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# LIVING IT

**CHILDREN, YOUNG PEOPLE AND JUSTICE**

Edited by Claire Lightowler, Susie Cameron and Brian Rogers



# UNDERSTANDING DIVERSITY

A service user from the Youth Community Support Agency talks to lead project worker, **Shoket Aksi**, on behalf of Scottish Justice Matters.

## Tell me about the work of the YCSA.

**SA:** The Youth Community Support Agency is a charitable youth organisation established in 1995 in Glasgow, supporting black and ethnic minority young people enabling them to reach their potential to become active, valued members of the community. Amongst the services currently is literacy, numeracy, youth development, employability support, counselling, Polmont throughcare, mentoring in adult prisons, and drug and alcohol addiction.

## Why does the BME community need specialised support?

**SA:** Within ethnic minority communities, we understand some of the challenges people face. Amongst some of the issues like shame on the family - such a taboo subject, nobody likes to talk about it.

The cultural issues, and at the same time, issues to do with the generation gap are some of the other issues families face. Sometimes there's a lack of communication within the house or between parents and children. Young people are sometimes involved with the gangs, that they're hanging about with the wrong people, end up doing all sorts of things, or it can be simple things such as low self-esteem or other issues they might be challenged with that could cause them to go into prison or through the court process.

## What support does the service provide?

**SA:** The support is a holistic approach.

So any young BME that comes into prison, particularly to Polmont as that's where we're based, we'll pick them up through the prison record system. We'll knock on the door or go visit the young person. Nine out of ten times they'll be happy to engage and even that one who doesn't want to speak to you eventually over time they realise, you know what, from hearing other people - you know, the throughcare officer, "He's all right, maybe I'll have a chat with him".

We understand the difficulties they'll be going through and the difficulties and challenges the family will be going through. We ask questions about goal setting, personal development, any type of support that they need inside and hopefully when they get back out again. We do group work sessions around each of these topics. So, we work with all the prisoners, it doesn't matter the type of offence, how long the sentence is, whether they're remanded or sentenced. We're in there, we'll work with them.

The second part of the work is post liberation. We offer a gate pick up service. We'll continue that support when they're back out. We'll engage with the young person, look back and see what he wanted to do in terms of, is it education? Is it employment? Is it training? So we'll look at that again.



## The YCSA works on behalf of both the young person in custody and their families. Why do you feel it's important to support both?

**SA:** It's crucial; they go hand-in-hand. We're working with a younger group between ages of 16 - 21, so working with the families and working with the young people is important and at the same time when supporting a young person we can see where the young person comes from. Maybe there is a reason why that young person has ended up in prison because of a situation at home. We don't know these things until they explore them.

Some of the difficulties at home are the whole cultural thing in terms of older generation, BME parents. They tend to be very conservative, very reserved and when something like this hits them, it takes quite a bit of time

to get over the initial shock. So supporting them through this journey we give them the tools and the know-how to deal with it, and also how they can support their son. From time to time we've had parents who [say] (going back to that whole thing about being ashamed) that "my son is in prison, I can't see him".

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## We shouldn't think that people who end up in prison should be labelled and I think sometimes BME communities, all communities, are quick to label people

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So in that situation then we can explain to the families what it means and what prison is all about. But within prison, in particular within Polmont, there's many opportunities such as education, there's training, and you're able to pick up certificates while you're there, able to learn a trade. If you simply want to go to the gym and get bigger and fitter there's that opportunity. So there are loads of opportunities for people to take up and you can tell the parents, your son, although he's in prison, he's still got opportunities there.

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## What difficulties and barriers are there in offering specialised support for young BME prisoners and their families in Scotland?

### And what do you feel works well?

**SA:** Some of them are to do with peoples' ideas of what prison's all about. Dealing with people or breaking down barriers that the people who end up in prison are not bad people. We shouldn't think that people who end up in prison should be labelled and I think sometimes BME communities, all communities, are quick to label people. But really it's a case of supporting the families and supporting the prisoners themselves to kind of overlook these barrier and think, don't listen to these people, there's no need. So at YCSA we support them because we understand what prison's all about and we can understand some of the challenges the family go through.

So the specialised support is for us to understand the cultural sensitivity. As well as that the religious aspect can come into it because people from BME communities, the diverse communities, still have some form of faith, be that Christian, Muslim, Sikh, and Hindu, When you're going into families' homes and when you engage with families it's the people who understand, or people who are relevant in terms of who are the right people to do the job.

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## How effective is the work of YCSA to do with the offenders?

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**SA:** I think the work has been quite effective in the sense that we've managed to reduce a reoffending rate particularly within the BME community.

In 2008 my CEO, Umar Ansari, was managing programmes within school and some of the young people they were supporting ended up in Polmont. So Umar used to go as a volunteer with the Imam to just visit. Eventually the numbers grew and they felt that there was the need for a post: that's where I came in, in June 2008.

When I first went into Polmont young people there weren't picking up any services, they were staying in their rooms 24/7, getting out for an hour or so for the gym or for a bit of recreation or for some food and whatever. And then they'd just go back in. Derek McGill who was the Governor of Polmont at the time, he'd highlighted this issue that he'd found a lot of the BME young people weren't accessing the services. So we started encouraging young people to get into some of those various services and opportunities, and they did. Currently in Polmont, probably more than half of them are accessing two or more services not just the one. They're not just going simply to education; they're going to education plus gym plus something else, the radio or something else.

So that's some of the changes there and at the same time it's given us access. One of the things we try to do, one of our outcomes is to try to reduce is homelessness so we are trying to find alternative accommodation for young people who might not be able to go back home. Thankfully the majority of young people we work with, the majority of times manage to go back to their family home through mediation and other ways.

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## What are some of the highlights of the service?

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**SA:** The Scottish Government had an event where some of our young people went along to deliver a presentation and that was brilliant. Currently we sit within the equality and diversity committee within Polmont, and we have quite a big say within that. Amongst other things we've had the opportunity to share a platform with the Justice Secretary Kenny MacAskill as well. We're out there and people get to know us. We're small relatively speaking but our work has been recognised by people from different levels of government, right down to statutory services to other third sector volunteer organisations.

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## Where do you see the YCSA youth justice service in the future?

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**SA:** There is still some room for change and improvement so to the make the service more effective and efficient. With the service currently working across Scotland I would like us to provide support to all BME offenders in any prison anywhere in Scotland. Ideally it would be a case of us being the first point of contact for all estates across the country so to provide immediate support.

It's a unique service that definitely needed; a service that understands the needs of the BME community and that can support the BME community effectively. We hope it continues.

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[The full interview can be heard on soundcloud.com/sjmjournal](https://soundcloud.com/sjmjournal)

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# UK Justice Policy Review:

Volume 2

6 May 2011 to 5 May 2012

# UK Justice Policy Review:

Volume 3

6 May 2012 to 5 May 2013

By Richard Garside, Arianna Silvestri  
and Helen Mills

# UK Justice Policy Review:

Volume 1

6 May 2010 to 5 May 2011

By Richard Garside and Helen Mills

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