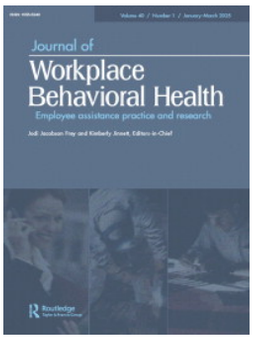

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Occupational burnout amongst youth justice officers in England

Irene Zempi Sfhea

Department of Criminology & Criminal Justice, Nottingham, UK

ABSTRACT

The evolution of youth justice in England and Wales and its more recent developments present unique challenges for youth justice officers. However, little is known about the experiences of occupational burnout amongst youth justice officers in the UK. The present study aims to fill this gap in the literature using individual, semi-structured interviews with 35 youth justice officers working in the youth justice service located in a geographical region of England. The findings reflect the three dimensions of occupational burnout in terms of emotional exhaustion (feeling emotionally drained and fatigued from work); depersonalization (treating others in an impersonal manner); sense of reduced accomplishment (feeling ineffective in the workplace). Participants discussed how burnout affected their relationship with children who come into contact with the system and their colleagues, as well as the strategies they used to manage burnout. To this end, some participants reported contemplating leaving the service for a new occupation, which would have implications for staff turnover. It will be concluded that burnout has significant costs to staff, children, YJS and society at large.

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Burnout; criminal justice system; youth justice officers; youth justice system

Introduction

Occupational burnout is a state of exhaustion resulting from long-term exposure to stress in response to chronic work-related stressors (Maslach et al., 1996). It is defined as "a syndrome of emotional exhaustion and cynicism that occurs frequently among individuals who do 'people-work' of some kind" (Maslach & Jackson, 1981, p. 99). Emotional exhaustion refers to "feelings of being emotionally overextended and exhausted by one's work," depersonalization represents "unfeeling and impersonal response toward recipients of one's service, care, treatment, or instruction" whilst personal accomplishment assesses feelings of effectiveness at their job

CONTACT Irene Zempi Sfhea irene.zempi@ntu.ac.uk Nottingham Trent University, Department of Criminology & Criminal Justice, 50 Shakespeare Street, Nottingham, NG1 4FQ, UK.

(Maslach et al., 1996, p. 4). High scores on emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, and low scores on personal accomplishment, are indicative of high levels of burnout.

The research literature has examined occupational burnout amongst a diverse array of professions including doctors, nurses, social workers, counselors as well as prison and police officers (Carrola et al., 2016; Foley & Massey, 2021; Salyers et al., 2013; Thompson et al., 2014; Young, 2015). Evidence shows that staff working in the Criminal Justice System (CJS) tend to experience elevated levels of burnout compared to other occupations, with most of the evidence emerging from studies conducted in the US. Indeed, the research literature shows that individuals working in the CJS consistently report high levels of occupational burnout both in the UK and internationally (Brady, 2017; Finney et al., 2013; Gutshall et al., 2017; Holloway et al., 2019; Lambert et al., 2015; Lane et al., 2023; Rhineberger-Dunn & Mack, 2020; Rhineberger-Dunn et al., 2017). CJS staff are at particular risk of burnout in response to chronic work-related stressors such as increasing job demands, heavy and intense workloads, unsociable working hours, personnel shortages and budget cuts (White et al., 2015). According to Clements and Kinman (2020), burnout can affect individuals' mental, psychological and physical health and has costly financial implications for services, such as poor employee performance, low quality of service, increased absenteeism, and high rates of staff turnover. As Finney et al. (2013) point out, there are higher rates of occupational burnout and relatedly, higher turnover rates and absenteeism amongst CJS staff than the broader working population. This infers that understanding occupational burnout in this population is critical.

However, the existing literature on burnout in CJS typically focuses on the experiences of individuals working in the probation, prison service, and the police, thus ignoring the experiences of youth justice officers in the UK (or juvenile probation officers in the US). As Rhineberger-Dunn and Mack (2020) point out, this relative lack of research is surprising, given the negative consequences of burnout amongst staff in similar professions in the CJS. Thus, Rhineberger-Dunn and Mack (2020) highlight the need for additional research in this context. To complicate matters further, although there is a growing (albeit limited) number of studies that examine occupational burnout amongst youth justice officers, however, these studies are based in the US rather than the UK. Thus, there is a gap in the literature in relation to occupational burnout among youth justice officers in the UK. This is particularly important in light of the evolution of the youth justice in England and Wales, and its more recent developments, which present unique challenges for frontline staff such as youth justice officers.

Accordingly, it is important to acknowledge that the Youth Justice System (YJS) in England and Wales has experienced significant change

over recent years as a result of responding to organizational, governmental, sector-focused, and wider environmental needs (Day, 2023; Smith & Gray, 2019). Historically, YJSs in England and Wales and across the western world have been shaped by populist punitiveness, managerialist, performance-led processes and risk-led practices (Case & Haines, 2018). Specifically, the YJS in England and Wales was created under the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, with the aim to prevent (re)offending through risk assessment-based intervention and management (Haines & Case, 2015). More recently, there has been a shift in youth justice central policy narratives away from the risk factor prevention paradigm (which has been criticized for criminalizing children by focusing on criminogenic risk factors rather than placing emphasis on children's vulnerabilities, needs and potentials) and toward "child first" (Bateman, 2020). This approach draws on Haines and Case's "child first, offender second" model, which is founded on the belief that "children are part of the solution, not part of the problem" (2015, p. 45).

Against this background, it is important that we gain an understanding of the perspectives of the youth justice officers who are navigating this shift in youth justice in England and Wales, and the impact this might have upon them in terms of occupational burnout. This is an exploratory study that aims to fill this gap in the literature in relation to youth justice officers. Accordingly, the study conducted individual, semi-structured interviews with 35 youth justice officers to explore their experiences of burnout in terms of its scope, impacts, and coping strategies. The findings reflect the three dimensions of occupational burnout in terms of emotional exhaustion (feeling emotionally drained and fatigued from work), depersonalization (treating others in an impersonal manner), and sense of reduced accomplishment (feeling ineffective in the workplace). Participants discussed how burnout affected their relationship with children who come into contact with the system and their colleagues, as well as the strategies they used to manage burnout. To this end, some participants reported contemplating leaving the service for a new occupation, which would have implications for staff turnover. It will be concluded that burnout has significant costs to staff, children, YJS, and society at large.

Literature review

Burnout

Occupational burnout is conceptualized as a response to repeated, work-related stressors, particularly among those in the helping professions (Maslach et al., 2001). It is defined as a psychological syndrome that consists of three related but distinct dimensions—emotional exhaustion,

depersonalization, and feeling of reduced personal accomplishment (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). Emotional exhaustion represents the individual stress dimension of burnout. It is associated with feeling emotionally overextended and depleted of one's emotional and physical resources (Maslach & Leiter, 2008). Depersonalization represents the interpersonal context dimension, which refers to viewing and treating others in the workplace impersonally and as objects (Maslach & Leiter, 2008). Reduced personal accomplishment represents the self-evaluation dimension, which refers to feelings of incompetence and a lack of achievement and productivity in the workplace (Maslach & Leiter, 2008). According to Cherniss (2002), these dimensions represent interrelated phases of a burnout process. Feelings of reduced personal accomplishment are the result of a psychological detachment from clients and colleagues (depersonalization) which is a response to emotional exhaustion (Holgate & Clegg, 1991).

Recent studies that examine burnout amongst juvenile probation officers in the US (Dir et al., 2019; Holloway et al., 2019; Rhineberger-Dunn & Mack, 2020; Salyers et al., 2015; Sheppard et al., 2022; White et al., 2015) demonstrate the extent, predictors, and impacts of burnout as well as the importance of interventions to tackle occupational burnout.

With regards to the extent of burnout, research demonstrates moderate to high levels of occupational burnout (Salyers et al., 2015; White et al., 2015). White et al. (2015) surveyed 246 juvenile probation officers in Indiana, US, to identify the prevalence, predictors, and potential outcomes of burnout using the Maslach Burnout Inventory—Human Services Survey (MBI-HSS). Participants reported moderate levels of burnout (although 32% of participants fell in the high range for emotional exhaustion and about 28% fell in the high range for depersonalization). These findings were echoed by Salyers et al. (2015), who used qualitative interviews to tap more deeply into how juvenile probation officers experienced burnout. Specifically, 23.1% of participants reported that they were experiencing symptoms of burnout, and that about another 11% reported recently experiencing burnout symptoms. Participants identified negative effects of burnout, including spending less time getting to know their clients and providing less quality care to clients.

With regards to the predictors of burnout amongst juvenile justice staff, studies by Rhineberger-Dunn and Mack (2020) and Holloway et al. (2019) shed light on this aspect of burnout. Specifically, Rhineberger-Dunn and Mack (2020) evaluated which set of variables (individual, job/role related, and organizational) had a greater impact on burnout amongst juvenile probation and juvenile detention officers. Results indicated that the only individual-level variable affecting burnout was contact hours, and only for emotional exhaustion. Input into decision making and lack of opportunities

were both significant for depersonalization and personal accomplishment. Rhineberger-Dunn and Mack (2020) concluded that the negative impacts of burnout have significant consequences not only for the employee but also for the individuals under supervision, the organization, other staff, and the general public. Stressors of occupational burnout were also examined by Holloway et al. (2019, who examined the role of demographics, attitudes about participation in the workplace, and burnout as predictors of social support and consultation networks within the workplace, amongst juvenile probation officers in the Great Lakes region of the U.S. The findings showed that individuals who felt more involved in workplace decisions also reported receiving more social support from colleagues. Thus, feeling more empowered in workplace decisions was associated with feeling more supported by others in the unit. The findings also showed that individuals who reported higher levels of the cynicism component of burnout reported providing less social support to others in their units. Thus, individuals who feel disengaged from their clients and regular work responsibilities due to burnout may be less socially supportive of their coworkers.

With regards to responses to burnout, research by Dir et al. (2019) and Sheppard et al. (2022) proposed organizational-level interventions for reducing burnout and its negative effects. Dir et al. (2019) examined the effects of job burnout and workplace participatory atmosphere on mental health stigma amongst juvenile probation officers in Indiana, US ($n = 226$). The results showed that participatory atmosphere mitigates effects of burnout on mental health stigma amongst juvenile probation officers and argued that organizational-level interventions might help to reduce mental health stigma and combat negative effects from burnout amongst juvenile probation officers. Along similar lines, Sheppard et al. (2022) examined the relationship between perceptions of trauma-informed care, burnout, and turnover intentions amongst juvenile justice staff members in residential commitment programs. This study focused on five domains of organizational trauma-informed care (TIC): training, trauma screening and procedures, staff safety, attitudes toward TIC, and complications and barriers. The results indicated that aspects of organizational TIC have the potential to reduce burnout and increase employee retention by improving physical and emotional safety in the workplace.

The aforementioned studies (Dir et al., 2019; Holloway et al., 2019; Rhineberger-Dunn & Mack, 2020; Salyers et al., 2015; Sheppard et al., 2022; White et al., 2015) shed light on the extent, predictors, and impacts of burnout as well as the importance of interventions for tackling occupational burnout. However, it is important to bear in mind that these studies focus on the experiences of occupational burnout amongst juvenile probation officers in the US rather than the UK. As Lane et al. (2023) point out,

to date, there is little comparable data on burnout amongst CJS workers in the UK and even less on staff working in the Children and Young People Secure Estate (CYPSE). To address this gap in the literature, Lane et al. (2023) examined levels of burnout in a range of staff groups across CYPSE settings. This was the first national study to explore burnout among staff working in the CYPSE in England. The results showed that frontline operational staff in Young Offender Institutions (YOIs) had significantly higher burnout levels had significantly higher client-related burnout than operational support staff, health staff, and those who did not specify their roles, according to the Copenhagen Burnout Inventory (CBI). Lane et al. (2023) concluded that YOI frontline operational staff, most of which have the greatest amount of person-to-person contact with the children and young people alongside prison officers, are particularly vulnerable. Thus, organizational support is essential to reduce burnout rates amongst YOI frontline operational staff.

Relationship between occupational burnout and coping

Closely connected to the level of burnout is coping—the individual abilities of those under stress and the resources available to them for dealing with burnout (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). As Demerouti et al. (2001) point out, the job demands-resources model is widely utilized to conceptualize burnout amongst workers. According to this model, burnout results from an imbalance of job demands and job resources. Demerouti et al. (2001) note that job demands are strains that have a negative impact on a person's emotional, psychological and physical health and job performance, whilst job resources mitigate the negative effects of job demands. CCJ staff are at particular risk for burnout because of increasing job demands such as heavy and intense caseloads with concurrent minimal job resources such as personnel shortages and budget cuts/limited funding (Slate & Johnson, 2013). The recent shift in youth justice creates unique challenges, which add to the existing job demands of youth justice officers in England and Wales (Day, 2023).

Burnout reflects a failure to effectively cope with occupational stress; therefore, coping strategies can help reduce burnout (Schaufeli & Greenglass, 2001). The research literature lends support to the view that problem-focused coping is more functional than emotion-focused and dysfunctional coping at reducing occupational stress and burnout (Savicki, 2002). Problem-focused coping entails defining a problem, generating alternative solutions, and considering the relative costs and benefits (Gould et al., 2013). Emotion-focused coping entails mediating one's feelings about the problem, rather than focusing on the external situation that triggered

the emotional response (Gould et al., 2013). Dysfunctional coping strategies are techniques deemed to be unsuccessful at reducing burnout (Carver & Scheier, 1994).

Different types of social support may impact different aspects of burnout amongst youth justice officers (Lambert et al., 2010). The research literature shows that problem-focused coping strategies help in decreasing burnout while emotion-focused coping strategies contribute to higher burnout (Savicki, 2002). Gould et al. (2013) found that problem-focused coping techniques were related to decreased ratings of emotional exhaustion and increased ratings of personal accomplishment. Social support significantly reduced levels of occupational stress and burnout (Armstrong & Griffin, 2004) although some studies did not find a correlation with measures of occupational stress or burnout (Wright et al., 2006). Drug dependency, excessive drinking and increased smoking have been reported as coping mechanisms of occupational stress and burnout (Makin et al., 1988). Along similar lines, Muchinsky (1997) found that individuals with high occupational burnout reported using alcohol, which is a form of dysfunctional coping, as a coping mechanism to cope with burnout. Gould et al. (2013) found that the use of dysfunctional coping strategies was consistently related to all sub-scales of burnout: reduced emotional exhaustion, reduced depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment.

Youth justice in England and Wales

To understand youth justice officers' experiences of occupational burnout in England and Wales, it is important to outline youth justice in England and Wales, and its more recent developments, which might present unique challenges for staff on the ground. The Youth Justice Service (YJS) in England and Wales is responsible for managing children who are aged between 10 and 17 years and have or are at risk of committing a criminal offense. In line with the Youth Justice Board (YJB, 2021) terminology, this article uses the words "child" or "children" to describe those aged 10 to 17 who are in contact with YJS. Relatedly, YJB is an independent public body appointed by the Secretary of State for Justice, which has a statutory responsibility to oversee the operation of the YJS and the provision of youth justice services in England and Wales. The statutory definition of a local youth justice service is contained in the Crime and Disorder Act 1998. In statute, these are known as "Youth Offending Teams." However, as services have evolved, they have become known by different names. The term that is currently being used is "Youth Justice Services," which moves away from the stigmatizing language of "offending" (YJB, 2021).

According to the most recent YJS statistics published in January 2024, from 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2023: Arrests of children increased by 9% compared with the previous year, although the number remained lower than pre-pandemic levels; There were just under 8,400 child first-time entrants (FTEs). This was an increase of 1% compared with the previous year, the first increase seen in the last 10 years.

The number of sentencing occasions involving children increased by 8% compared with the previous year, the first year-on-year increase of the last 10 years.

There was an average of around 440 children in custody at any one time during the year, a fall of 3% against the previous year and the lowest number on record. The reoffending rate increased by 0.9 percentage points from the previous year, the first increase since the year ending March 2014, though the second lowest rate in the time series (YJS, 2024). The increase in diversionary measures has led to a dramatic reduction in the number of children entering the YJS each year; however, despite the reduction in overall numbers of children coming into contact with the YJS, the disproportionate over-representation of racially minoritised children remains persistent (Taylor, 2016). Also, those children who remain in the system are often the most vulnerable, with adverse childhood experiences, trauma, and complex needs.

Correspondingly, the literature demonstrates that children who come into contact with the CJS in England and Wales are more likely to have experienced high levels of socio-economic disadvantage and trauma including physical and sexual abuse, witnessing domestic violence, school or community violence (Bateman 2020; Pickens, 2016; Kerig et al., 2016; Taylor, 2016). HMIP (2017) examined the case files of 115 young people who had committed violent, sexual and/or other offenses where there were potential public protection issues. More than three in four had experienced emotional trauma including separation and estrangement from parents, the death of a parent or main carer, sexual abuse, severe physical chastisement, serial domestic abuse and parental substance misuse (HMIP, 2017). HMIP (2017) also found that domestic abuse was prevalent: one-third had grown up in a household where there was a formal record of domestic abuse whilst almost half of the sample were in local authority care. As Lane et al. (2023) point out, children and young people who come into contact with the system have consistently been shown to have a range of mental health, educational, and welfare needs, often with significant histories of trauma. A lack of appropriate training and occupational support means that staff are not appropriately trained to recognize and manage these complex needs (Lennox, 2014). Similarly, research with professionals working in the care and youth justice services in Ireland (McElvaney & Tatlow-Golden, 2016)

demonstrates inadequate system responses to children with complex needs, and difficulties in interagency working, reflecting a "traumatized and traumatizing system." McElvaney and Tatlow-Golden (2016) argued that despite the best efforts of many dedicated professionals working within the system, there was a concern that children who are already traumatized by early experiences are being further traumatized by the system, primarily through the lack of early intervention, appropriate, stable placements and mental health supports.

It is important to note that the evolution of youth justice in England and Wales is characterized by recurring tensions, embodying the conflict and ambivalence that still feature in 21st-century youth justice debates (Case & Hampson, 2019). Historically, strategies included punitiveness (e.g. custody), reform, justice (e.g. just deserts, proportionality), welfare, education, restoration, minimum-intervention/diversion and risk prevention. Specifically, key historical youth justice developments included the "welfare versus justice" approach which was then replaced by a risk-led, neo-liberal neo-correctionalism (Case & Hampson, 2019). This was embraced by the "New Labour" Government of 1997, which legislated the "evidence-based" risk approach, thus reflecting the "tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime" mantra (Day, 2023). In this context, the Risk Factor Prevention Paradigm and its associated agenda of responsibilisation were the dominant discourse. Key criticisms of the risk factor prevention paradigm include its flawed methodology, its labeling effect, and the adulterisation and responsibilisation of children (Bateman & Pitts, 2010; Haines & Case, 2015). Along similar lines, successive reviews have criticized YJS as ineffective (see, for example, Audit Commission, 1996; Taylor, 2016).

There has been a shift in youth justice more recently, away from the risk factor prevention paradigm to the "child first" paradigm. In its updated Strategic Plan for 2021–2024, the YJB (2021, p. 10) identified "Child First" as their central guiding principle. YJB's (2021) vision entails a YJS that "sees children as children, treats them fairly and helps them to build on their strengths so they can make a constructive contribution to society." This aims to increase children's positive outcomes and prevent (re)offending as well as create safer communities with fewer victims. This vision is in line with children's rights as outlined in the United Nation's Convention on the Rights of the Child. "Child First" recognizes children according to their age, development, maturation and their potential as they grow into adulthood. Previously, perspectives of children's involvement in the YJS focused on managing a child's offending behavior and the risks they were considered to pose. However, in recent years, evidence has demonstrated that effective prevention is driven by focusing on children's needs; identifying their strengths and creating opportunities that realize their potential

(YJB, 2021). Evidence also shows that contact with the youth justice system can increase the likelihood of children reoffending (YJB, 2021). This places emphasis on preventing as many children as possible from coming into contact with the system but also preventing any longer-term damage caused to children who are in contact with the system. This approach acknowledges the structural inequalities that many children face, which can be multiple and complex in nature, and which contribute to disproportionality within the youth justice system. Indeed, Covid-19 has amplified the challenges faced by children today.

There are clear implications of these changes for youth justice officers in England and Wales. Specifically, these changes in youth justice in England and Wales may impact occupational burnout among those working in this area, particularly if youth justice officers are not adequately trained to implement these changes. In addition, if the language and messages from the Youth Justice Board about what these changes entail are not transparent or clear enough to the staff, this would affect the quality of service offered. These changes might lead to further challenges in terms of multi-agency working between youth justice officers and other agencies such as social services, housing, police, probation and courts, whilst organizational factors such as budget cuts and staff shortages may add to the pressures that youth justice officers face.

Indeed, evidence indicates that the shift in youth justice presents unique challenges for frontline staff such as youth justice officers (Day, 2023). The reasons for this have been conceptualized as "resistance and reticence, contradiction and bifurcation and confusion about competing narratives emerging from different UK government departments about how to meet the statutory requirement to 'prevent' youth offending", especially in the context of reductions in funding from local authorities and central government (Day, 2023, p. 58). Indeed, Case and Haines (2021) note "resistance and reticence" amongst practitioners moving away from risk-based approaches and toward child first. Day (2023, p. 63) highlights that according to the youth justice literature (see, for example, Bateman, 2020; Case & Haines, 2021; Hampson, 2018), "lack of adequate training, mixed messages at the macro and meso levels, confusion about key terminology, investment in established forms of practice and the reducing influence of the YJB" have played a part in the limited impact of changes in practice.

Current study

Study aims

The aim of this study was to shed light on the experiences of youth justice officers in relation to occupational burnout and their coping strategies.

To date, there is a gap in the literature regarding occupational burnout amongst youth justice officers in the UK. Existing studies typically focus on burnout amongst juvenile probation officers in US which means that the experiences of youth justice officers in the UK remain "hidden." As mentioned above, occupational burnout may lead to lower levels of employee commitment and productivity that run counter to the goals of the institution (Holloway et al., 2019; Lambert et al., 2010). This is particularly concerning in light of recent developments in youth justice in England and Wales which present unique challenges for frontline staff such as youth justice officers. Therefore, it is critical to shed light on youth justice officers' experiences of occupational burnout and the strategies they employ to cope with it. Correspondingly, the research questions examined: (Q1) perceptions of occupational burnout amongst youth justice officers; (Q2) the impacts of occupational burnout amongst youth justice officers; (Q3) the coping strategies that were used by youth justice officers in response to their experiences of occupational burnout; (Q4) recommendations on preventing and responding to occupational burnout in youth justice. The interview guide contained a series of open-ended questions related to these research questions (please see interview guide in Appendix).

Research methods

Participation to the study was voluntary. The study obtained ethics approval by the author's University ethics committee. The study involved individual, in-depth interviews with 35 youth justice officers. The average duration of individual interviews was approximately 60 min (the shortest being 30 min and the longest one hour). Participants were recruited from local youth justice services in one [anonymised] geographical region of England. Inclusion criteria included: individuals working as youth justice officers (of all ranks) in youth justice in this region. Youth justice services in this region were contacted *via* email and invited to participate the study. Participants were advised (prior to participation) that participation was voluntary, and that there would be no consequences for them as a result of their decision to participate (or not). In order to ensure participants' anonymity, their real names have been replaced by pseudonyms, while any personal information that could identify them has been removed. The sample included 23 male and 12 female officers. Participants' ages ranged from 28 to 56. With respect to their ethnic background, 18 participants self-identified as White, 9 as Asian, 5 as Black, and 3 Mixed Race. Years of experience ranged from 1 to 20. The majority of participants (30) were working full-time.

Analytic strategy

Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. Interview transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis, a qualitative method used for "identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). Thematic analysis is a strategy for organizing, describing and making sense of data. Also, it is "a way of seeing," which highlights the subjective notion of encoding and interpreting data (Boyatzis, 1998, p. 1). Themes refer to specific patterns of meanings found in the data. They may be identified inductively from the raw data or deductively from the existing literature. In the present study, the analysis was driven by the author's theoretical interest in occupational burnout as well as the analytic preconceptions regarding the nature, extent and impact of occupational burnout that has been identified in the literature. This form of thematic analysis is understood as "deductive" (Joffe, 2012). The ontological approach to participants' experiences was critical realism (Collier, 1994; Gorski, 2013) and the epistemological approach was relativism (Willis, 2023).

The author used Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach to thematic analysis. The first step included the author familiarizing themselves with the data by repeated, active reading of the transcripts and noting down initial ideas for coding. The second step involved generating initial codes across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code. The third step included searching for themes. The author examined the codes and collated data to identify significant broader patterns of meaning. The fourth step included reviewing and refining the candidate themes to ensure that there were clear distinctions between the final themes. Candidate themes were refined, split, combined or discarded. Final themes were clearly linked back to the research questions, but each theme was distinct. The fifth step included defining and naming themes. The author wrote a detailed analysis of each theme. This included making sense of the content of the data extracts presented, and considering whether they agreed with, or contradicted the existing literature. At this stage, the author chose an informative name for each theme. There were four overarching themes: (1) Scope of occupational burnout; (2) Coping strategies; (3) Impacts of occupational burnout and (4) Recommendations on preventing occupational burnout. The sub-themes are presented in the Appendix (Table 1).

The first two of these themes are discussed in the current study to shed light on how youth justice officers experience (nature) and respond to burnout (coping strategies), whilst an article focusing on themes 3 (impacts) and 4 (recommendations for action) is currently in progress. Themes 3 and 4 will shed light on the "harms" of occupational burnout but also how we can effectively tackle this problem. Correspondingly, the

Table 1. Themes and sub-themes.

Themes	Sub-themes
Scope of occupational burnout	Defining occupational burnout
	Personal experiences of exhaustion
	Personal experiences of depersonalization
	Personal experiences of reduced accomplishment
	Individual stressors
	Job/role related stressors
	Organizational stressors
Coping strategies	Organizational/Supervisory support
	Peer support
	Unhealthy coping mechanisms
	Normalisation' of burnout as part of the job
Impacts of occupational burnout	Impact upon role
	Impact upon relationship with fellow staff
	Impact upon relationship with external partners
	Impact upon relationship with children
	Impact upon mental and physical wellbeing
	Impact upon personal/family life
Recommendations on preventing occupational burnout	Tackling individual stressors
	Tackling job/role related stressors
	Tackling organizational stressors
	Additional interventions

author selected illustrative data extracts to provide sufficient evidence of the themes within the data, as discussed in the next section.

According to Nowell et al. (2017), it is crucial that researchers conduct theoretically and methodologically sound thematic analysis research that aims to create sensitive, insightful, rich, and trustworthy research findings. Indeed, the author's aim was to meet the trustworthiness criteria outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985). To this end, the author conducted the research in a rigorous and methodical manner to yield meaningful and useful results. Before outlining how this was achieved, it is important to note that the concept of trustworthiness entails the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (to parallel the conventional quantitative assessment criteria of validity and reliability) (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Specifically, credibility addresses the "fit" between participants' views and the researcher's representation of them (Tobin & Begley, 2004). Transferability refers to the generalizability of inquiry; in qualitative research, this relates only to case-to-case transfer (Tobin & Begley, 2004). Although it is not possible for researchers to know the sites that may wish to transfer the findings; yet, they should provide thick descriptions, so that those who seek to transfer the findings to their own site can judge transferability (Nowell et al., 2017). To achieve dependability, researchers can ensure the research process is logical, traceable, and clearly documented (Tobin & Begley, 2004). According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), confirmability is established when credibility, transferability, and dependability are all achieved. Confirmability is concerned with establishing that the findings are clearly derived from the data (Tobin & Begley, 2004). Table 2 in

Table 2. Establishing trustworthiness during each phase of thematic analysis.

Phases of thematic analysis	Means of establishing trustworthiness
Phase 1: Familiarizing self with the data	• Prolonged engagement with data • Documented initial analytic interests and thoughts, interpretations, and questions in reflexive journal
Phase 2: Generating initial codes	• Researcher triangulation • Reflexive writing • Audit trail of code generation
Phase 3: Searching for themes	• Thematic map to make sense of connections between themes • Kept detailed notes about development and hierarchies of concepts and themes
Phase 4: Reviewing themes	• Researcher triangulation • Returned to raw data to ensure that the themes reflected participants' voice (i.e., tested for referential adequacy)
Phase 5: Defining and naming themes	• Researcher triangulation
Phase 6: Producing the report	• Described process of coding and analysis in detail • Thick descriptions of context • Reported on theoretical, methodological, and analytical choices throughout the entire study

Appendix highlights how the author addressed Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria for trustworthiness during each phase of thematic analysis.

Finally, it is important to note that the use of inter-rater reliability (IRR) provides an opportunity to improve the transparency and consistency of qualitative data analysis in terms of the rigor of how codes and constructs have been developed from the raw data. However, although IRR can enhance the findings and theory emerging from qualitative data analysis through reconciliation, discussion, and consensus building amongst a team of researchers, IRR is not a guarantee of good research (Cole, 2024). There is a risk that IRR can stifle researchers' creativity or turn qualitative data analysis into a mechanical process. Echoing Cole (2024), O'Connor and Joffe (2020) caution that IRR can be a somewhat controversial topic in the qualitative research community, with some arguing that it is an inappropriate or unnecessary step within the goals of qualitative analysis.

Findings

The findings in this paper indicate youth justice officers' personal experiences of burnout as well as their coping strategies. Specifically, the sub-themes covered under theme 1 include a) participants' personal experiences of exhaustion, depersonalization and reduced accomplishment and b) burnout stressors (individual, job/role related, and organizational) and the sub-themes covered under theme 2 include coping strategies with regards to tackling burnout such as organizational/supervisory peer support; unhealthy coping mechanisms and accepting burnout as a "normal" part of the job.

Theme 1: Scope of occupational burnout

Throughout the interviews, participants shared experiences of the three components of burnout: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and reduced personal accomplishment. A common finding amongst all interviewees was a sense of psychological and/or physical exhaustion, as outlined in the quotes below.

> Not enough attention is paid to staff wellbeing and building staff resilience. I feel overwhelmed and emotionally drained. This is a particularly emotionally demanding work that we do, especially working with vulnerable children. I find it difficult to switch off, I take work home. (Daniel)

> Prevention and diversion works. We must continue to use mentoring, positive activity programmes, safeguarding and ECM [Enhanced Case Management] to prevent and divert children from the system. I am incredibly proud of the great work we do in [anonymised] region but while it feels incredibly rewarding, it can also be emotionally draining. It requires long hours, it involves working with complex, traumatised children and it has serious consequences when mistakes happen. (Doreen)

> We are psychologically worn out and physically exhausted. We've seen a reduction in the number of children entering the system because of diversionary measures but those children that remain in the system are the most vulnerable to criminal and sexual exploitation. Black boys are overrepresented across most stages of the system including stop and search, arrests, FTE [first time entrants], sentencing and custody. Staffing levels are not sufficient to cope with children's complex needs, and local budget cuts can be a barrier to supporting children to change their lives for the better. (Stephen)

As these quotes demonstrate, participants described feeling psychologically and physically exhausted. Participants felt that youth work is particularly demanding, and expressed feeling drained and overwhelmed by the complex needs of the children they worked with. These participants made references to working to support and divert children from the system—in line with the "child-friendly justice" and "Risk-Need-Responsivity model"—which was perceived as rewarding but also challenging as their caseload increasingly involved children with multiple complex welfare, health and educational needs. It is important to note that a child-friendly, rights-compliant model of youth justice system (e.g. "child-friendly justice") prioritizes children's reintegration, dignity and wellbeing, diversion, the incorporation of legal safeguards, and focuses upon implementation and operation. Within the Risk-Need-Responsivity model, children's relevant criminogenic needs are the focus of targeted interventions, with the goal of moving these needs in the direction of becoming strengths, while the responsivity principle specifies that interventions should be tailored to the child's strengths, motivations, preferences, personality, age, gender, ethnicity and cultural identifications. Despite the success of these models, diversionary measures

and related reduction in overall numbers of children coming into contact with the system, participants noted the disproportionate over-representation of racially minoritised children in the system. Participants observed that the children who remained in the system were the most vulnerable, whose complex needs and disadvantaged backgrounds required long term support. However, insufficient staff levels and local budget cuts were identified as barriers to participants supporting these children to change their lives.

The issue of lack of funding was also highlighted by another participant (Anthony) in the quote below as a barrier to delivering high-quality youth justice services in all areas of their work including prevention, diversion, out-of-court disposals, youth court, safeguarding, enhanced case management, electronic monitoring, resettlement work and youth to adult transitions to support the children, especially those that remained in the system. The social-ecological framework (also closely linked to the relationship-based practice framework) mentioned here recognizes the need for a whole systems approach, understanding the child in the context of their life and responding in a holistic and child-centered way, paying attention to the individual, interpersonal, community, and societal levels. However, as noted below, the lack of funding made it difficult to implement this approach, which was challenging for this participant.

> The lack of funding makes implementing this framework [social-ecological] a big challenge for us. We need to think carefully about works in youth justice, so we can use funding in a smart way, directing funding to those children and communities that need it most, whilst balancing protecting the public and ensuring community safety. Otherwise, more children will be drawn into the system again, and we know that children who become involved in the system are more likely to also commit crimes as adults. In the face of this, funding becomes even more important. (Anthony)

These findings show that despite participants' commitment to make a difference in children's lives, insufficient staff levels and local budget cuts were identified as barriers to youth justice officers fulfilling their role, in in line with the "child first" YJB principle. Furthermore, when asked what other stressors contributed to their emotional and/or physical exhaustion, participants reported feeling overwhelmed with the complexity of some of these cases, the lack of adequate training and experience in the team, high staff turnover and the specific challenges in the local community (such as rising costs of living, social deprivation, poor housing, and the influence of social media that can make children more vulnerable to criminal and sexual exploitation), as outlined in the quotes below. Participants also noted challenges in working with statutory partners, providers and other agencies as additional stressors. To this end, participants did not feel equipped to

provide adequate support to children to develop their strengths and realize their potential, in line with the "child first" YJB principle.

> Organisational challenges should not be played down. The caseload for youth justice services is made up of children who have complex needs. This requires highly trained and experienced staff. As it stands, training is not adequate to equip us with the skills we need to keep up with the changes in youth justice and the challenges in [anonymised local area]. Although we have more staff, the reality is that a third of staff have less than five years of service. There are positives to having new staff, you know, such as fresh ideas and perspectives but at it stands, they do not have the experience needed to deal with vulnerable children's complex needs who are at risk of exploitation, grooming and gangs. As it stands, a high staff turnover is a barrier to the effective operation of youth justice in practice. (Zahra)

> Multi-agency working is very important to prevent children offending and reoffending, particularly working with our key partners such as the police, children's social care, and health for assessment of children's needs and effective interventions. Strong partnerships are key but sometimes there is uncertainty, multi-agency arrangements are not well organised, and lines of responsibility between agencies are not always clear. A better understanding of the respective roles and responsibilities of partner agencies would help to ensure clarity in communication, accountability and decision making when working together. (James)

> Some cases are extremely complex for YOTs [youth offending teams] to deal with alone. The support required for these children supervised by YOTs need sharing intelligence, resources and facilities between a range of organisations in the local area. There is a need for ring-fenced funding from [anonymised] Council for sustainability of services as there is often conflict over funding between different agencies. We also need staff training on strategies for fostering multi-agency ways of working together because there have been "territorial" issues and "passing the buck" mentality which has led to low staff morale in YOT. (Malcolm)

Against the stressors of complex cases of vulnerable children, insufficient training and lack of experience in the team, high staff turnover, budget cuts, challenges in multi-agency working coupled with the constant changes in youth justice, participants reported feeling a sense depersonalization, detachment from the job, cynicism and reduced personal accomplishment, which contributed to low staff morale and lowered productivity, as the following quotes demonstrate. For one participant in particular (Patrick), not being included in the decision-making process regarding changes in youth justice, new initiatives or how they might operate in practice had resulted in feeling undervalued. As a result, some participants described "retiring on the job" in terms of withdrawing commitment to their work but also thinking about leaving the service and/or changing careers.

> It's just a revolving door. It [persistence of racially minoritised children in contact with the system] has really made me doubt my own competence and the value of my work. Over the years I have become very disengaged about working with young people. I detach myself from the job. The system is broken. (Nick)

> Staffing levels are not sufficient, workloads are not manageable, and staff are not always appropriately qualified or experienced. We can't offer a high-quality service if we don't have the right skills, if we are not effectively trained and if we are not supported by the right levels of management oversight. As it stands, the appraisal process is a tick box exercise with little scope for identifying staff diverse needs. I have become very cynical about making a difference in this role. The only option for me is to get out. (Charlotte)

> It's difficult to keep up with the constant changes because of central government policy decisions versus local and regional decisions. Mixed messages from central government and local authorities can lead to staff resistance to change. I don't feel like our views are sought to improve the effectiveness of services. We are rarely consulted about changes and new initiatives or how they will operate in practice. I'm working to the best of my ability and feel a strong sense of personal accomplishment and pride in my work but I don't feel valued by the organisation. I'm strongly considering leaving the service. (Patrick)

Theme 2: Coping strategies

As indicated above, participants shared experiences of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and reduced personal accomplishment, which are key components of occupational burnout. Participants cited complex caseloads, inadequate training, budget cuts, challenges in multi-agency working, constant changes and mixed messages from central government and local authorities as contributing factors. It was also clear that racially minoritised children were over-represented in the system despite the success of prevention and diversion. Occupational burnout in youth justice can have harmful consequences for the individual, fellow staff and the children who come into contact with the system. Throughout interviews, it became clear that participants' mental and physical wellbeing were affected, as well as their performance, motivation, and sense of belonging to the organization; yet they had little strategies for managing burnout. The majority of participants understood occupational stress as "part of the job" (in light of the high-stress nature of the work itself) and were reluctant to seek occupational support. Burnout was mostly mitigated informally by peer support rather than supervisory support or other official organizational mechanisms, as indicated in the quotes below.

> It has taken a toll on my mental and physical wellbeing. Other colleagues have been very supportive but not my line manager. During supervision meetings, she listens which is good but takes no real action. There is little investment in staff wellbeing which is a shame. In my view, leadership should be more focused on encouraging and supporting emotional resilience and promoting work-life balance. There is alliance in the team which is good because it helps to develop positive relationships and share intelligence among the team about how to cope with things but overall, staff do not feel valued and supported by the management. (Stephen)

> Due to staff shortages I feel under pressure to come to work even when I don't feel well because I don't want to let my colleagues down. I don't feel encouraged by the management to seek support. There is a pervasive culture of "this is how things are, that's the nature of the job, it's a difficult and demanding role, you need to get on with it". Leadership is more interested in performance management, outputs and outcomes, and less in helping staff build resilience and wellbeing. (Aisha)

A very small minority of participants indicated that they were using dysfunctional coping mechanisms such as "comfort food," smoking and alcohol to cope with prolonged stress in the workplace, as indicated in the quotes below.

> It has affected me mentally. I feel tired all the time and have difficulty concentrating, I am less motivated, and it has affected my relationship with the staff and the children I work with. It has also affected my relationship with my family. I have less patience to engage with them at the end of the day and I become frustrated more easily. Junk food, comfort food helps to cope with my anxiety and the mood swings. (Isla)

> Changes in youth justice have amplified the challenges we face in this role. There is a lot of uncertainty which is stressful. On top of this we find ourselves grappling with mounting complex workloads, staff shortages, longer hours, and the requirement to meet the constant changes in policies and procedures by local and central government. I've been suffering from insomnia for a long time. I sometimes use alcohol or pills to sleep. But I know that this does not solve the problem. It's like putting a band-aid on your problems, you are treating the symptom, you are not curing the disease. (Taylor)

As indicated above, participants were trapped in a cycle of exhaustion, disconnection and withdrawal. Burnout had a negative impact on their occupational performance and their wellbeing. It affected their relationship with children and staff (internally) as well as their relationship with family (externally). Participants pointed out that the work was stressful with many competing demands; but it lacked resources and organizational commitment to mitigate burnout, despite the shift in youth justice and the success of diversionary measures. Peer support was valued by participants, particularly in terms of promoting alliance and positive relationships in the team. However, participants noted the lack of supervisory support or other official organizational mechanisms for tackling burnout. Rather, burnout was seen as "part of the job." Given the stigma related to disclosing occupational stress and/or mental health challenges in masculine environments such as CJS agencies, some participants might have felt reluctant to report burnout to their line manager to avoid appearing "weak" or "powerless" and thus suffered in silence (Crawley, 2004). Yet burnout has important consequences for the overall health of the youth justice system and ultimately for the support that children receive.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to extend the existing literature by exploring occupational burnout amongst youth justice officers in England and Wales. Findings in this study spoke of the three dimensions of burnout in terms of participants experiencing a clear signal of fatigue (emotional exhaustion), a distant attitude toward work (depersonalization), and low satisfaction with work accomplishments (reduced personal accomplishment). The three components do not occur in isolation but rather influence each other. As Rhineberger-Dunn and Mack (2020, p. 350) point out, it is important to explore which factors affect burnout as this might assist organizations in creating meaningful change that leads not only to less burnout among staff but also to "greater efficiency and effectiveness when dealing with clients, potentially resulting in less recidivism and greater community safety."

Participants in the present study identified internal job-related factors (such as complex caseloads, inadequate training, lack of experience in the team, high staff turnover), organizational factors (such as budget cuts, challenges in multi-agency working) as well as external constraints (such as changes in youth justice, and mixed messages from central government and local authorities). As a result, participants did not feel equipped to fulfill their role and provide adequate support to children, especially the most vulnerable, to develop their strengths and realize their potential, in line with the "child first" YJB principle. Thus, some participants described "retiring on the job" in terms of withdrawing commitment to their work but also thinking about leaving the service and/or changing careers. At first glance, these findings mirror recent studies that have examined burnout amongst juvenile probation officers in the US (see, for example, Dir et al., 2019; Holloway et al., 2019; Rhineberger-Dunn & Mack, 2020; Salyers et al., 2015; Sheppard et al., 2022; White et al., 2015) and Lane et al.'s (2023) UK-based study on burnout amongst staff in CYPSE settings. Therefore, it could be argued that youth justice officers in England and Wales experience burnout like other professionals in CJS who work with children who offend on the basis that many of these job-related and organizational factors are typical in this context.

However, the current study advances our understanding of burnout among youth justice officers in England and Wales by demonstrating that there is currently a gap between the job demands and the job resources, which not only leads to occupational burnout amongst youth justice officers but also means that YJB's vision and mission are not successfully implemented. Throughout interviews, participants raised the issue of lack of resources which made it even more difficult for them to meet high job demands, in line with the "child first" YJB principle. According to the job demands-resources model, burnout results from an imbalance of job

demands and job resources. As Demerouti et al. (2001) point out, the development of burnout follows two processes: firstly, high job demands lead to exhaustion and secondly, a lack of resources leads to withdrawal behavior. The effect of high job demands and too few resources are additive and have a unique contribution on the development of burnout (Demerouti et al., 2001). For participants in this study, burnout was accelerated because of the speed and volume of changes in YJS whilst lacking adequate resources and organizational commitment to support them to implement these changes. This infers that staff on the ground cannot successfully deliver the new YJB policies. That said, it is important to point out that participants were supportive of new initiatives, for example, prevention and diversion as part of a child-friendly justice and they were committed to making a difference in children's lives in order to break the cycle of offending, especially for those vulnerable children who were likely to return to the CJS as adult offenders. However, the persistence of barriers such as lack of resources and organizational commitment raises concerns about the "success" of the youth justice landscape, which is ever changing. This demonstrates that the paper has clear policy implications for YJS. Underperforming because of burnout can put at risk the high quality of service that children should receive, which has implication for the success of a child-friendly, rights-compliant youth justice system, encompassing children's reintegration, dignity and wellbeing, a prioritization of diversion, the incorporation of legal safeguards, and a focus upon implementation and operation.

To complicate matters further, participants in the present study associated burnout with poor mental health, sleep issues, the development of unhealthy coping mechanisms such as junk food and alcohol consumption, and poor family relationships. This shows that the implications of burnout are costly not only for staff (both personally and professionally), but for youth justice more widely (Gould et al., 2013). Firstly, work performance is affected, particularly in relation to interactions and communication with children who come into contact with the system as well as fellow staff. Secondly, burnout leads to staff absenteeism/turnover, which is costly and disruptive for YJS. Thirdly, burnout may lead to physiological and psychological health implications for staff as well as negative implications for their family life. Thus, YJB needs to prioritize tackling the causes of burnout amongst youth justice officers and identifying "what works" with addressing these causes and offering tailored support to staff who are affected by occupational burnout. As mentioned above, although the current study extends the existing literature by exploring occupational burnout amongst a small sample of youth justice officers, future research is needed that examines burnout among a larger, more nationally representative sample of youth justice officers in England and Wales.

Limitations of the study

This study provides a significant contribution to the literature as it is one of the very few, and most recent, studies exploring burnout amongst youth justice officers. Nonetheless, there are a few limitations that should be addressed. It is important to acknowledge that this was a qualitative study based on a small sample size. Because of its non-probability sampling, it is not possible to generalize the findings amongst the entire youth justice population in the UK. All participants were youth justice officers in youth justice located in an [anonymised] geographical region of England. Although participants were based in a diverse range of counties in this region (including rural and urban), the current findings might not translate to youth justice officers in other regions. It is possible that the youth justice offices in this region differ significantly from other settings, which limits the generalizability of the current findings. Also, it is not possible to generalize the findings to other criminal justice agencies such as probation, prisons and the police in England and Wales. Another limitation of the current study is that it did not explore the role of variables such as officers' personal characteristics (for example, age, gender, race, ethnicity) or aspects of their work (e.g. tenure, contact hours) in burnout levels.

Bearing these limitations in mind, the findings of the study lend themselves to further exploration. It would be important to determine if these results extend to youth justice officers in the UK. A large, probability sample of youth justice officers will help shed light on the reliability and validity of the present findings. Relatedly, in an effort to ascertain reliability over time, a carefully designed longitudinal study would be useful in order to compare burnout levels over a period of several years. Also, it would be useful to examine the relationship between burnout levels, internal job-related (e.g. complex caseloads, lack of adequate training and experience) and organizational factors (e.g. budget cuts, challenges in multi-agency working), as well as external constraints (e.g. changes and mixed messages from central government and local authorities). Finally, quantitative methods could also offer the means to examine ways to prevent and/or address burnout amongst youth justice officers. In this regard, it would be useful to examine prevention strategies to understand how these mechanisms may be better institutionalized, to the benefit of *all* youth justice officers. Therefore, although the present study advances our understanding of burnout amongst youth justice officers, researchers should seek to expand the results with a large, probability sample and/or longitudinal research to extend our understanding of its nature, scope and implications as well as effective strategies for addressing burnout.

Conclusion

Contemporary youth justice in England and Wales is complex and contested (Smith & Gray, 2019). Historically, there has been a move away from the welfare-justice debate to a paradigm shift toward risk as dominant (Case & Hampson, 2019). More recently, there has been a shift from the risk factor prevention paradigm and toward "child first." Given the recent developments within youth justice, the purpose of this paper was to better understand the experience of occupational burnout amongst youth justice officers. To date, little is known about the experiences of occupational burnout amongst youth justice officers in the UK. Qualitative research can offer rich perceptions of burnout in staff. Using individual, semi-structured interviews with 35 individuals, the study examined levels of burnout and coping amongst youth justice officers in an [anonymised] geographical region of England. Overall, the findings reflected the three dimensions of occupational burnout in terms of emotional exhaustion; depersonalization; sense of reduced accomplishment.

Burnout has significant costs to staff, children, YJS and society at large. YJB's updated Strategic Plan for 2021–2024 (2021) states that youth justice officers are a key asset toward achieving YJB's vision and mission. Its success depends on and is driven by staff and their ability to work in a challenging environment. However, burned-out officers are unlikely to perform their roles effectively. The development of an effective YJS should include strategies to prepare and protect staff from the potential effects of exposure to burnout (Pickens, 2016). If YJB is concerned about maximizing the effectiveness of the YJS, priority should be given to addressing the causes of burnout amongst youth justice officers as well as "what works" with addressing these causes and offering tailored support to staff who are affected by occupational burnout.

Identifying the extent to which youth justice officers are experiencing burnout is a necessary precursor to planning appropriate resources that support staff wellbeing and consequently, job efficacy and supporting children (Lane et al., 2023). If staff are better equipped for their role, this will help to reduce staff stress and associated burnout, building a safer environment for both staff and children (Lane et al., 2023). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) argues for an approach to youth justice that is child-friendly, strengths-based and centered on participatory practice with children. Youth justice officers cannot serve a child friendly justice and echo the provisions of the UNCRC if they are burned-out. In the words of Nelson Mandela (1995): "There can be no keener revelation of a society's soul than the way in which it treats its children."

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ORCID

Irene Zempi Sfhea http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1719-8573

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Appendix A

Interview guide

1. Have you heard of the term occupational burnout? How would you describe it?
2. Have you experienced occupational burnout in your current role?
3. In your view, what are the causes for this?
4. How have the recent changes in youth justice affected your burnout levels?
5. What is impact of occupational burnout upon your role?
6. What is impact of occupational burnout upon your personal life?
7. How do you cope with burnout? For example, what strategies do you use?
8. What would you like to see in place in terms of official support in your organization?
9. In your view, what is the solution to the problem of occupation burnout?