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Shared practice, learning and goals between police and young people: A qualitative analysis of the National Volunteer Police Cadets

Jeffrey DeMarco and Antonia Bifulco

Introduction

This paper explores the impact of the Volunteer Police Cadets (VPC) programme. Founded in 1988, the VPC is a national English and Welsh programme, re-launched by the Metropolitan Police and the Mayor's Office in 2009, with a national framework agreed by the National Police Chief's Council in 2013, and a new strategy currently under development. The VPC programme aims to:

- link youth with the police in a volunteer capacity;
- promote a practical understanding of policing among young people; and
- promote community engagement that incorporates local policing priorities.

Over the course of its years since the development of the national framework, funding has been from a variety of sources, including the Police Innovation Fund for two years, with a view to mainstreaming and expanding its delivery, as well as exploring the added value to young people through their involvement. The Police Innovation Fund provides grant funding across English and Welsh police forces, to support emergency services collaboration, improvements to police information and communication technologies, and developments within the police workforce. This paper describes an evaluative, qualitative and independent university-based research project involving a series of focus groups with volunteer cadets and with adult volunteers to ascertain the strengths and challenges of the programme and its overall benefits. It will focus specifically on issues of opportunities for youth mentoring and impact; for enhanced police/youth interaction and community impact and civic engagement.

The research was conducted at 13 individual cadet units across 7 police forces. These are organised uniformed groups, managed by police and police staff where activities were undertaken.

The aim of the current study was to better understand the primary aims of the cadet programme, as listed above, but also to identify the benefits of engaging with the cadet programme from both perspectives (cadets and adult leaders), and the challenges in delivering it and working within a police structure. The unintended impacts of the programme, such as youth-police relationships and the policing presence in communities, through the role of the cadets, were also explored. Specifically, the paper aims to (i) articulate the overall rationale of the VPC programme (ii) its impact on the young people, (iii) impact on their communities' and police engagement. It also discusses the continuation of the programme for social good.

Literature review

Community impact through civic engagement

The Criminal Justice System (CJS) is a multi-levelled, wide-reaching, complex institution. However, most people will only know it through their encounters with its most visible frontline staff—the police. Bradford, Jackson and Stanko (2009) in researching public-police encounters have shown how these contact experiences have lasting effects on the public in terms of their policing views. They highlighted that many neighbourhood policing strategies across England and Wales are aimed at increasing the frequency and improving the quality of police and public interactions. By improving the quality of police interactions, citizens may feel more secure and confident in the police, which in turn can have benefits for the wider CJS remit and functioning.

Studies focusing on young people, show those who report having had good, positive previous police encounters report more positive feeling and attitudes towards the police (Bayley & Mendelsohn, 1969; Wattenberg & Bufe, 1963; Winfree & Griffiths, 1977). It is conjectured that having young people interacting in prosocial, amicable and constructive ways with police can influence the over-arching relationship more permanently. Hopkins (1994) argued that providing youth groups and the police with the opportunity to interact together in a proactive manner would allow youth to appreciate better the role of police,

and the police to respect the needs and motivations of youth. Moretz Jr. (1980) identified that whilst adolescents held positive views of the police they also found it difficult to understand the purpose, function and behaviour of police officers. This lack of understanding may contribute to youth-police anxieties and incongruent expectations by both. Working on improving the police-youth relationship may assist in improving opinions and collaboration between these two groups moving forward. This paper examines the volunteer police cadet programme as an initiative to improve police-youth relations. Similar research has explored the value of young people working in partnership with youth workers (Devlin & Gunning, 2009), teachers and educational representatives (Klem & Connell, 2004) and other organised and uniformed youth programmes such as the Scouts, Guides and Army Cadets (Jarvis & King, 1997).

Youth impact and mentoring

Part of the VPC activity involves mentoring of the young cadets, and this has precedent in more focused mentoring programmes applied in countries such as Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom which provide interesting examples of CJS links in which the construct of 'trust' can be examined in relation to youth. Becker (1994) describes mentoring programmes in general as a constructive relationship between youth and adult volunteers who foster a range of developmental factors; personal growth; career/skills development, learning novel sports and engaging in previously unavailable activities. The mentoring allows the youth to create a meaningful, reciprocal relationship with an adult in which friendship, productive authority and respect can be maintained. Grossman and Garry (1997) discuss the importance in providing young mentees with a strong, positive, trusting relationship. The emphasis thus on young people not only being nurtured but also learning discipline and developing structured routine as a protection against impulsive or antisocial behaviour can aid their social development.

Another concept relevant to initiatives such as VPC is that of the 'teachable moment'. This is defined as when an event occurs which provides an opportunity for a key social

message to be imparted. It has its roots in education and teaching practice, but has also been applied to health and policing fields (Tyler et al., 2014). The idea is to utilise naturally occurring events or experiences to impart and underline a social message. This is believed to have added impact from the context in which it occurs. Other 'teachable moments' have been examined in relation to victims of gang violence when they enter A&E with injuries, as an opportunity for offering interventions and alternative lifestyle choices (DeMarco et al., 2016).

Initiatives such as VPC also provide support opportunities for young people involved as cadets. In the case of the police organisation, and those choosing to be involved and creating activities for the young people, these could be considered 'high resource adults'. This refers to adults with a level of professionalism, expertise and status, who can be approached for aid with practical information and advice. For individuals from deprived backgrounds, there may be a lack of such adults to provide resource or to become role models (Sullivan & Larson, 2010).

Universal early intervention programme

VPC is potentially part of a universal approach to early intervention for risky behaviour, which can be modelled by public health. Here the concept is that health campaigns and preventative health care (e.g. inoculations) are provided to the at-risk groups or even the population. It is defined as *"the science and art of preventing disease, prolonging life and promoting human health through organized efforts and informed choices of society, organizations, public and private, communities and individuals"* (Griffiths, Jewell & Donnelly, 2005). When the concept is applied to other interventions it usually denotes both a universal and somewhat untailed approach with a view to preventing risks to populations whether to health, or from crime or poverty or other negative lifestyle issues (Ilan-Clarke et al., 2013). Whereas its format of delivery is unstructured, and more bespoke initiatives have been pursued, it often involves engaging with young people at a point in which they are perceived to be vulnerable, and focusing on rapport building and skills development (e.g.

educational, vocational, interest) so as to offer support and protection against further adversity (Allison et al., 2011).

Communities where the police are visible, accessible, prompt and efficient can lead to positive popular perceptions of the police (Hough et al., 2010). Organised volunteer cadet work can assist with this, as well as providing benefits associated with mentoring in general. This paper aims to examine these influences.

Method

The VPC operation

The current VPC programme involves approximately 520 units across all 43 police forces in England and Wales, with additional units in the British Transport Police, Isle of Mann and an emerging group of 'mini' police cadet units in schools. Since the current research commenced in 2013, the number of cadets nationwide has increased from 4,000 to 17,756. Funding was provided from multiple sources, including the Police Innovation Fund which started in pilot sites at the commencement of the current project and is becoming increasingly mainstreamed. At the time of writing, individual forces also contributed a minimum amount to allow for the set-up of new units. As previously discussed, the aim of the programme is to involve young people in their communities, promoting a greater understanding of police work and linking them to the police in a volunteering capacity. This can ultimately provide the cadets with a better understanding of the workings of the police force, gaining a greater understanding of it as an institution and provides an opportunity for the youth community to get to know police officers as individuals. This can assist with reducing any mistrust that may have arisen from the communities in which they live, or from their status (e.g. Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic - BAME). Whilst some cadets may later become recruited as police officers, that is not the primary aim. The cadet units typically involve on average 20 young people aged 12-18, with some units having as many as 70 cadets. They are from varied backgrounds,

but the inclusion of those from minority or disadvantaged communities is intentional. Both girls and boys are involved. The process of recruiting them is varied but primarily originates through word of mouth through the national teams' strategic partnerships. This includes visits and information being delivered to families and youth groups by local police, professionals working with Looked After Children, Youth Offending Teams and School Officers. Young people themselves are also seen as critical in the recruitment of new cadets, as they share their experiences with friends and peers. However, there is no official referral or recruitment pathway, and no young person is turned away (however, capacity at times may lead to a delay before engagement). Once installed in their units they are engaged in a wide range of activities such as drills, criminal-justice based learning, first aid and safeguarding training, social action, community volunteering and sport. Police officers are either nominated or volunteer to manage and supervise the cadets, with civilian volunteers and senior leaders also involved in the process. These are selected on a case by case basis with no formal recruitment process in place. Currently, this is being re-visited by the national team to ensure standard practice.

Aims

The current study used focus groups to question both young people and their supervising police officers/volunteers about aspects of the VPC programme to chart its function, benefits and challenges. Specific issues around youth impact through mentoring; community impact through civic engagement and the universal early intervention approach will be highlighted.

Sample

Fifteen focus groups were held across seven forces with police officers and adult volunteers linked to the operation of cadet units and 15 focus groups across the same forces with enrolled cadets. These 30 focus groups centred on the functionality, motivations, strengths and limitations of current cadet units operating in England and Wales. Variations in ethnicity, socio-economic status (SES), age (range 12-18 in youth

and 19-58 in adults) and gender were represented across these groups. Ethnicity was mixed across all groups. This involved 26% from BAME groups, most notably from Black British communities. Overall, 51% of participants across the focus groups were female. It also included a proportion who had previous poor experience of the police and had either been arrested (22%), been involved with a social worker (17%) or were on the verge of school exclusion (11%).

The seven police forces involved were from both urban (5) and rural (2) areas. Two focus groups were facilitated in Wales. Although no formal assessment process was applied in selecting the forces, they were chosen on the basis of their geographical diversity, community demographics, local crime needs and working relationships with the national VPC team.

The focus groups varied in the number of individuals involved, ranging from four to twelve participants (average 9 per group). Overall, approximately 200 different individuals were involved. All the focus group sessions were between forty-five and sixty minutes in length and in the location of the common gathering/meeting place for the respective unit. All were audio recorded with the group's permission and the focus group was run by the lead author together with facilitators from the research team, with a predetermined list of questions agreed by the research team around issues of aim, function, benefits and challenges of the VPC initiative. Questions were set to align with the outlined aims and objectives presented in the original proposal submitted to the Police Innovation Fund, specifically the aim of innovating and improving police services to communities.

An online survey was also developed as part of the research project, which was constructed by the authors and embedded within a new digital platform for cadet unit management called the 'Marshall Volunteer Platform'. Its purpose is to assist adult volunteers and leaders in organising the training, administration and records for their units, but the survey also offers an opportunity to collect information on attitudes and opinions towards civic participation, mental health difficulties, anti-social behaviour, self-

esteem, trust and behavioural intentions. Additionally, the survey has been established to allow for completion when joining the cadets and again at other points in time to explore change. For this paper, these results are not presented here.

Ethical procedures

All materials were designed by the research team and conformed to ethical guidance of the British Society of Criminology and the British Psychological Society. The research was approved by the Middlesex University ethics committee and by an independent advisory board, convened for this research project. In accordance with ethics guidelines, participants were given a briefing introducing the researcher and the background of what was involved. Permission forms had been sent around for the cadets prior to participation to ensure parental consent for participation. Informed consent was taken verbally on site with both sets of participants. It was explained to all participants that they could leave at any time. They were informed that the discussions would be audio-recorded for analysis, and that their identities and responses would remain anonymous. Topic guides were created to direct the flow of discussion and prompt new leads. Copies were provided for the researcher and facilitators assisting with the session.

Following delivery and collection of information, all participants were debriefed and provided with contact details for the researcher for follow-up questions.

Analysis

Each focus group session was transcribed verbatim for further analysis. Qualitative thematic analysis using NVivo computer software was undertaken. Transcribed focus group data was managed and analysed using a structured approach, where key topics emerging from the data were identified through familiarisation with the transcripts. An analytical framework was drawn up in the form of a matrix where columns represented the key sub-themes or topics and the rows represent individual focus groups. Data was summarised in the appropriate matrix cell for analysis.

Results

The qualitative analysis is presented for the two groups involved (police officers/volunteers and then young cadets) with a synthesis then undertaken.

The first step is to describe for the police/officers and volunteers the seven emerging themes derived from the analysis of the focus group material. These involved safe/secure environment, civic engagements, discipline/routine, friendship/support/community, continuing education and a public health (i.e. universal) approach. These will be described in turn with quotes from the participants to illustrate points and the meanings and implications discussed.

The second step is to describe for the cadets the five themes derived from the analysis. These were: social capital/value; importance of volunteering; belongingness/self-worth; youth-authority relationships and proxy policing. These again are illustrated with quotes from individual participants and the meaning and implications are discussed

Finally, the overlap of these themes for some degree of synthesis was undertaken. A final discussion summarised the findings in terms of aims/motivations; VPC procedures and strengths and challenges of the programme.

1 - Police officers and adult leaders

Seven themes emerged from the analysis, each of which is discussed in turn. These are grouped by mentoring (safe environment, discipline/routine, continuing education) and civic engagement (friendship/community) and universal intervention (need for more police support) to fit with themes described earlier.

Mentoring

VPC Unit as a safe and secure environment

The leaders and police discussed in the focus groups the importance of wanting the cadets to feel safe, comfortable and at ease whilst at the unit. The activities and participation were intended to be enjoyable, with cadets able to look forward to participation. Once attendance at the unit is perceived as a burden or a source of anxiety, it was commented that there would be a risk of decreased motivation, interest and attendance. The adults were keen to make the curriculum as interesting, diverse and activity oriented as possible. A police officer commented that this led to a feeling of being safe but also empowered, and this aided learning and imparting messages:

“...coming here, coming [to a unit] let’s us work with the young people and gives them a place to call their own...we can do lots of [activities] where [cadets] feel empowered, safe and we can use this to teach and to learn...” [Police FG3]

This allowed the staff to utilise ‘teachable moments’ when dealing with the cadets, as described earlier. This is defined in terms of opportune moments in the course of the activities for imparting key social messages. These teachable moments were considered critical for imparting the deeper social benefits of the cadet organisation. These moments ideally need to influence the well-being and prosocial development of the young people as individuals and are used as opportunities to distil information, knowledge and trust in forging good police-youth relationships in the future. One of the advantages of the cadet programme is its offer of a new organised activity that the young people find interesting, bringing them into contact with the police in meaningful and interesting scenarios. A police participant commented on the importance of ‘fun’ in imparting such messages:

“...innovation, originality...the [structured] activities need to be fun and enjoyable. That keeps [cadets] engaged and coming back for more. Means we can always plan what is useful and informative...” [Police FG11]

The analysis showed that supervision and monitoring were deemed important to perceptions of safety. A minority of the young people involved in the cadet programme were from 'at-risk' or deprived backgrounds. Whilst this could be for various reasons, one perceived danger was lack of supervision when young people were outside the home. This was seen as making them at risk from problem peers to be victims or participants in antisocial behaviour. By being at organised activity sessions, these young people were involved in organised activity while their caregivers were at work which also allowed for some level of supervision. One police officer commented on the:

"...opportunity to keep an eye on the [cadets]. This is not meant to restrict or keep them from doing what they want to do, you know. We want them to want to come here, but we also think that by being here, they are less likely to get up to no good on the street, or to come into contact with the wrong sorts of crowds. These [cadets] are strong, but sometimes it is just good to have an extra pair of eyes..."
[Police FG1]

Discipline, routine and authority

The development of discipline and routine in the lives of the cadets was considered one of the defining features of the programme. Most units applied a form of drill or parade to instil ritualised orderliness in the cadets. This assisted the adults with managing the cadets, but also established a level of discipline, to which many cadets were unaccustomed. In addition, learning about police practice, legislation and aspects of criminal law allowed the leaders to be 'high resource adults' in the lives of the youth—resources in which the youth who found interests or wished to gather further understanding could pursue. One police officer commented:

"...it's like any other organised activity but with a [police] twist. [Police leaders] think that for some, that is the added value. Learning about structure and rank..."
[Police FG12]

There is the added value of monitoring and supervision which often, parents or caregivers are unable to provide and without which there is a higher risk of the pull towards anti-social or excluded peers, and engagement in anti-social behaviour. This is more likely for young people who are the most vulnerable and can be an important 'buffer'

of protection. Associated with this, working with the police (albeit in a civil society capacity) can positively influence the values of the young people, and their respect for authority and criminal justice. Many of the young people had never interacted with the criminal justice system positively before. Some had experienced it under negative circumstances. This could allow a shift in their feelings and understanding of the police. One police officer noted:

“...[cadets] may start to think differently about [the police]. [The police] have an opportunity to showcase what we really do...” **[Police FG7]**

The learning opportunities and knowledge acquisition, both official and unofficial, were considered valuable. As one officer noted:

“...unit is not just about working together and learning...[several] opportunities to influence and teach...” **[Police FG3]**

Continuing education

Adult leaders involved with the VPC and police officers saw the agglomeration of young people and ‘high resource’ adults as an educative opportunity. They saw this as skill and expertise acquisition outside of the education sector. Learning about police career paths, and specialisms and related expertise was perceived to be highly valued and a useful ‘carrot’ to incentivise the youth. The learning about issues as diverse as legislation pertaining to dog ownership, or understanding interviewing processes, was perceived as beneficial to the young people. A comment by one police officer on the cadets seeing the police organisation from the inside:

“...they are inside, and see how police works. What the roles are, what the job involves, they are getting involved in some of the events. These are the inside sort of things that you’d never see outside. And it suits on your CV for going to university, it’s useful to do some career later on...” **[Police FG1]**

This also provided cadets with an introduction to varied topics and debate around religion, politics and other matters. The adults discussions in focus groups highlighted

their belief that they could influence the cadets in ways that would make them think more critically. For example:

“...[bringing young people together] is a great thing. You have all these different people from different, you know, places and backgrounds...poor, rich, Catholic, Sikh, Jewish, Muslim...and they can converse and disagree...and learn to back up their thoughts...” [Police FG13]

Civic engagement

The focus groups showed the adults involved in cadet programmes wanted to promote community involvement within their local area and assist the youth with developing an understanding of civic engagement and participation. The goal of civic engagement is to address public concerns and promote the quality of the community (Checkoway & Aldana, 2013). This incorporates the idea of ‘giving back’ to their communities and to help others. Within VPC this included directing their voluntary hours and work towards shared interests such as assisting the elderly; improving understanding of under-age drinking; or mental health in communities. The police officers involved described how the process inculcated a greater sense of their own and group values. One commented:

“...many causes, many interests. We can teach the young people to think about these, about what matters to them individually but also as a group. Gives [cadets] some ownership, but also provides a shared drive and a connection to the [city]...” [Police FG14]

Friendship, support and community

The adult leaders discussed the way they interacted with the cadets. Delivering firm instructions, with an authoritative demeanour, yet being kind and approachable was seen to lead to positive interactions. The newer recruits were observed as more cautious and warier of the higher-ranking officers. The cadets who had been involved for longer periods of time showed respect and adherence to the rules but also indulged in banter, informal horseplay and camaraderie with the leading officers. The officers demonstrated their concern for the cadets. Although serious with them when they misbehaved, they shared laughter, smiles and jokes in appropriate situations. One police officer observed:

“...[operating a unit] means more than just that; we can learn, experience, laugh and cry together. We have respect and authority, and the [cadets] can [joke or mock] with us at certain times, and they know when not to and when things are serious...time to be serious, and time to have fun...[cadets] also know they never need to worry about the [consequences] of being told-off...if they “do the crime, they serve the time” and all is forgiven...” [Police FG5]

The groups also discussed the development of new experiences and interactions that would not have happened had it not been for the cadet programme. The participants did acknowledge that the same benefit may have occurred in other organised youth work programmes, but believed that utilising the police as a social institution in the community, provided a real opportunity for both police officers, and the next generation of young people moving into adulthood. One officer commented:

“...To be fair I know what [other organisations] do... we are quite proactive with our duties, we encourage [cadets] to experience police officers’ duties. We also manage some events... I think this stuff is quite positive...” [Police FG7]

Universal approach

There was a sense that the cadet units, in their varying capacities, offered a central hub that provided multi-disciplinary, multi-dimensional and multi-directional support to young people. This means that a cadet’s engagement with a particular unit could be perceived to positively impact upon their lives in a multitude of ways. Whether it was about their own self-growth, study, employment preparation —what was of importance was the manner in which this was done, and what the youth could access, and how they would benefit. A police officer noted the opportunity for raised confidence:

“...unit works very well and I think that’s very positive. I think one of the other positive elements is the growth of self-confidence for young people, they sort of grow networks and they get a sense of belonging because they are all together...” [Police FG15]

The reference to a ‘public health’ approach, implies the VPC offers a national and wide-ranging influence towards positive health, wellbeing and growth. Units were not necessarily a one-size fits all operation but found varied ways of spending resource and giving attention holistically and personally with the cadets. Careful consideration was

given to subject matter and delivery of information and to providing activities that would benefit a wide range of different young people with different needs, in addition to a standard level of engagement, empowerment and interest for all. A police officer underlined the need for a programme which could benefit all the cadets:

“...young people want to join. Lots of differences, lots of diversity but it potentially interests all of them. So that’s why we need support to get deliver a program everyone could benefit from it...” **[Police FG9]**

Thinking of a cadet unit and its functionality in this way provides a means of information delivery to the youth concerning multiple issues and interests. It may be about encouraging them to be more involved in their own communities; it could be for their own self-improvement and growth of their interpersonal skills; and it could be to provide them with the skills development and support they need when facing adversity. Regardless, the programme is meant to meet the individual needs of each participant.

Need for more police support

The police focus group participants spent a great deal of time discussing the need for more direction, support and assistance from the VPC programme team for delivering the programme. This was a request for aid in achieving the goals set by individual units in responding to the cadets. One stated:

“...we all volunteer all the time...need more structure, more finance...more support and help...[senior management] used to come and be involved, but now we are often left to [get on with it]...” **[Police FG7]**

There was concern that working with cadets was a ‘soft’ job in the police force, not meriting the time or attention of more pressing matters in young people, such as radicalisation, sexual exploitation, knife crime or drug use. Thinking of the cadet programme as not ‘real policing’ meant that those working in cadet units were constantly struggling for resources (financial and human) and in ensuring the continued growth and diversity of the programme. Buy-in from senior leadership and those with access to

resources and finances was deemed to be important. Without endorsement, many in the focus groups perceived the sustainability of units to be under threat. There was also a disproportionate belief that those already in non-police constable roles (e.g. Police Volunteers, Police and Community Support Officers) were often left to take full responsibility and 'carry' units and of lesser status since not seen to be working in high priority or important roles.

2 – Young Cadets

This section provides the thematic analysis of the focus group discussions facilitated with the cadets themselves. The cadets were asked about their experiences with police forces and operational units. Under the three themes of Civic engagement, mentoring and universal intervention were five key subthemes of social capital/value; importance of volunteering (civic engagement) belongingness/self worth; youth-authority relationships (mentoring); and proxy policing (universal intervention). These are outlined in turn.

Civic engagement

Social capital and value

The cadets themselves discussed the various benefits they received from participating with their specific units. The development of new social networks with peers and adults was considered highly valuable, as well as developing an understanding of trust, reciprocity and cooperation with a diverse group of peers. They saw the benefit not just to themselves, but also to the individuals that they were regularly interacting with. They listed several of the resource-based advantages they received through participation, such as access to festivals, community work, 'special lessons' from other branches of the police system (firearms and first aid training were mentioned several times) but also the resource of having access to the various police and adult staff and how that influenced many of their decisions in their day to day life outside the cadet unit. They contrasted it with school learning, for example:

“...It’s not like school: you learn things that are interesting, but you are not pressured to do anything...it’s not the same as school because you are making new friends, and seeing things you may not have ever seen or tried before...useful things...” [Cadets FG3]

Enhancing awareness of diversity was an important aspect that cadets were able to both experience and benefit from. This was affected by interacting with other young people not usually included in their school or normative peer group. This meant for some, experiencing new cultures, religions and politics. It also meant that they were able to experience new and different discussions around identity, gender, sexuality and other issues that influenced their concept and view of ‘other’ groups and people. This was perceived as a benefit with a reduction in use of stereotypes, prejudices and discriminatory attitudes, improving interactions with other groups and appreciating the benefit to their own social network. This exemplified by one cadet:

“...You are going to see very interesting things and make friends with people very different to you...and you learn a lot about them, and things you never knew...” [Cadets FG7]

Importance of volunteering

The importance of having volunteer experience to list on their curriculum vitae, and the advantage from having worked with police was noted by the cadets themselves. One cadet commented:

“...[by volunteering] you gain a life experience and you write it on your CV. Because that you have been doing volunteering in the community and in many situations, for many people, including me and my mates, that is really important...” [Cadets FG9]

The cadets also echoed the multiple benefits of volunteering. They acknowledged that it assisted them with a variety of their own interpersonal needs but that the benefit from engagement could additionally cascade to multiple interactions within the community. They were aware of national austerity measures and financial difficulties experienced by the police as an organisation and saw how as cadets they could aid the police in their local area without undue cost. Volunteering also had effects on the young peoples’

reported psychological growth and maturity. The cadets identified that many adolescents see the utilitarian purpose of volunteering for personal gain, but also that many cadets acknowledged additional benefits. It removed them from their comfort zone at times and forced them into engaging with different people, places or causes. They saw the value of working with strangers (e.g. random members of the public) as a means of counteracting their own insecurities, low self-esteem and efficacy and thought that volunteering was an excellent use of time when compared to alternative other hobbies (i.e. video games, social media). This illustrated by a comment from one of the cadets:

“... so many [new] experiences...things that I never thought about before...public speaking, talking to other adults like [elderly people] and businesses and people in the community...I feel good, it helps...I think [the police] and [the community] like it too...” [Cadets FG4]

Youth impact

Belongingness and self-worth

Importantly the cadets felt like they ‘belonged’ in their VPC unit. This created and strengthened new friendships likely to be outside of their neighbourhood, family and school. They talked about the diversity of their interactions and friends on site at the units and how these experiences were enriching for their own growth and continued identity formation. As such, they seemed to develop a new internal set of norms, and values consistent with the structure of their unit and new social relationships. A cadet commented:

“...You are going to see very interesting things and make friends with people very similar to you...and you do become friends and learn to get along and disagree and that stuff, and its important...we are like a little family and it is different than my friends at school or at home...” [Cadets FG2]

This is interesting as many cadets discussed how the elements of hierarchy and structure were important in dealing with their own impulsivity. They liked having structure in their lives and learned to appreciate it and see the value in it for their own personal growth. One cadet noted:

“...I think that if you told [friends and leaders] something to them they believe you and they trust you. They respect you and what you say, when you are upset, you can trust them. They trust you and they have respect for you...and this makes you respect and understand the importance of working together...” [Cadets FG6]

They also noted the importance of ‘group growth’ where the cadets could develop, learn and experience together. This shared comradery was perceived to be strong— sharing both positive and challenging situations together that at times, the adults involved may not be able to relate to.

Youth-authority relationships

The cadets also discussed the importance of having positive experiences with authoritative figures—specifically the staff with whom they interacted while at cadet sessions. This provided them with insight into the more complex elements of policing and the criminal justice system which, according to the participants, made the police seem less powerful, fearful and anxiety-inducing. Many had never known a police officer before, or an individual in a position of power and as such, the experience allowed them to de-mystify many of the stereotypes and prejudices they held. One cadet noted:

“...When I was younger a lot of my friends used to speak negatively about the police. So I was not like quite sure about it, because I did not know a lot. Just they come around when you need them, basically. So I did not have my opinion. But now I do see how much police change people’s life. They do work the hardest to help everyone...” [Cadets FG9]

Some cadets also stated that although they still felt wary of the police not involved in their unit, they had a newfound understanding of the role and issues police face on a daily basis. This also pointed to increased capacity to be self-reflective and other-reflective. Taking the perspective of others from the police - a very adult-oriented and significant social institution - allowed the cadets to consider some wider life complexities that they may not have considered before. Issues from a policing perspective; such as drug-taking; extremism; sexual exploitation; general crime; domestic and sexual violence provided the cadets with broader information to influence their own views.

“...we learn so much about [crime], different types and ways they work and its important. For example, all the [sex offenders] working on the internet, I now know more and can think more about being safe, and I share that with my friends and tell them the good and the bad about it and what the police have taught us...”
[Cadets FG14]

Improvements in youth-police interactions more generally may also be considered as a benefit from cadet involvement. Procedural justice, which explains how police-public interactions can influence the public's willingness to co-operate based on their assessment of police fairness, may benefit from programmes such as the cadets. In theory, the more fairly members of the public deem an encounter with the police to be, the more likely those members of the public are to have trust and confidence in the police. This in turn may increase the likelihood of the public co-operating with the police in future situations, such as providing a witness statement or reporting a crime (Tyler & Fagan, 2008). Linking this to the interactions of cadets with the police and procedural justice, it was perceived that many cadets differentiated between working with police on site in their VPC units, versus encountering unknown police officers on the street. Cadets admitted that they did not see the VPC adult leaders they had regular contact with as police officers 'per se' but more as friends. This was in contrast to the police on the street. They did discuss that they may be reluctant to approach and trust unknown police officers as representing the larger force, but were certainly more aware of the difficult job police officers have, and would be more willing to enter an encounter neutrally, or without prejudice, than before.

Universal Intervention

Proxy policing

The cadets took pride in their role within the police force— they saw themselves as governed by policing structure and protocol. When they did positive things in the community they shared policing pride—and when negative events occurred within their police force, they felt defensive. The conformity of their roles within the cadet unit is an

interesting element of their experience. All of this contributed to their apparent desire to present themselves outwardly to their communities as being of ‘good character’, which links back to the importance of developing good morals and shared norms and values with their unit and leaders. One cadet used the word ‘family’ about the police worked with:

“...the police have it hard. When they do something bad as a cop a lot of attention. But not every person represents the whole group. We [cadets] can help with that, be part of the [police] family and show that we care and that we are good...”
[Cadets FG14]

Many cadets also had the insight of seeing their own utilitarian benefit to the larger police force. This was discussed in terms of human and financial resources, but also visibility and accessibility. The cadets saw their role in the community as representative of any other police officer, across rank—but also saw themselves as more disarming and approachable by community members. This was particularly evident in their discussions with regards to peers and non-cadet classmates. For example:

“...[community members] they ask us what we’re doing as [cadets] and we tell them and they find it interesting and ask questions [about the police]...”
[Cadets FG15]

Discussion and conclusion

This section provides an overview of the findings and draws links with current policy and socio-cultural issues in England and Wales as highlighted by the study and the VPC programme.

The thematic analysis of the 30 focus groups from both the adult and cadet perspectives indicated many positive aspects about the VPC programme. Whilst the themes varied across the two groups commonalities were also found. Figure 1 combines the two sets of themes subsumed under the three preselected themes of civic engagement, mentoring and universal intervention:

Figure 1 – Combined themes from focus groups

Over-arching theme	Adult/Police Theme	Cadet theme
Civic engagement	Need for support Continuing education	Social capital and value Importance of volunteering
Youth impact	Discipline and routine Safe and secure environment Friendship, support, community	Youth-authority relationships Belongingness and self-worth
Universal approach	Public health approach to intervention and development	Proxy policing

The overarching themes highlight the positive benefits of the VPC programme as viewed from both police and cadet perspective. Thus the cadets were seen to benefit from engaging, enhanced safety and opportunities for friendship. These also had wider impacts on their capacity for volunteering, for respecting authority and belonging to their communities. In this way the VPC can be seen as a type of early intervention and benefit to young people’s development.

The cadet participants in the focus groups were mainly positive about the scheme – these were cadets who had stayed with the volunteer programme. The adult volunteers and police were similarly positive. On the negative side the cadets reported being less cooperative towards other police officers not in their units, showing the generalisation to the police force as a whole was limited, and the adults/police involved felt that their role in the VPNC did not get the status it deserved.

Limitations of the study involve the exclusion of cadets who had dropped out of the scheme early who may have been more critical. Also, the views of other police or community members were not involved in this phase of the study to give a wider perspective. In addition, the study was not time-based and unable to judge whether participants had modified their views with greater experience of the scheme. Ideally moving forward in evaluating the programme, the research could recontact cadets to consider attitudinal and behavioural change after entry into a cadet unit, and at different time periods throughout their engagement.

The findings of this evaluation could speak to issues of interventions with youth relevant for youth crime and problem relationships with the police. For central policy makers and politicians, tackling youth crime, disorder and encouraging desistance from antisocial behaviour has often been a centrepiece to criminal justice policy. With the increase in populist movements across Europe and the Western world, the public more often endorse punitive measures for combatting the breakdown of social cohesion, and the 'youth' problem (Mears, Pickett & Mancini, 2015). This can result in damaging and exclusionary measures being adapted for young people which lead to relationship breakdown and mistrust (Bailey, 2019). The work of the VPC presented in this paper tackles preconceptions linked to youth, embracing a more inclusive, restorative and welcoming approach in dealing with young people and wider communities. This is effectively an early intervention approach to youth or young adult crime, reaching vulnerable and at risk young people and offering wider support through participation, with implied wider benefits than originally planned in the cadet force itself. The findings support the added value of the cadet initiative to both the criminal justice apparatus, but also to wider societal institutions. Governmental engagement and support of the cadet programme is advocated—seeing the value in criminal justice reform; community engagement and early intervention; and the longer-term outcomes and successes of citizens in such programmes in England and Wales (see for example, the Early Intervention Foundation, and the mission statement of the Youth Endowment Fund).

Civil society, including third sector organisations, families and wider communities, has played a crucial role in bringing about social change around issues such as gang violence and youth criminality (Big Lottery, 2018). Often such agents in civil society at grass roots level (emerging, new, tailored organisations delivering to the special needs of particular, at-risk groups) are the only viable option for the State to advocate change. Bringing together diverse groups (e.g. across race, ethnicity, religion, sexuality) can be facilitated through activities and interests such as sport, music and learning or, in the case of the national VPC programme, volunteer cadet units. Best practice in terms of police work with communities, includes community organisations (social, religious, educative) and the criminal justice apparatus working together. Here the police are 'available and present', seen as approachable and the community is thus potentially 'disarmed', increasing engagement with higher visibility also to the police. These elements feature in the VPC programme. Having this platform can allow different groups (in this case young people and the police, but also minority representatives) to develop close relationships, and as such have some small influence through having a voice, on decision makers, such as senior police. Working with 'grass-roots' units (these new, innovative and original cadet units) within the police force can assist with integrating the VPC cadet units locally and ensuring that police-public interactions are improved from the ground up.

Community engagement with the public is also a pillar of British policing, and central to ensuring equality and diversity across communities (Bury et al., 2018). The cadet programme, if considered appropriately, provides a great deal of benefit to the State in its capacity and ability to police.

It is also clear that all those involved understand the importance of volunteering. The findings show the multiple benefits of volunteering—to individuals, to the community and to the police force. In a time of austerity appreciating the use of low-cost assistance and support, and its reward across social agents is critical (Davies, 2019). Decision makers should conduct further, economic analyses to further illustrate the financial benefits of

cadet volunteer work, while assured of the individual benefits these activities offer the young people themselves

A cadet unit needs to be seen as a 'one size fits all' service, but which reaches across individuals with varying levels of risk and resilience. Many of the findings discussed here focus on the well-being of cadets, and the benefits they may draw from involvement. VPC Units should not simply tackle the minority that are considered to be the most at risk to social exclusion, deviancy and anti-social behaviour and ignore the majority of youth with whom they need to interact. The findings here support holistic growth and advantage to youth across the spectrum of risk/resilience. It can benefit all and mixing young people together can improve peer resource for those more at risk. At a minimum those most at risk receive structured engagement, and opportunities for further support and assistance in times of crisis. Those more resilient will still benefit from the knowledge, activities and relationships and interactions for personal growth and wellbeing.

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