very well". Idrees calls for a more structured Islamic faith-based intervention to address the needs of young people who identify as Muslim, whether they are born into Muslim families or whether they have embraced Islam. Additionally, the social structure is something which governs our lives through education, employment and opportunity. Idrees articulates "I think that the educational system needs to also not shy away from Islam as a faith and also possibly use that as an intervention to engage with people". Although religion and faith are discussed and used within frontline practice, there are also several complexities that arise. Young people face several barriers in their quest to desist from crime (McMahon and Jump, 2018). There has been a shift in academic discourse where scholars have sought to look beyond

government policy and populist punitiveness as it relates to young people and the criminal justice system (Case and Haines, 2009; Phoenix, 2016) exploring ways youth justice systems can possibly evolve (Case and Hampson, 2019; Smithson *et al.*, 2021). Young people's engagement is important yet scarcely examined; the "child first, offender second" (Haines and Case, 2015) mantra is thought to be influential to the process of engaging young people. Those in this study adopt the "child first, offender second" position. Although this exact statement was not specifically used by participants, their speech, action and practice on the frontline clearly illustrate this. It is naïve to think that faith-based work can solely deal with the host of systematic and structural issues pertaining to young people and crime. All respondents have expressed their narratives and collectively we see that the life experiences of young people are of paramount importance, not only to understand the struggles many face, but to call for more recognition and understanding of faith-based perspectives.

### The "pains of "on road" youth work"

The "pains of imprisonment" (Sykes, 1958) is defined as "one of the most prominent concepts in the social study of incarceration" (Haggerty and Bucerius, 2020, p.1). Such "pains" have been explored by prominent scholars in varying ways (Bosworth, 2017; Carlen and Tombs, 2006; Crewe *et al.*, 2017). In this study, "the pains of "on road" youth work" refer to long working hours, emotional stability, trauma and so forth. Similar sentiments are expressed in other research as it relates to the difficulties practitioners encounter in regulating their own emotions (Steinkopf *et al.*, 2021).

#### *Long hours*

The negative impact of working long hours for frontline practitioners is a reality. Gabriella, a teaching assistant and mentor, states "Working with children with challenging behaviour, young people fighting, long hours, low pay, living in the same area as some of the students". In addition, working in the same community where one resides can also be challenging, as the line between personal and professional can potentially blur. Several practical issues are described. Asiyah explains "One of the biggest concerns I have is the lack of funding for services that are paramount especially for young people". Also, the salary of frontline practitioners is thought to need reconsideration, "[...] I think this is why the retention of people is low for many organisations and burn out levels are high". Saarah states "We need the time to engage the young people opposed to filing unnecessary amounts of paperwork whether electronic or paper form". Similarly, Harpreet explains "Processes linked with the role have become bureaucratic and endless amounts of paperwork take away from the actual work". Research pertaining to youth work practice and differences within youth cultures is documented (Kaz and Maynard, 2015). There are specific principles "on road"; consequently, respondents in this study call for an understanding of issues that relate to specific locations and cities. Simply put, before work is designated, there should be an understanding of key components such as language, expression, religion, dress code and knowledge [9]. It is proposed that positionality and approaching youth working through an "on road" lens signifies the complex nature of working on the frontline, where often an insider perspective is imperative to engage young people and work effectively with a broad spectrum of interventions.

There is an intense sense among respondents that those in managerial roles should have some level of experience on the frontline as it relates to young people. This would enable those in senior positions to appreciate the difficulty and challenges before delegating work to those on the frontline. Kaleb states "We need more people working with the youth who have experienced issues that their client base has". Similarly, Gabriella expresses "Sometimes measures are introduced by senior management, but they are not the ones implementing it". An awareness of frontline practice would encourage a better relationship

between managers and some frontline staff. Harpreet explains, “Managers who have lived experience of the actual role and/or are still willing to stand on the frontline with you to better understand the challenges and hence tackle them”. Harpreet’s view is twofold in the sense that lived experience is important as well as managers’ willingness to support staff. A breakdown of hierarchy regarding job roles is discussed to best support the young person; Gabriella states, “it is important to have an understanding between the frontline staff and those who are making the rules to ensure that we are safe and supported in the best way”. Knowledge of relevant challenges that disproportionately impact “inner city” “urban” areas is imperative. [Pinkney et al. \(2018\)](#) suggests “It is important to understand the context of “On Road” youth work [...] by those on the front-line”.

### ***Training and development***

Overall, respondents advocate for more training to understand the holistic needs of the young person. Harpreet discusses, “On-going and relevant training considering social grades also historical and present context of local community [...] Languages, faiths, ethnicity, practices, and dates to consider”. All of these elements are crucial to the preparedness of frontline practitioners. Those who work on the frontline in an educational setting hope to pass on the baton of experience for future change. The current state of the curriculum is noted, Yaqoob explains, “In my line of work we need to teach young people about their history [...]” (Yaqoob). This is thought to have an impact on the young person’s confidence, self-worth and sense of self. Further expressing, “Sadly, it has been constructed in a way so that the “White man” is seen as someone who has always benefitted society and revolutionised it”. Many young people particularly from BAME backgrounds are unaware of the contribution of their ancestors on civilisation, Yaqoob expands, “ [...] If our young people knew more about their ancestors, they would feel a sense of pride and motivation to go out and become pioneers”. The impact of race, racialisation and religion is evident in all levels of society, an issue that is thought to impact how practitioners engage and address sensitive issues with young people from minority backgrounds. Thus, training and future development should consider the complexities that arise in these settings, where often practitioners deal with a multitude of issues as it relates to crime and beyond.

### ***Trauma***

Literature on trauma informed practice and youth work is established ([Schneider-Munoz et al., 2015](#); [Thomas et al., 2019](#)). This study argues that the impact of trauma from a practitioner perspective is not yet fully appreciated within the literature. Asiyah articulates, “Finding out that your young person has died is very difficult and I think there is not enough emotional support for the professionals working with the Young Person”. This is a traumatic experience and some frontline practitioners are not supported sufficiently ([Innes et al., 2006](#)).

Emotional and psychological challenges associated with frontline practice are expressed. Trauma in particular is a lived reality for many frontline workers. Maryam, a youth violence intervention practitioner, states:

Working on the frontline can expose practitioners to a diverse range of trauma which can impact them in both their professional and personal lives [...] (Maryam).

Asiyah calls for more support in this area:

[...] more clinical supervision for frontline practitioners. I think there also has to be a systemic change as our government now do not value the work that frontline practitioners carry out on a daily basis (Asiyah).

Frontline practitioners deal with difficult and life-changing events, many of which are unknown by wider society. There is a need for accessible counselling and talking therapies for those who require these services Gabriella expresses:

Some of the stories we hear from the students are truly heart breaking and can change our outlook on the world. It is important to have someone to talk to, so we are not going home to our families with emotional baggage (Gabriella).

Maryam echoes this point and states “A platform for professionals to share their feelings and speak about the impact our work can have on mental health would be beneficial” (Maryam). The structure of current systems needs revisions to better support both the young person and frontline practitioners. This will differ depending on the sector of work, and thus an open discussion with frontline practitioners is imperative to implement change.

To conclude, “on road” youth work builds upon the work of key scholars (Bakkali, 2019; Glynn, 2014; Hallsworth and Silverstone, 2009; Joseph and Gunter, 2011). Practitioners have concerns about the environment and spaces they often occupy. They support young people; nevertheless, witnessing traumatic events with the absence of effective support in a professional capacity is concerning. Support is vital, and without it, some practitioners will often avoid entering a world where an understanding of the “code of the streets” is essential for practice (Pinkney *et al.*, 2018, p. 1).

## Conclusion

The “on road” approach to youth work builds upon “on road” literature (Bakkali, 2019; Gunter, 2008). This study shows that often youth work is intertwined with religion, faith and faith-based perspectives. Critical inquiry and understanding of young people’s subjective experiences are deeply embedded and impacted by the environment which one works and resides, an environment that is “ [...] urban, disorganised and in need of contemporary understanding” (Pinkney *et al.*, 2018, p. 1). Frontline practitioners are most often the first point of contact for young people who are in contact with the criminal justice system. The majority of research on “road life” considers “drift” (Matza, 1964). Practitioners in this study suggest that many young people “drift” between illegitimate and legitimate modes, which is often impacted by religiosity (Robinson-Edwards and Pinkney, 2018). Young people often occupy these two spaces, one embroiled in deviance and crime and the other focused on religious application and practice. This is problematic; young people attempt to navigate life “on road”, yet their religious selves warrant a different response to often violent and hostile situations. Practitioners play a direct role in helping young people transform attitudes towards violence and find other solutions to deal with conflicts, although in some instances faith-based understandings are drawn upon for additional support.

Often the experiences of frontline practitioners are overlooked, lending itself to an unbalanced understanding of the dynamics between Young People and practitioners. This paper argues that working on the frontline and dealing with issues pertaining to “on road” youth work is important in academic discussions, and can contribute to the “on road” criminology discourse. As noted, many of the respondents in this study work in the “inner city”, where problems such as county lines, knife crime and gang-related crime are a lived reality. The importance of faith-based intervention is discussed alongside its limitations. “On road” youth work is an approach to engage young people through informal education. Using a set of principles that are person-centred and holistic to address issues relating to the development and changes in youth cultures. Thus, often respondents engage with young people by understanding faith-based perspectives; this is on a personal level, alongside faith-based understanding and approaches that are used to successfully engage some of the most hard-to-reach and disaffected young people.

It is noted that many of the young people that respondents refer to came from Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) backgrounds. It is not this paper's intention to further stereotype a particular segment of society. Nevertheless, what is apparent is that respondents work in areas where there are high numbers of young people from BAME and disaffected backgrounds. If practitioners worked in other areas, their perspective of various interventions and in particular faith-based support may have differed to some extent. A key finding is the lack of faith-based support for young people who require it, thus shedding light on the way in which the needs of young people should be looked at holistically, not minimising the role of practitioners and their personal lived experiences on the frontline and beyond. The authors do not suggest that there are no organisations who support young people from faith-based backgrounds, rather, what shines through is that respondents do not see young people in consistent communication with faith-based agencies. This could be because of several reasons, such as access, location, motivation and the willingness of the young person to engage.

After care is crucial to promote and sustain the desistance process, and where the young person requires faith-based support, then this support should be readily available. Respondents acknowledge that faith-based support has many enabling factors; nevertheless, a multidisciplinary approach to engage young people is needed. The Good Lives Model (GLM) suggests that people naturally seek primary goods, and well-being is very much dependent on achieving certain goods (Ward and Brown, 2004). Goals are motivating factors in the desistance process; Emmons (1996) states "goal directedness is a human enterprise" (1996, p. 331). For those who have a strong need for religious, spirituality or faith-based support, then according to the GLM, the good of "spirituality (in the broad sense of finding meaning and purpose in life)" (Purvis, 2011) may be important to them. For others, importance may relate to employment and educational attainment. Although personal faith is alluded to throughout, respondents acknowledge the limitations of some interventions and agree that a multifaceted approach is needed to engage young people.

To conclude, the authors acknowledge that this paper was based on a small qualitative study, which refers to a specific geographic context. Therefore, the specific context of "inner city" Birmingham should be considered. This could be deemed a limitation; however, this paper was not solely based upon location, rather experience on the frontline and willingness to participate was key. This study opens a dialogue on "on road" youth work, "on road" criminology and faith on the frontline. Secondly, such findings can be used to understand similar settings in cities across the country. We propose that further understanding of the experiences of frontline practitioners is needed; thus, we put forward that exploration into the needs and experiences of young people and frontline practitioners is approached on a wider scale, with reference to "on road" youth work and "on road" criminology.

## Notes

1. The categories were as follows: No religion, Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, Sikh, Any other religion. Those who identified with No religion stood at (38.4%) and Muslim (5.7%) (ONS, 2020).
2. "Salafism (or Salafiyah) is the true Path in following Islam and the Sunnah [...] The terms Salafi, Sunni, Ahlus-Sunnah wal-Jamā'ah, Ashābul-Hadeeth and Ahlul-Hadeeth are interchangeable. All these titles refer to the same body of people who all follow the same path. However, not everyone who uses these titles is a true adherent of what they represent (Alam 2018, p. 3)
3. A type of clothing typically worn by Muslim men.
4. "To be a Salafi means adhering to the Creed, Methodology and the way of life of the Salaf As-Sālih (the Pious Predecessors)" (Alam 2018, p. 3).
5. Peace be upon you.

6. And unto you peace/Peace be also with you.
7. "Islām is built upon five: The declaration that there is none worthy of worship except Allāh and that Muhammad is the Messenger of Allāh; to establish the Prayers; to pay the Zakāh; to perform Hajj to the House (Kābah) and fasting in the month of Ramadān (Bukhārī and Muslim)" (Alam, 2016a).
8. "The Shahādah is to utter: Ash-hadu an laa ilaaha illallaah, wa ash-hadu anna Muhammadan 'abduhu wa Rasooluhu' (I bear witness that none has the right to be worshipped except Allāh alone – and I bear witness that Muhammad is His slave and messenger)" (Alam, 2016b).
9. As it relates to government agendas, grassroots knowledge, knowledge of the environment, history, interventions; boundaries, credibility, social capital, gender, legislation; and policies, safeguarding and risk assessment.

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