

## Race and Youth Policy: working with young people



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This OpenLearn course is a sample of formal OU study and is an adapted extract from the qualification BA (Honours) *Childhood and Youth Studies*

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# Introduction

Policy is constantly changing, not simply through the actions of governments but also through changes in the wider society. This course presents youth policy as both shaping and reflecting our sense of priorities, values and expectations about the future lives of young people.

This course will discuss the ways in which Black and Muslim Asian young people have been problematised via social policy since the early 2000s.

Policy formulation can be viewed as a governmental driven response and/or solution to a perceived social problem. Since 1945, UK policy-makers have devised cost-effective strategies for ensuring that the majority of young people make a trouble-free transition into adulthood. However, not all children are born equally and many also face discrimination, or multiple forms of discrimination, due to their class, gender and/or race which can impact on their future educational and employment life-course opportunities.



Between 2010/11 and 2018/19 there has been almost a billion pounds of funding cuts to youth services, some areas in England and Wales now have no funding (YMCA, 2020). Youth transitions are longer, less stable – due to loss of traditional labour market and reforms in further and higher education – and less predictable than they were in the past, particularly for young people who are less successful in school.

[Click here for a discussion about why we need a cross sector recovery strategy to secure young people's futures.](#) (Remember to right-click and open the link in a new tab or window so you can return to the course when you are ready.)

These cuts disproportionately impact on disadvantaged Black and Asian young people, i.e. those who may potentially need support the most. The government funding that is available for youth provision in poor urban neighbourhoods is primarily for tackling gang violence and preventing terrorism. The gang agenda and prevent perspectives locate Black and Muslim Asian young people as the problem, but fails to address key societal issues such as poverty, discrimination, and a lack of meaningful educational and employment opportunities (Gunter, 2017).

Hine (2009, p. 37) argues that social policy towards young people reinforces this 'distorted and often negative view of young people's lives'. She says that it is time for a different approach, one which is based on understanding the lived experiences of young people, and acknowledging the structural and social changes they are contending with. She urges everyone working with young people – policymakers, researchers and practitioners – to



see young people 'in the round', rather than as a collection of deficits; to seek ways of building on their strengths to help them navigate an increasingly complex world.

The racialisation of social policy around knife crime, gang violence, and terrorism demonstrates how policy isn't neutral; rather it can feed into longstanding issues of racial inequality and injustice. Policy should alleviate social suffering, instead it is making it worse, this can be demonstrated by the disproportionality of Black people who are stopped and searched compared to their white counterparts. According to the Youth Justice Board (2019) Black children aged 10-17 are four times more likely than white children to be arrested, they note that 'what is overwhelmingly clear is that the disproportionate number of Black and Asian children arrested, prosecuted and put into custody is a problem which is getting worse'.

- [Learn more about the overrepresentation of Black young people and the criminal justice system.](#)
- [Find out what Kenechi, 13, and Loren, 18 think about race.](#)

As an introduction to policy, watch Video 1 of Pete Alcock, a Professor of Social Policy at the University of Birmingham, answering the question 'What is social policy?'

### Activity 1: What is social policy?

6 minutes

As you watch the video, make some notes below. Your comments in the boxes are only accessible to you and no one else is able to view this information.

Video content is not available in this format.

[Video 1: Pete Alcock - What is Social Policy?](#)



*Provide your answer...*

#### Discussion

Pete Alcock describes the scope of social policy in very general terms as the ways in which society promotes welfare and wellbeing in the population. Studying social policy usually means looking at particular aspects, for example health or education. Note how he does not take either of these as 'givens': health and education can be understood very differently by different people or by different governments. As Alcock puts this, much depends on 'how we define it, how we promote it.'

He draws attention to the fact that social policy is not simply defined or implemented by governments, but also depends on a range of voluntary and community organisations and the informal relationships between people. This idea that policy is not simply a top-down process in which governments design and deliver policy solutions to social problems will be revisited throughout this course.

This OpenLearn course is a sample of formal OU study and is an adapted extract from the qualification [BA \(Honours\) Childhood and Youth Studies](#) and the following OU courses:

- [E102: Introduction to childhood studies and child psychology](#)
- [E232: Exploring childhood and youth](#)

# Learning Outcomes

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After studying this course, you should be able to:

- understand how issues such as knife crime and terrorism inform 'policy' and 'work with young people' practice
- analyse some of the assumptions that underpin youth policy
- evaluate some of the ways in which policy can be interpreted through a racialisation lens
- have greater understanding of how social policy influences working with young people practice.

# 1 What is policy?

Policy is usually understood as 'a course of action' (The Chambers Dictionary, 1998) in relation to:

- a. an individual and the general rules of conduct a person chooses to live by
- b. a family group and the habits, traditions and rules through which it tries to structure and control the behaviour of individuals within it
- c. an organisation and how it sets out its goals, strategies and values
- d. a nation state and the way it describes its priorities for government and its expectations for its population.

Whenever policy is articulated, it tells you a lot about priorities in terms of what really matters to the government at this time, as well as importantly what, and who, doesn't matter.

Policy both constructs and reflects a view of young people: what they are like; what their interests and concerns are; how best to intervene in their lives to help them become adult citizens. This section looks at this relationship between policy towards young people and knowledge about young people, and at how each influences the other.

As discussed earlier, the term 'youth' was a valuable political ideological tool that identified a social problem and provided a focus for reports, legislation and sanction. However, the term has become linked with negative aspects of young people, such as criminal and violence, so that when these issues are raised it is frequently young people that come to mind rather than the adults who are the perpetrators of most crime and violence.

## Activity 2: What do we mean by policy?

30 minutes

Identify a policy statement at each of the following four levels.

- Individual
- Family
- Organisation
- **Nation state**

For example, at an individual level, it might be a plan to cycle to work at least once a week. At an organisational level, it might be to ensure that all staff are provided with private health insurance.

Having identified two policy plans, write a few sentences which describe the priority being addressed, the values which underpin the policy, and the expectations of those who made the policy.

*Provide your answer...*



### Discussion

This activity is intended to help you think about the nature of policy as a means of framing rules of conduct or priorities for action which govern the way people live and work. These are grounded in beliefs, values and expectations which might not always be obvious.

So a person who is determined to cycle to work more often might be acting on an intention to reduce their carbon footprint, or improve their health and sense of wellbeing, or both. Prioritising this intention might be caused by the growing evidence for climate change, or an uncomfortable conversation with the doctor about the importance of weight loss. In either case, his beliefs are influenced by the people around him, by what is being said or written about pollution or health. These influences help to shape his expectations that, through cycling, he can contribute to a cleaner planet or a healthier person.

The organisation that decides to consult with young people before making spending decisions might be acting on the belief that only by involving young people in real decisions can they feel a sense of belonging to or ownership of the services being provided. The organisation might also be motivated by the fact that its funding is directly linked to the existence of mechanisms for consulting young people.

The quality of the consultation process will probably be strongly influenced by the extent to which this is a matter of principle which runs right through the organisation's processes and procedures, or a pragmatic and tokenistic response to funding requirements. In either case, implementation of the policy will involve making difficult decisions about who will be consulted, how often, and how conflicts of interest will be resolved.

Policy is analysed in an attempt to expose those priorities, values, expectations and potential conflicts which lie behind policy statements.

The key questions to ask are as follows.

- What is the motivation behind this policy?
- What is it trying to achieve?

## 2 How does policy work?

... a strategy implemented by public authorities to provide young people with opportunities and experiences that support their successful integration into society and enable them to be active and responsible members of society and agents of change.

([Council of Europe CM/Rec\(2015\)3](#))

Policy is often considered in terms of a series of directives to be followed or instructions to be carried out; an authoritarian, top-down way of governing conduct; directed 'at' and 'for' people. But to be successful – that is, to be accepted and implemented – policy must also work 'with' people, appealing to the values which they hold and the expectations they have for the future. It must win at least the tacit support of others. Davies describes the process of policy formulation in terms of 'negotiation' which is:

particularly focused on and shaped by the *values* of those involved – by what they see as right and wrong, good and bad.

Davies (2010, p. 9)

Now watch this video about the essentials of youth policy.

Video content is not available in this format.

[Video 2: Introduction to youth policy](#)



So, while policy statements represent the views of the people who hold power, in framing policy, its makers are anxious to carry others with them; to persuade less powerful people to accept the assumptions and the prescriptions of the policy direction. Strategies for

achieving this often appeal either to people's aspirations for a better future, or their fears and anxieties about all that is wrong in the present.

Policy documents often look like rational and universal statements which no sane person could easily disagree with; for example, that young people should have rich and fulfilling lives and be allowed to achieve their full potential. However, they only make sense when understood in the historical, social, political and economic context in which they have been formed.

[Find out more about the eight standards for a quality youth policy here.](#) (Remember to right-click and open the link in a new tab or window so you can return to the course when you are ready.)

Youth policy should reflect the society which it seeks to serve, young people regularly experience discrimination and labelling simply for being young. This is further compounded by intersectionality such issues of classism, racism and sexism. According to Wanda Wyporska the Executive Director of the Equality Trust:

Divides in society are intersectional in themselves and there is a need to address them or we risk seeing a more divided country, and, as such, we will not achieve gender pay equality.

appg (2019, p. 4)

The Council of Europe (2021) suggest a consideration of the following in relation to the importance of intersectionality:

- What are the experiences, examples and expectations from the youth field in applying the theoretical frameworks of intersectionality into practice (youth work, youth policy, training, research)?
- What kind of educational activities, tools and approaches on the basis of intersectionality can be applied in youth work and training in the youth field?
- What can youth organisations, youth workers, trainers, researchers and policy makers do to secure that the intersectional approach is applied in their work?
- How can youth organisations and other stakeholders communicate and cooperate about intersectionality?

[Find out more about intersectionality from the Open University's Professor Ann Pheonix.](#)

### Activity 3: Representations of young people

1 hour

Look at one of the programmes or initiatives run by your organisation and try to answer the following questions. If this doesn't apply to you, have a look online. Some organisations will put their programmes and initiatives on their website.

- What understandings does this programme convey about what young people are like, what their interests and concerns are, and how best to intervene in their lives to help them become adult citizens?
- In what ways do these understandings reflect current policies towards young people?
- In what ways do these ideas about young people influence the practices of the organisation?

You might want to discuss these questions with other people to see how far you share the same views. You may wish to note down your thoughts in the free response box below, outlining the programme you have identified and giving your answers to the questions. Include any significant differences of opinion which emerged from talking to other people. (Remember, your comments in the boxes are only accessible to you and noone else is able to view this information.)

*Provide your answer...*

### Discussion

This activity is intended to help you think about some of the assumptions about young people which are embedded in policies at national and organisational levels, and to see how these can influence practice. When looking at policy, it is important to ask yourself what are the conceptions of young people on which this policy is based?

## 3 Themes of race and risk within youth policy

A major policy theme over the past decade during the period of the coalition government has been the focus on so-called 'gangs', thus highlighting the relationship between race, policy and injustice. Smithson and Flint argue that:

The governance of young people's behaviour through the imposition of increasingly punitive measures needs to be viewed in terms of the messages they send out about young people by increasing fear and intolerance and also the degenerative effect they have on relations between young people and those organisations [which] seek to control them.  
Smithson and Flint (2006, p. 36)

Analysis of youth policy and its growing preoccupation with risk helps in seeing the close relationship between our understandings of young people and their lives, and the priorities of policies directed towards them. Usually, these initiatives seem to involve persuading young people to improve their ability to overcome the risks through education and training, or constraining them through the criminal justice system when these fail.

Young men, particularly those from a Black or Asian background are viewed as high risk groups, and via youth policy is articulated through the gang and Prevent agendas. Prevent was first launched in the UK in 2003 as governmental response to the 9/11 Twin Towers terrorism attack in the USA. It is viewed by many as a vehicle to justify the surveillance of Muslim people, particularly young Asian men, and has resulted in negatively labelling Muslim Asian youth as a 'problem'.

Interactive content is not available in this format.



[Find out more](#) about how the Prevent strategy resulted in a thirteen year old boy being asked if he was affiliated to the jihadist group Islamic State.

### 3.1 Gang agenda

In terms of the gang agenda, Gunter has voiced his scepticism about the tenuous causal links being made between gangs and gun and knife crime, whereby any events which occur in poor, urban environments are regarded as a consequence of gangs:

Since the mid 2000s the UK has witnessed a worrying and increasing number of anti gang laws and policies including: gang injunctions for 14–17 year olds, joint enterprise, specialist gang policing units, gang profiling databases/matrices, and minimum mandatory sentence for possession of a knife or offensive weapon by a 16 or 17 year old in public or on school premises.  
Gunter (2017, p. 208)

For Gunter, this focus on gangs is not a race neutral one and constitutes a 'racialised gang crisis', with youth policy clearly contributing to this set of processes. This is evident via the over representation of certain ethnic groups in stop and search figures, the media fascination with gangs and the police's over-zealous interventions including the MPS Gangs Violence Matrix. This is a means of categorising and labelling gang members, many of whom do not know they are on the database. As noted by Patrick Williams and Becky Clarke:

It is clear that the gang label is disproportionately attributed to **BAME** people, when compared to both the size of the BAME populations within each of the cities presented and the numbers of white British people flagged or registered as involved with gangs... Yet, the gang databases created by such police units have a policy and operational significance that develops over time, potentially failing to respond to the changing nature of the defined problem.

Patrick Williams and Becky Clarke (2016, p. 10)

One of the biggest concerns about such databases then is the racial disproportionality of those being recorded as gang members with the breakdown as follows: (Met Police, 2021)

- White European: 242
- Dark European: 66
- African Caribbean: 1943
- Asian: 125
- Arabian/Egyptian: 56
- Not recorded: 12

According to these figures four out of five gang members have an African Caribbean background which is extremely disproportional compared to population figures for this group. This also correlates with the high numbers of African Caribbean children who are routinely excluded from schools. As noted by Gunter (2017), in the UK there are more African Caribbean young men in prison and young offenders' institutions than at university.

[Learn more about race and social policy.](#)



## 4 Government responses to the London riots 2011

Ex-Prime Minister David Cameron's contrasting paragraphs below reproduce a well established dichotomous discourse of young people as angels or devils, citizens or troublemakers. The first group are presented as trainee members of the Big Society, caring and willing to take action but preferably on uncontroversial causes such as recycling and non-specific poverty. The second group are at first merely lost and directionless, but the word 'so' implies that this leads inevitably to gangs, vandalism, drinking and drugs (de St Croix, 2011, p. 49–50).

The young of this country are as passionate and idealistic as any before. Perhaps more passionate. They march against poverty, they set up online campaigns, they push their parents to recycle and they care deeply about climate change.

But too many of our young people appear lost. Their lives lack shape or any sense of direction. So they take out their frustrations and boredom on the world around them. They get involved with gangs. They smash up the neighbourhood. They turn to drink and drugs.  
Conservative Party (2010, p. 1)

While race isn't mentioned specifically above, gang discourses are rooted in racial discrimination and contentious stereotypes, so race is implicit rather than explicit in these comments. During this period it was also claimed that gangs were responsible for the bulk of the organisation and looting during the London riots in 2011. Prior to these events the media had increasingly presented sensational headlines about gun and knife crime which have been assumed to be gang-related, and the riots became a 'watershed moment' for the Cameron-Clegg administration' (Gunter, 2017, p. 49). Cameron declared war against gangs, describing them as:

Territorial, hierarchical and incredibly violent...They earn money through crime, particularly drugs and are bound by an imposed loyalty to an authoritarian gang leader. They have blighted life on their estates with gang-on-gang murders and unprovoked attacks on innocent bystanders.

Cameron (2011)

This claim was challenged as false by the **LSE** (2011), thus illustrating how young people continue to be used as scapegoats by the state to overshadow wider societal problems. According to Jasbinder Nijjar:

The LSE and The Guardian, as part of a joint study, interviewed some of those involved in the unrest. Their research found that frustration towards the police, government spending cuts (most notably the scrapping of the education maintenance allowance) and the shooting of Mark Duggan were significant factors in motivating people to participate in the disorder.

Jasbinder Nijjar (2015, p. 7)

In response to the riots Cameron (2011) promised a 'concerted, all-out war on gangs and gang culture' for what has become a national priority to tackle the 'major criminal disease that has infected streets and estates across our country'. The Daily Mail (2011) meanwhile reported after the riots that British youth were the 'most unpleasant and violent in the world'. Pearson on the other hand has surmised the response to the London riots as a dead-end discourse:

While the riots of 2011 announced a new chapter in violent youth disorder. Britain was already in the thick of a moral panic concerning its young people...Indeed, when interviewed about youth behaviour during the riots, Kenneth Clarke, the Justice Secretary, said that Britain had cultivated a 'lost generation' of young people. But really this worry was nothing new.

Pearson (2012, p. 45)

Such blame tactics by the government indicate how, and why, the importance of gangs in youth policy continues to be over-estimated by the media and the police. On the back of the 2011 riots, the coalition government launched its Ending Gangs and Youth Violence (EGYV) policy initiative. The EGYV report (HM Government, 2011b, p. 5) claimed that the 'government has already set in motion a number of far-reaching reforms to address the entrenched educational and social failures that can drive problems like gang and youth violence'. Further suggesting that 'welfare reforms will give young people better opportunities to access work and overcome barriers to employment'.

However, coalition claims about addressing the needs of marginalised young people were quickly undermined by fiscal austerity. Since 2010, there have been a raft of cuts which have decimated youth services, according to the YMCA (2020) 760 youth centres and more than 4,500 youth workers have been lost in England and Wales. Kalbir Shukra (2011) predicted a decade ago that the youth service could be the 'first public service to completely disappear'. In comparison, by mid-2015, the coalition government had spent around ten million pounds on its EGYV programme. Since 2016, the policy focus of the gang agenda has shifted to wider concerns about county lines, grooming and exploitation. County lines is defined by HM Government as follows:

...a major, cross-cutting issue involving drugs, violence, gangs, safeguarding, criminal and sexual exploitation, modern slavery, and missing persons; and the response to tackle it involves the police, the National Crime Agency, a wide range of Government departments, local government agencies and VCS (voluntary and community sector) organisations.

HM Government (2018, p. 2)

This new focus gives a much greater role to social workers and police to intervene in lives of young people in order to tackle these issues. According to Kristen Olver & Ella Cockbain (2021), the term 'county lines' may obscure the complexities and harms of criminal exploitation of children and vulnerable adults within a policy as well would likely support investigations and prosecutions.

- [Explore the National Crime Agency's take on county lines and exploitation here.](#)
- [Click here for a discussion about Stopping Knife Crime. Ndidi thinks that Schools cannot be expected to solve Knife Crime.](#)

### Activity 4: Policy priorities

40 minutes

First, identify a priority goal for your organisation.

Then write a paragraph about why you think this is a priority, using the following questions to structure your answer.

- Which words would you use to justify this policy as a priority?
- Which factors have led to this policy becoming a priority?
- Which values lie behind this policy?
- What are the expectations for the future to which this policy appeals?

You might want to discuss these questions with your co-workers or friends to see how they would answer them. Hearing other people's experiences, thoughts and opinions will give you a sense of policy priorities in other organisations, perhaps ones quite different from yours.

*Provide your answer...*

#### Discussion

The aim of this activity is to encourage you to develop a critical approach towards policy statements. This means not taking them at face value, but looking behind the text to ask questions such as:

- Why is this policy being prioritised at this time? What is the 'back story' here?
- What is the ideological motivation for this policy? What is the vision of how society might be which drives this policy?
- How is the persuasive power of this policy established? For example, does it appeal to people's moral sense of how things should be, or to their self-interest in remaining safe and secure?

## 5 Young women and social policy

When it comes to youth policy the rhetoric is firmly rooted in the concern surrounding young men rather than young women. Clare Choak (2021) has highlighted the lack of attention paid to young women in England, and in particular a lack of focus around the intersection of their lives in terms of class, gender and race. This also links to the longstanding issue about 'invisible girls' in youth studies, and also youth policy, as apart from a focus on teen pregnancy they tend to be ignored or side-lined.



However, young women do not escape stigmatisation, as young working class mothers are linked to negative discourses surrounding the ways in which they live their lives. For example, in the 1990s, there was pressure on the UK government to reduce the number of teenage pregnancies as rates were higher than in other European countries. This led to a concerted effort in terms of addressing this 'problem', and in 1999, the Labour government launched a 10-year Teenage Pregnancy Strategy for England to address this, with the goal being to reduce under-18s conceiving by half.

Around this time, young working class mothers became associated stigmatising labels such as 'pramface' which are difficult to escape (Nayak & Kehily, 2014, p. 1330). They suggest that such imagery is an example of demonising the working classes and creating sites of disgust based on ideas of what is respectable and what is not. One of the respondents in Nayak and Kehily's study, Zoe, 17, says she gets 'funny' looks:

Some people look at you funny because you're young and you've got a bump ... two ladies were sitting on the bus the other day talking about how young people were getting pregnant and how it was a disgrace and all this lot! And I wanted to say something, but I couldn't because I didn't want to be rude ... [At the parenting class] some girls cover their bump and some girls don't. I usually do but sometimes my tops do rise and I think that's what they were shocked about 'cos some of my tummy was hanging out.

Zoe, 17 years old (Nayak & Kehily, 2014, p. 1340):

According to Klaudia Kublik, 19, 'there is a lot of stereotyping' around young mothers:

I am training to be a peer educator with a teenage pregnancy charity. I want to show young people what it is really like to be a teenage mum... People think you get a council flat and lots of benefits, but that is just not true. I still live with my family, but as it is a small house the baby's crying wakes everyone up... I'd like to go on to university and be a teaching assistant. There are lots of young women who give up their whole lives when they have a baby... There is a lot of stereotyping that goes on. People who see a pregnant teenage girl think it is a one-night stand, but lots of girls are in relationships.

Klaudia Kublik, 19 years old (Independent, 2010)

Therefore, when thinking about issues of youth policy from an intersectional perspective we can see the ways in which different discourses impact negatively on both young men and young women and how policymakers maintain these stereotypes through the non-neutral presentation of youth policy.

## 6 Policy as discourse

Describing policy as a 'discursive achievement' means that it seeks to establish certain ideas about how society is and how it might be changed for the better. Policy statements work hard to persuade practitioners and the public at large that their analysis of the problem is irrefutable and their prescriptions for change irresistible.

The notion of discourse is helpful in raising awareness of the processes through which changes to the ways of thinking about the work done with young people are mobilised and enacted through language. So 'young people' become established as a category of persons, or 'youth work' is established as a category of activity, which can then be named, investigated, discussed and legislated for. However, these understandings of what it means to be a young person or 'youth' are socially constructed and change according to time and place. The way in which children and young people were seen in pre-industrial societies was quite different from our contemporary understandings.



Foucault (1980) raises our awareness of the close relationship between language and power and the processes through which certain ways of speaking, writing and thinking gain more attention and carry more weight than others. Discourses, then, create conditions which make certain courses of action seem 'natural' or 'inevitable'. They work to 'highlight certain things as "real" problems whilst marginalising others' (Apple, 2006, p. 9).

Discourse is about how meanings are created and sustained to look like common sense interpretations which no right-thinking person would want to argue against.

Discourse provides a tool for analysing policy, allowing the ways in which problems are framed and prescriptions are presented to be scrutinised more closely. This allows attention to be paid, not only to descriptions and the ways in which they construct certain objects as knowable and known, but also the techniques through which certain descriptions are worked up to become more persuasive than others, effectively marginalising or silencing alternative accounts.

The ability to control discourse can be a vital source of power. As Zareen Zaidi and colleagues (2021, p. 74) argue, not only government institutions exert power within society, it is also maintained through individuals – and in terms of racism this comes from 'top down' policies and 'bottom up' from individuals within these systems.

Stephen Ball points to the ways in which discourses embody the effects of power by defining the limits of expression and imagination, as 'discourses are about what can be said and thought, but also about who can speak, when, and with what authority' (Ball, 1990, p. 2). This can be linked to the negative discourses which focus primarily on the underachievement of Black Caribbean boys in schools rather than focusing on



achievement, or to those surrounding young mothers who are claiming benefits. The processes through which meaning is created are not neutral or naturally occurring; rather they are political, contestable and open to critical analysis.

While this might sound like 'Big Brother' – imposing certain ways of speaking, writing and imagining – Foucault saw discourse as not simply dictated by those in power, but as more fluid and dynamic, open to reworking into different meanings which might subvert or resist the original intention. So, while some voices will be more powerful than others at any given moment, there are always spaces for resistance and possibilities for the emergence of new narratives. Meanings, which are often taken for granted, are not fixed but always in flux and open to negotiation. They do potentially open up spaces and possibilities for working with policy, not simply working within policy.

## 7 Policy and the practitioner

Policy is often represented as a process in which those who make policy – for example, national or local government or individual organisations – decide on the overall direction of travel and establish the rules and structures which determine how this should be delivered. Policymakers like to work with metaphors which suggest control: for example, ‘policy levers’ which can be ‘pulled’, or ‘policy mechanisms’ which can be ‘fine-tuned’. These indicate a mechanistic, top-down, transmission model in which the designed intention is realised in practice.

It does not take a very thorough examination of policy initiatives to realise that this is rarely the case; that changes in policy undoubtedly lead to changes in practice, but not always in the ways intended. For example Gus John (2017) argues that there is never a more urgent time for the government to pay attention to youth policy. Practitioners have an important role in shaping, transforming or resisting the innovations and reforms which policy introduces. Andy Rixon argues that youth practitioners are not simply implementers of policy directives; rather, they filter or mediate these through their own sense of what is best for young people:

What practitioners do is mediated through their own beliefs and values. Some will have professional or occupational codes of values or ethics that can give them another source on which to draw in order to be openly critical of the implications of legislation or policy where these are seen to run counter to the interests of young people.

Andy Rixon (2007)

The process of policy implementation might better be understood as a dialogue, in which the intentions of policy makers are translated or mediated by practitioners and the wider public as they move from policy intention to practical application.

When writing about youth work, Jean Spence describes the relationship between policy and practice in the following terms.

Work with young people is shaped by a combination of professional values and purposes, the needs of young people themselves and the imperatives of policy ... but workers interpret policy through the lens of their professional knowledge and their understanding of the young people who come into their sphere of influence.

Jean Spence (2007, p. 287)

Similarly, Hazel Kemshall argues that people in face-to-face contact with service users retain a degree of power through their role as interpreters of policy in practice settings. Note how she uses the image of practitioners acting as a ‘firewall’ between policy and its implementation in practice:

It is also important to recognise that policies are also mediated by the workforces tasked with implementing them. Workers bring their own values and ideologies to bear on policy interpretation and delivery, and in the area of youth policy they may for example present ‘firewalls’ to the direct impact of current policies.

Hazel Kemshall (2009, p. 161)

These studies show that practitioners have a vital role in mediating policy and influencing policy outcomes. They also support Foucault's analysis of discourse as a process of making meaning which is never closed, but always open to contest, resistance and change. Our argument here is that it is only by engaging with policy, and understanding its motivating forces and the strengths and limits of its reach, that practitioners can fully exploit their own power, for influencing the impact of current policy, and perhaps even influencing the formulation of future policy.

[You can find out more about how youth and community work can support the Black Lives Matter movement here.](#)

## 8 Policy into practice

Now watch Video 3, taken from the BBC programme *Subnormal: A British Scandal*. While watching Video 3, consider how these controversial policy practices in the 1960s and beyond negatively impacted young Black children's lives in a range of ways.

Video content is not available in this format.

Video 3: *Subnormal: A British Scandal*



In the next activity, draw on what you have learned about the role of practitioners in implementing policy, in order to reflect on some examples from your own practice.

### Activity 5: Reflecting on your own practice

1 hour

First, think of an example from your practice and write a short account of the policy which this work sprang from, and how you interpreted and mediated it in the context of your own work. How much influence did you feel you had in acting as mediator between policy and practice?

*Provide your answer...*

#### Discussion

Your experience of working within policy is personal to you, and you will have your own views on how far policy directives can be influenced through debate or practices. Keeping up to date with policy change, and engaging with policy discussions and consultations, is not only an essential part of professional practice; it also offers opportunities for influencing the impact and direction of policy.

In the example of the Prevent policy, it is interesting to note that, by 2009, the government had come to recognise that the focus of the initiative needed to be broadened to include extremism in other parts of society besides the Muslim community – see [this article](#).

Malcolm Payne expresses the relationship between government policy and practitioners, and the responsibility this places on practitioners, as follows.

The national state provides a significant mandate for the work, sets its parameters, provides much of the funding and, through its management and accounting mechanisms, a regulatory framework. Local authorities have significant powers too, but are in many ways subservient to an increasingly interventionist national state. The stance that practitioners take in response to this scenario is critical to the practice models which emerge.

Malcolm Payne (2009, p. 216)

## 9 Conclusion

This course reviewed the nature and scope of youth policy through racialised race and crime discourses: what it sets out to do, how it operates; how practitioners can be actively engaged in shaping and influencing it, and challenging it where appropriate.



Now that you have completed the course, you should be able to:

- analyse some of the assumptions that underpin youth policy
- evaluate some of the ways in which policy can be interpreted through a racialisation lens.

You have been presented with policy formulation and delivery as a complex and rather messy process, driven by a multiplicity of factors – economic, political, social and cultural – and both influencing and reflecting the way young people and their wider communities are understood in society. Ultimately, this course has highlighted that policy is never neutral and instead is mediated through discourses and stereotypes of risk, societal threat and/or problems, and race which can serve to stigmatise and label some of the most



marginalised young people in society, rather than support them as they navigate their transitions to adulthood.

This is particularly salient given that the transitions into adulthood in contemporary society have become increasingly complex, whereby unequal starting positions among young people in negotiating them have simultaneously produced greater opportunities for some and increasing social and economic marginalisation for others.

## Where next?

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Below is a list of resources, some of which you came across throughout the course, compiled here in one handy list:

- [Click here for a discussion about why we need a cross sector recovery strategy to secure young people's futures.](#)
- [Learn more about the overrepresentation of Black young people and the criminal justice system.](#)
- [Find out what Kenechi, 13, and Loren, 18 think about race.](#)
- [Follow the UK youth instagram page.](#)
- [Click here to watch a video about the essentials of youth policy.](#)
- [Find out more about the eight standards for a quality youth policy here.](#)
- [Find out more about intersectionality from the Open University's Professor Ann Pheonix.](#)
- [Find out more about how the Prevent strategy resulted in a thirteen year old boy being asked if he was affiliated to the jihadist group Islamic State.](#)
- [Learn more about race and social policy.](#)
- [Explore the National Crime Agency's take on county lines and exploitation here.](#)
- [You can find out more about how youth and community work can support the Black Lives Matter movement here.](#)
- [Guardian article: Government 'Prevent' strategy widened to combat rightwing racism.](#)

Explore the [Race and Ethnicity Hub](#): This hub offers fresh perspectives on race, racism and ethnicity through free courses, articles, interactives and audio/visual materials.

This OpenLearn course is a sample of formal OU study and is an adapted extract from the qualification [BA \(Honours\) Childhood and Youth Studies](#) and the following OU courses:

- [E102: Introduction to childhood studies and child psychology](#)
- [E232: Exploring childhood and youth](#)

## Glossary

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### BAME

Black, Asian And Minority Ethnic. Sometimes referred to as BME, Black and Minority Ethnic.

### LSE

London School of Economics

### Nation state

refers to a country, e.g. UK, France, Nigeria.

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