

# **Exploring peer mentoring as a form of innovative practice with young people at risk of child sexual exploitation.**

## **Abstract**

Peer-led approaches hold unique and innovative potential as a response to child sexual exploitation (CSE), yet little is known about such approaches in this field. This study aims to increase understanding by listening to young people using one such service. Qualitative methods were adopted in an attempt to understand how young people make sense of peer mentoring, data were collected through self-completion booklets; interviews; and a focus group, and analysed using thematic analysis and Gilligan's listening guide (see Kiegelmann, 2009). Given the small and local sample, the findings presented are not representative, rather they provide a snapshot, which enables us to consider the approach with this client group and the broader implications for peer-led practices. Peer mentoring emerges here as a method which may have emotional, practical and interpersonal benefits for young people facing multiple vulnerabilities. It also, importantly, reaches young women from hidden populations, who are often missing from, or missed by, support services. The article concludes by reflecting on the dilemmas associated with peer-led work and by outlining suggestions made by young people themselves, in the hope that inherent strengths in the approach can be recognised and embedded.

**Keywords:** Children and adolescents; Child safeguarding; Empowerment; Qualitative methods, Service users.

## **Introduction**

This article reflects upon the work of Manchester Active Voices (MAV), a young people's service in England, which works to address 'the hidden problem of young women and gang exploitation' (Project literature, 2016). Permission has been given by the agency to use their name. This article draws upon a 'needs analysis', commissioned by MAV, to understand how young people's needs are met; and how they could be better met. MAV work with young women who have been exploited or are identified as being 'at risk' of exploitation. All of MAV's peer mentors have lived

experiences of serious youth violence or exploitation. ‘Peer’ mentoring is often defined as people with shared backgrounds or experiences (Berrick, Young, Cohen and Anthony, 2011; Willoughby, Parker and Ali, 2013) conveying educational messages. Whilst there is a broader literature on peer mentoring with young people (see Karcher, 2014 for a detailed introduction), there is a lack of research into peer mentoring young people in abusive or exploitative relationships. The article begins by introducing the research and policy context, before explaining the study approach, it then presents the findings of this research, which illustrate how mentees [or service users] experience multiple vulnerabilities and how they see their mentors as a protective point of connection. Mentees also indicate how they feel valued, supported and visible – things that are often missing from the experience of exploited young people. The article concludes by considering explicit suggestions from young people and the lessons for practice that they provide. This unique contribution to child and family social work forefronts the voices of young people who have experienced this under-researched form of abuse. It not only illuminates some of the helping tools that they value, and the important role that peer mentors can play in reaching them, but it highlights some of the challenges facing charitable or community-based providers in this field. This is an important feature given that several countries have transferred welfare roles from the state to community or third sector interests (Corcoran, 2012).

Child sexual exploitation has risen to the forefront of political and public interest in the UK following a series of high-profile cases involving the organized targeting of young people (Klonowski, 2013; Jay, 2014; Bedford, 2015). However, the commercial sexual exploitation of children ‘is increasingly recognized as a significant societal and public health concern globally’ (Dubois and Felner, 2016: 2). UK research into exploitation in gangs has uncovered graphic accounts of sexual harm experienced by young women, along with threats of violence, isolation, and grooming (Berelowitz, Firmin, Edwards and Gulyurtlu, 2012; Jay, 2014). In addition, practitioners and policymakers have become increasingly concerned about the often hidden sexual exploitation of ‘gang’ associated young women (Berelowitz, Clifton, Firmin and Gulyurtlu, 2013; Beckett, Brodie, Factor, Melrose, Pearce, Pitts, Shuker and Warrington, 2013). Patterns of victimization include: pressure or coercion; sex in return for status or protection; multiple perpetrator rape; exchange of sex for drugs, alcohol, debt or money; to set up males from rival gangs; and to disrespect a rival

gang (e.g. having sex with a family member) (Beckett et al., 2013: 6-7). Victimization occurs on and offline and young people rarely report offences, or access any formal support services (Beckett et al., 2013: 6). Moreover, young women are often blamed for their experiences of victimization and are assumed to have ‘deserved’ or ‘asked for it’ (Beckett et al., 2013: 7). The experiences of ‘gang-associated’ young women lie within a broader context of abuse and exploitation, Barter, McCarry, Berridge and Evans (2009), for example, found that one in three girls experienced sexual violence from a partner before they turned 18, and a quarter reported some form of physical violence from a partner. Furthermore, 48% of young women (age 14-17), surveyed in England, experienced online forms of interpersonal violence and abuse (Barter et al., 2015). The extent of the problem supports the argument that sexual violence is:

part of an enduring wider continuum of violence against women and girls of all ages that is deeply embedded in a wider context of gendered power relationships and a deeply rooted notion amongst many young people – and indeed adults – that girls’ and women’s bodies are somehow the property of boys and men (Beckett and Schubotz, 2014: 442).

Not only is sexual violence commonplace and often normalised, but a national inquiry in the UK found that a ‘coordinated, multi-agency, child-centred approach has been lacking... [and] it is often left to invaluable but stretched voluntary sector providers to coordinate child-centred action (Berelowitz et al., 2013: 21). This report, among others (Jay, 2014; Firmin, 2011), highlights the value of voluntary or third sector services, along with the tenuousness of their existence; a fragility which impacts directly upon the young women using services. This theme will be returned to. Whilst local and national responses are vital, Barnitz (2001: 607) highlights that effectively responding to the sexual exploitation of children requires ‘decision makers at local, state, regional and international levels to prevent, monitor, control and offer comprehensive support services’. Promising practices are therefore of international relevance.

### *Why peer mentoring?*

Whilst the inclusion of clients is ‘one of the central tenets of quality case work’ (Berrick, et al., 2011: 179), the prominence that peer mentoring affords those who

have used services is argued to indicate ‘an important paradigm shift within child welfare that could lead to culture change for the field’ (Berrick et al., 2011: 179). Because peer mentors have made profound changes in their private lives, their perspective on others’ potential for change is argued to be great, as a result, their inclusion in child welfare practice may lead to improved outcomes for children and families as well as a more satisfying experience for clients (Berrick et al., 2011: 191). The value of community-based, peer-led programmes has been documented for a number of marginalised populations (Hotelling, Burris, Johnson, Bird and Melbye, 2004; Berrick et al., 2011; DuBois and Felner, 2016). These include women exiting prostitution, who [like sexually exploited young women] often encounter discrimination, alienation, stigmatization, victim-blaming, and inaccessibility to social services (Hotelling et al., 2004: 255). Hansman (2002) also points to the importance of female-focused mentoring services, arguing that women often encounter discordance in the advice offered to them by male mentors (2002: 44). Mentors are theorised to act as ‘interpreters of the environment’ (Daloz, 1986: 207), helping protégés [or mentees] to understand the culture in which they find themselves (Hansman, 2002: 39). This is important given that many young women who are exploited, normalise and accept their abuse (Berelowitz et al., 2013). Peer mentors can also ‘be instrumental for combating trust issues... and for instilling hope through the example of a positive role model who has overcome similar challenges’ (DuBois and Felner, 2016: 9). Given the promise of mentoring, Beckett and colleagues’ (2013) argue that every gang-affected neighborhood ‘should have trained and supported mentors to support young people... affected by gang-associated sexual violence or exploitation (2013: 8). Similarly, Williams and Frederick (2009: 63) recommend that responses to CSE utilise youth as peer mentors, to help young people avoid and exit exploitation. Despite enthusiasm and some promising messages, ‘research that explicates the mechanisms by which peer mentoring promotes participation... remains in its early stages’ (Rockhill et al., 2015: 126). Dubois and Felner (2016) also point out that whilst ‘mentoring is a theoretically promising form of support’ for sexually exploited young people, ‘direct evidence of the effectiveness of mentoring... is lacking’ (p. 7). There is a particular lack of evidence in relation to peer survivors as mentors (Dubois and Felner, 2016: 12). It is our hope that this research begins to address this gap.

## **Aims, objectives, and methodology**

This study aimed to give voice to young women using a peer mentoring service and gather evidence of the impact of the approach. A qualitative design was adopted, in order to explore the meanings that participants themselves attached to mentoring relationships. Mixed methods, including self-completion booklets, interviews, and a focus group were employed. These were decided upon through scoping conversations with peer mentors, who advised which methods young people might find most accessible. Booklets were designed to be visually appealing in colour and design (Lampard and Pole, 2015: 106) and included six open questions:

1. What happens in peer mentoring and why?
2. What problems does it help with?
3. What are the most important things to say about mentoring?
4. Where would you be without peer mentoring?
5. What is needed to make mentoring better?
6. What is needed to make other services you work with better?

Mentees who expressed an interest were given a choice of completing the booklet and/or speaking to a researcher. As many mentees are habitually missing from home or care settings, large numbers could not be reached, or understandably, were not prioritising participation in research. In total, four mentees chose to complete a booklet *and* to be interviewed, four chose just to complete the booklet, and three chose just to be interviewed. The study, therefore, gathered data from eleven mentees, who were aged between 12 and 18.

Three peer mentors also took part in a focus group, which explored the needs of young people from mentors' perspectives. Researchers used the following four prompts, supplemented with clarity questions: *What is peer mentoring? Who is affected? What is happening to the young people you work with and why? What is needed to improve things for the young people you work with?* Mentors at MAV are paid employees, to acknowledge the value of the experience they bring. All employees were proactively recruited by the manager, who is a member of the multi-agency 'gang management unit' and a local anti-violence campaigner. Mentors were encouraged to apply for positions if they demonstrated potential in empowerment courses run by MAV, or where they were recommended to the manager given their

status as survivors who wanted to help others. All mentors received training in mentoring and child safeguarding, and reflective supervision after visits to ‘offload’ and reflect with colleagues and the manager. Supervision was described as an activity to check mentor and mentee wellbeing and to identify any concerns that needed further action. Mentors were aged between 23 and 30, all lived in the locality that they were working within and considered that they had valuable ‘local knowledge’, they also all had direct or peripheral experiences of serious youth violence or exploitation.

The research employed ‘availability sampling’ (Monette, Sullivan and DeJong, 2014), relying on mentees who were available within the project. The first approach was made by mentors who distributed information sheets and consent forms. This was designed to maintain privacy in case mentees wished not to take part. The research was carried out by two university-based researchers. MAV’s manager later worked with these researchers to develop the findings into this journal article, but she did not collate or analyze any primary data, in order to separate her own perceptions from those of young people taking part.

Analysis of the data involved thematic analysis, which comprises the identification of common themes (King and Horrocks, 2010), along with elements of Gilligan’s listening guide method (Kiegelmann, 2009). Gilligan’s technique includes the creation of ‘I poems’, by taking ‘each I phrase... that occurs [in data] and listing them in sequence (“I want, I know...”)’ (Kiegelmann, 2009: 39). Gilligan argues these poems can ‘often prove to be remarkably revealing... capturing what people know about themselves, often without being aware of communicating it’ (2009: 39). Themes presented in the findings section were identified through a combination of thematic analysis and close reading of ‘I’ poems.

The study design was approved by the research ethics committee at Liverpool John Moores University. Participants were informed of the purposes of the research and the proposed use of research findings. Participation was voluntary and all respondents were informed orally and in writing that they had the right to withdraw from the research at any point and to decline to answer any questions. Participants were advised that their own names would be anonymised in publications to avoid unintended disclosure. If mentees consented to take part, mentors issued the booklets and advised mentees of the dates that researchers would be at the office to collect them. When booklets were returned, researchers verified that mentees understood the

research and were fully consenting. If mentees were more comfortable talking than writing, researchers used the booklet questions as interview prompts.

Research with exploited young people requires an understanding of their complex needs and vulnerabilities. To maintain a duty of care, all participants were issued with helplines if needed. Additionally, all meetings took place at the project office, at the young person's school, or in the presence of a mentor (if requested). This was to ensure young people had familiar support nearby if discussions caused them distress.

As researchers aiming to represent a vulnerable population it was also important that we acknowledged our own positions within the study. 'Reflexivity' is a process that involves re-knowing the self and questioning how we may act to dehumanise and oppress others (McBride, 2017: 86). Both researchers are white women, employed by a university. The manager of the project and the mentors are all black or mixed ethnicity women, employed by a local housing provider. The mentees are all young people from a range of ethnic backgrounds and were living predominantly in inner city areas. Whilst we agree with Brown and Strega (2005: 147) that positionality is not fixed, rather we are situated in relation to multiple communities, we considered that reflections on our own positions provided vital context. In addition to reflecting openly about our differences, we created spaces where the analysts' perspectives could 'come into view' and where the meaning of events for individuals involved could be explored (Kohler Riessman, 2013: 181 – 182). The preliminary findings, along with complete 'I poems' were presented to mentors and mentees in a written report and spoken seminar. These activities created forms of 'member checking' wherein participants were invited to comment on the accuracy of the research in an effort to ensure their 'subjective realities are revealed as adequately as possible' (Rubin and Babbie, 2010: 232).

In terms of promoting trustworthiness, researchers created an 'audit trail' (Padgett, 2008: 191), documenting each step in the data collection and analysis process. A shared, password protected folder was created, by both primary researchers, this contained interview guides; anonymised transcripts and 'I poems'; along with copies of information sheets and consent forms. Signed forms containing personal data were kept in a separate, secure folder.

## **Findings**

This section will highlight the multiple vulnerabilities of mentees, as outlined by mentees and mentors, before revealing the elements of mentoring that were most valued by mentees, these include mentors as a point of connection; the approach to working; and reduced invisibility.

### *Multiple vulnerabilities*

The varied and complex nature of needs that mentees presented with was striking. Mentors described young people being ‘groomed’; involved with ‘older guys online’ and at parties involving drugs; exclusions from school; living in care; involved with child protection; financially unstable; struggling with self-esteem, bullying, self-harm and ‘loved ones in prison’. These vulnerabilities, which were also described by mentees, match many of the characteristics of young people in large scale exploitation inquiries (Jay, 2014). Mentors recognised the importance of addressing these factors in order to prevent an escalation of harms. Mentees also told us that without mentoring, these difficulties would impress upon them more deeply. For example, in answer to the question: *where would you be without mentoring?* Young people responded:

In a very dark place, lonely, scared to go out, alone with my thoughts, less confident, feeling anxious, upset (Izabela, mentee).

Dead, homeless, no self-esteem (Alicia, mentee).

Peer mentoring, in contrast, *reaches* young people, as indicated by these ‘I’ poems:

I love mentoring because it helps me and  
I enjoy spending time with (mentor)  
I would be a low life,  
I will be in trouble, end up getting locked up, hang with the wrong people,  
I love it  
I just love every bit of it... (Lexi, mentee)

I wouldn’t be in school, be sat at home doing nothing,

I like it how it is... (Ellie, mentee)

I think because they come out to the house, so are on the child's territory,  
I'm happy with the service (Izabela, mentee).

These young people enjoyed their time with mentors, valuing the fact that the work took place in their communities. Indeed, it was a specific recommendation of the Rotherham CSE inquiry that staff should make efforts to restore *outreach* work (Jay, 2014: 117; emphasis added). Clearly, MAV reaches vulnerable young people and their approach was valued by mentees. The article will now focus on *why* the approach was valued, with a particular focus upon mentors as a point of connection; the approach to working; and reducing invisibility.

#### *Mentors as a point of connection*

I'll listen to her where I wouldn't listen to others (Lorna, mentee)

Many mentees explained that they could speak to mentors about things they couldn't speak to others about – that they *connected* with them. This connection was based on two elements (i) mentors were from the local area and understood the presenting problems and (ii) mentors were less authoritarian in their approach than other workers.

##### *(i) Local knowledge:*

She's a young person turning into an adult, she shares her own self, knows what it's like in this area. She understands more than others, we have a connection... Someone not from here wouldn't connect with me (Lauryn, mentee).

She lives near me, we know the same people... and situations. She says: 'I get it'. Usually, I have to explain to people – to other services – they can't understand... She's experienced the same stuff we've experienced. For example, if I say: 'I'm going to this place', she says: 'Don't go! Or go with someone', she knows the risks (Yasmin, mentee).

Mentees value how mentors share their ‘self’ and their lived understandings and how they have important local knowledge, which can keep them safe. Their narratives illustrate the importance of women affected by gang violence becoming empowered to act as local advisors (Firmin, 2011). They also echo some of the benefits reported in criminal justice settings. *The Princes Trust*, for example, found that peer mentors’ personal insight makes it easier for young people to bond with mentors (Princes Trust, 2012: 1). Devilly, Sorbello, Eccleston, and Ward (2005: 223) found that peers have ‘specific knowledge about risk behaviour’ and realistic strategies to reduce risks. Correspondingly, both mentees speaking above appear to bond with their mentors on the basis of their experiential expertise. Their mentors’ advice is deemed more credible as it is based upon personal knowledge of risks and realistic strategies.

*(ii) Less authoritarian*

Mentees also consistently highlighted the importance of mentors who were less formal or authoritarian in approach:

They’re different than most workers because they’re your friend... they’re sisterly (Monica, mentee).

They’re a friend, not there to judge... CAMHS [Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service] feel more professional (pulls dissatisfied face), not comfortable (Lorna, mentee).

On a friend level, not hard to speak to... free 24/7 to [text] message (Yasmin, mentee).

These mentees describe experiences of equity. Mentors are perceived as like ‘friends’ or sisters, resulting in feelings of ease. Mentors, correspondingly, described themselves as ‘big sisters’. These are not relationships in which young people are judged, or subjected to rigid boundaries. Mentees value support offered outside of normal working hours and through text messages, such informal approaches potentially allow more trusting and open exchanges. Mentees communicate a desire for relationships where personal experiences can be explored with less judgement and

adverse consequences. This is particularly important given the prevalence of judgement and blame that exploited young people experience, and the detrimental impact of such responses (Jay, 2014; Beckett et al., 2013).

### *The approach to working*

In addition to mutual recognition, mentees highlighted two important approaches that mentors employ in their practice: an investment of time, and individualised support.

#### *(i) An investment of time.*

It was striking to hear (and observe) how much time mentors spent with their mentees. This is a key feature of mentoring, as time is a resource which big systems no longer have. Rather ‘the contacts between [professionals] and their clients are likely to be brief and episodic’ (Brown and Ross, 2010: 32). Such an investment was also a specific recommendation of Jay’s inquiry into CSE (2014: 188):

Once a child is affected by CSE, he or she is likely to require support and therapeutic intervention for an extended period of time. Children should not be offered short-term intervention only, and cases should not be closed prematurely.

Time was also clearly valued by mentees:

She prepared me for normal teenage things, she took me skating, went to Café’s, Subway, makes me feel more sociable (Lorna, mentee).

They build the relationship slowly, most people put pressure on, they don’t, if you want to you can (Monica, mentee).

Slow by slow, build your self-esteem. See what’s good in you then others do too (Yasmin, mentee).

Young people are given time through extended activities *and* by working at their own pace. This relaxed, non-pressured, often social approach allows trust and confidence to grow. It also has benefits in terms of helping young people to have fun, to feel

‘normal’ or included, and to improve their social skills, providing what Dubois and Felner (2016) have termed “normative social capital” (p.13). Such activities additionally provide a diversion from personal problems:

We do activities which are fun and help me to forget about any worries I have, for example, going bowling (Lizzie, Mentee).

This gentle, informal, leisure based approach takes time, yet it builds a positive sense of self and connects mentees with safe relationships in safe settings. Mentors offer acceptance and fun, providing an escape, whilst nurturing a new sense of belonging. This is a crucial dynamic given many young people at risk of CSE, had a low self-image (Clutton and Coles, 2007). Despite the evident value of investing time, this feature will also later be examined as a challenge of the work.

#### *(ii) Individualised support*

Another clear theme was that activities and interventions varied, dependent on the needs of the individual:

They ask what *you* want to do – send a message before and give you options... they listen to young people’s voices and find a way to help (Lizzie, mentee).

Nothing was too much trouble – she [mentor] learned her [mentee’s] interests and came back with pictures of nature, fashion, they made collages. It was lovely that she picked all that up straight away (Mentee’s parent).

Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states that children have a right to be listened to and to be taken seriously, yet all too often young people who have been exploited describe feeling unheard (Beckett et al., 2013) and lack confidence that services will respond appropriately to them (Firmin, 2011). In contrast, mentees here described how their voices and interests were central to the relationship. Mentees clearly felt listened to in mentoring exchanges, which enabled them to talk: ‘someone to talk to... I can just get on the phone, she’s always there. Text. Meet every week’ (Lizzie, mentee). The following ‘I poem’ elaborates on *why* listening is so important:

I don't think I'd be able to manage without talking to a person,  
I'd be stuck at home doing nothing, worrying about what will happen next,  
I'm OK now  
I've got [mentor] to speak to and share emotions and express myself,  
I wouldn't have done that without her (Lauryn, mentee).

Listening then is an intervention in itself. It allows young people to explore complex problems from their own side and to learn to 'manage'. It also enables mentors to meet specific emotional needs:

They release your stress away... like kickboxing, but without the fighting!  
(Monica, Mentee).

It relaxes me, especially when I'm feeling angry, mentoring has helped me overall, at college and home I'm calmer... They listen, find a way to help with certain situations (Lizzie, mentee).

Mentors provide release when young people feel angry or stressed. This is significant given Clutton and Coles (2007) finding, that 80% of those at significant risk of CSE had expressed despair including self-harm and aggression. In contrast, the MAV mentees utilise mentors to release stress and control anger, providing a protective factor against turning these emotions upon themselves or others.

### *Reducing invisibility*

A final important finding was that peer mentoring potentially reduces the invisibility of vulnerable populations. This feature was two-fold in that mentors reduce individual isolation and reach a hidden population.

#### *(i) Reducing individual isolation*

Mentees often described a shift in their personal circumstances since having a mentor, they moved from being isolated to feel connected to others:

It helps with people feeling alone and needing someone to talk to... helps children like me understand there is adults and people around them that can help them (Lauryn, mentee).

Making the child feel they are not alone... [Without them I would be] lonely, more scared to go out, alone with my thoughts (Izabela, mentee).

There is a strong sense that mentoring builds personal supports and socialises young people to accept help. This is an important protective feature given that many young people at risk of CSE were isolated from peers and family (Clutton and Coles, 2007). Indeed this is something young people would like to develop further, as will be discussed in the recommendations.

*(ii) Reaching a hidden population*

Another striking feature at MAV was that all of the mentors and many mentees are from Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) backgrounds. Figure 2 details the statistics collected by MAV to capture the ethnicity of their mentees:

Ethnicity	Number of Mentees	% (rounded)
White/ White British	34	60
Black/ Black British	9	16
Mixed ethnicity	11	19
Asian/ Asian British	1	2
Not declared	2	3
<i>Totals</i>	<i>57</i>	<i>100</i>

*Table 1: Ethnicity of mentees at MAV.*

Despite evidence of BAME victims of CSE being ignored, due to the prevailing myth that only white girls are exploited (Berelowitz et al., 2013: 56), at least 37% of MAV service users were from a BAME background. These numbers are significant. Not only do they support growing evidence of a higher rate of victimization amongst BAME young people than has been previously identified (Berelowitz et al., 2012: 14),

they also indicate that MAV reaches a too often hidden (or missed) population. The fact that all three of the mentors we met at MAV are from a BAME background corresponds with Jay's (2014) recommendation that there should be more frequent engagement with people from minority ethnic communities on the issue of CSE. Correspondingly, it supports the principle that those with direct experience of inequality should be central to solutions to address it (Firmin, 2011: 3). The visibility of young black mentors at 'MAV' also helps to counter negative representations of black young people in 'gang' discourses (see, for example, Smithson, Ralphs and Williams' (2013) critique of the disproportionate targeting and labelling of young ethnic minority males). Here, in contrast, young black people represent a key part of the solution, they are positioned as leaders, role models, and problem-solvers.

### **Ideas from young people**

A central aim of this research was to include the voices of young people. A key recommendation *they* made was to broaden support structures during and post mentoring:

Create a special group of kids who need support or help... Get kids together to start thinking about education and what to do, especially the boys – some need more understanding of relationships (Lauryn, Mentee).

Group activities, not just your mentor and yourself, workshops with other young people. We could use the local youth zone, they have a big space. Going the cinema with others, going the beach in summer... Young people could come up with... anger management, peer pressure, maybe five different workshops, ideas how to improve and then give feedback. Even if young people don't speak, you're still learning how to deal with things. Using skills young people already have (Lizzie, mentee).

Group events, just to listen to others, even if you didn't want to talk, could just listen and learn from others... Also, work with the whole family... And create a website, and a phone line, where the number is always active – someone will pick up anytime (Yasmin, mentee).

Young people recognised the value of building connections within their own peer groups and stronger relationships with their families. Such work could be facilitated by mentors in order to build upon mentees' own ideas and resources. Billingham (2015), for example, argues that 'when there are skilled facilitators in place and where the group environment is seen as a safe and respectful space, difficult conversations can take place and young people can safely navigate through these risks' (summarized by Cody, 2015: 3). Carefully managed group work approaches have the potential to build capacity within young people's existing networks and may also reduce the dependence of mentees on individual mentors. Similarly, work with family groups would allow mentors to build resilience within young people's own networks. Family work is additionally important given that 'Sisters, cousins, aunts, mothers and grandmothers' are all at risk of victimization in the context of serious youth and gang violence (Firmin, 2011: 34). MAV do already offer informal support to parents and carers, as observed during this study, the recommendations here are that such practice is formalised and communicated as an option should young people want it.

### **Acknowledging Challenges**

There were a number of challenges and dilemmas facing MAV that are important to consider in order to develop positive practices. Firstly, like many third sector organisations, MAV operates within an insecure funding environment. At the fieldwork stage, their funding grant was coming to an end and whilst new bids had been made, it was not clear how the project would continue to be funded. This tenuousness reflects the concern of Berelowitz and colleagues (2013: 31) regarding reductions to voluntary sector grants and the resulting losses of service. A lack of stable funding also limits the potential for long term work. Grossman and Rhodes (2002), undertook a large-scale randomized study of mentoring services in the United States. They found that young people 'in relationships that lasted a year or longer reported improvements in academic, psychosocial, and behavioral outcomes' whilst fewer effects emerged for those in relationships of less than one year (p. 213). Short term support which 'closes prematurely' can have a detrimental effect on service users including drops in self-worth and perceived scholastic competence (Grossman and Rhodes, 2002: 213), along with risks not being adequately addressed (Jay, 2014:

48). This links directly to the second major challenge facing MAV. Whilst it is clearly considered a strength that mentors 'go the extra mile', are available by text '24/7' and occasionally support young people in crisis at the weekend, this can create an unsustainable level of dependency. For example, one young person expressed anger and loss when her mentor left the project unexpectedly. Others worried about the service closing:

It's really important to me. I don't want her to stop... We've not spoke about ending – maybe in the summer holidays. I've got my GCSE's [examinations] coming up – I don't know how I'm going to cope (Lorna, mentee)

They are really helpful and you can talk to them about anything... I need a longer period of time (Joy, mentee).

Anxieties about mentoring relationships ending indicate that whilst mentoring relationships have protective features, they can also leave young people vulnerable when they (whatever the reason) end. Asked what would happen if funding ceases, mentors stated that they would continue supporting young people on a voluntary basis. Whilst this is commendable and reflects the commitment of these mentors, it leaves them vulnerable to offering demanding emotional support without formal support for themselves. In turn, mentees would be left without the stability and protection of a managed, accountable project. Young women who have been sexually exploited may need years of support to help them recover and ideally need long-term, sustainably funded projects – in the absence of this security, however, we suggest that mentees need to know how to cope when the end of the relationship nears. Indeed mentees themselves have some ideas for how to safeguard against over-reliance on one mentor, which will be discussed below.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

It is important to re-state that MAV was highly valued by mentees in this study. Young people using the service have experienced complex and multiple vulnerabilities, yet they described their mentoring as an escape from these experiences and the accompanying emotions. Mentoring appeared to meet their needs

to talk, to share, to be understood, to have a gentle response, to be nurtured in social activities, to have fun, to be seen as individuals and to not be judged, but to experience caring relationships. On a broader level, MAV reaches young women from hidden populations, who are often missing from, or missed by, support services.

The article now closes with some recommendations, which may help in the development of peer-led services moving forward. These suggestions utilise the ideas of young people and are supplemented with findings and observations of our own. Firstly, it is recommended that projects place young people with experiences of CSE at the centre of their practices. This could include identifying, training and supporting young people who have survived such experiences to become mentors, as is the case here; creating a young person's advisory panel; or holding consultation events. Such forums may explore young people's experiences of services – reflecting on what works well and what could improve, in order to shape service development and staff training in a user-led way. This study indicates that young people have insight and creativity, which can be harnessed to increase their resilience and sense of agency. Their ideas, for example, included mixed gender work in localities; a website; and a 24-hour phone line, all of which would reduce reliance upon individual mentors.

A second recommendation would be to include resource building activities in mentoring work. Young people requested group activities and family support work. They offered workable suggestions such as themed groups co-designed with mentees, group outings, and group education sessions focused upon healthy relationships. These activities are not only desired but invest in young people's social supports, which has the potential to build resilience post mentoring.

A third recommendation is that projects recruit multi-professional advisory panels. Mentors and mentees persistently communicated frustration with other services. Whilst some of these frustrations were based upon a lack of resources available, there was also a sense that other services took a fundamentally different approach to their work, which was at odds with the mentoring approach. An advisory panel, comprised of colleagues from key partner services (such as police, social services, and mental health services), could potentially increase understanding on all sides. It may also strengthen mentors' role as 'connectors to the community... the "glue" that helps the youth stay engaged with other services and supports' (Dubois and Felner, 2016: 18). We additionally suggest that mentors and mentees are represented in this group to ensure they are central to the dialogue.

A fourth recommendation is to formalise staff support and development arrangements. Mentors with lived experience are ‘particularly well-suited to serving in this role, provided that they have built up sufficient resiliency and support systems for their own self-care’ (Dubois and Felner, 2016: 17). The mentoring team at MAV presented as cohesive in their values and approach and described their manager as helpful when they were dealing with complexity. To further strengthen mentoring practices and protect the wellbeing of staff, projects could create reflective supervision spaces with other CSE professionals to share good practice and develop working relationships.

We make a concluding recommendation that further research is undertaken into peer mentoring as a response to vulnerable young people. Our own study was largely appreciative in approach – looking to highlight the ways in which needs were met, and could be better met. Future studies could look more closely at the dilemmas and tensions inherent within this work.

This research has highlighted a number of internationally relevant findings. These include the importance of young people with lived experience playing a central role in the design and delivery of community responses to CSE; the important role that peer mentors can play in reaching and engaging hidden populations; the value of community or third sector contributions; and the need for such organisations to work closely with (and be supported by) formal partners and funders to ensure continuity of provision. Whilst there is clear potential for harnessing mentors with lived experiences in this field, research is needed nationally and internationally to explore the extent to which the strengths within this model transfer to different cultural settings. In order to facilitate this work, international networks of stakeholders and researchers should place emphasis on collaborative spaces where all those involved can share approaches, experiences and develop practice.

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