



THE CENTRE
FOR YOUTH
IMPACT

Part of YMCA George Williams College

Inclusive or intrusive?

An exploration of young people's and practitioners' experiences of demographic data collection and equity in the youth sector

Written and supported by:

Peggy Warren (PhD), Catherine Mitchell, Sarah Tayleur, and Zunaira Mahmood

September 2024

Table of Contents

Table of Contents	2
Executive summary.....	3
Introduction.....	3
Methods	5
Key findings	6
Next steps	8
Conclusion.....	10
Appendix.....	11
Definitions	11
Individuals	11
Youth provision	11
Equity and equality	12
Demographic data	12
Deficit narratives	12
About us.....	14

Inclusive or intrusive?

An exploration of young people's and practitioners' experiences of demographic data collection and equity in the youth sector

Executive summary

We would first like to thank all the young people and practitioners who gave their time and energy to an interview or focus group, and whose lived experiences have informed this project.

We would also like to thank colleagues who have contributed to creating this report. Along with the authors (Peggy Warren [PhD], Catherine Mitchell, Sarah Tayleur, and Zunaira Mahmood), thank you to Rammiza Akhtar, Elva Bonsall, Kayley Doran, Geethika Jayatilaka, Sarah McCoy, Bethia McNeil, Kaz Stuart, and Hannah Warsame.

Thanks also to Youth Futures Foundation (YFF) for funding this work and providing feedback on this insights report. Finally, thank you to the young person who inspired the title of this report – you can find their full quote on page 51 of the main report.

Introduction

This project is all about demographic data practices. 'Demographic data' refers to information that describes personal characteristics and background.¹ It is collected by organisations, researchers, and policymakers for a wide range of different reasons. When we talk about 'demographic data practices', we are talking about how people collect and use demographic data – from design of collection tools through to analysis and sharing. Please note that all key terms are explained in the appendix.

This conversation was prompted by a pilot of the College's [suite of measurement tools focused on young people's socio-emotional skills development](#). Over a series of engagements with a dedicated youth sector Practitioner Panel, the College identified multiple factors that are currently limiting sector-wide action to improve engagement and support equity within demographic data practices. There is a lack of tailored tools, guidance, and support that consider and address the needs of both young people and practitioners in relation to demographic data practice, and which enable youth

¹ For a full definition, please see the appendix.

organisations to meet their duties under the Equality Act 2010. As the workforce supports the current generation of young people in England – where YFF funding is focused – and other countries in the UK, there is work to do to ensure that all understand why data is collected and how it will be used, and that they therefore feel confident and competent to collect and share data because they are assured that it will promote equitable practice.

The challenges associated with demographic data are complex and interrelated. We believe that there is no ‘quick fix’ and that to pursue one would fail to address inequities in accessing and experiencing youth provision and demographic data practices. If we are to make the process of collecting demographic data more respectful, humane, and considered, we must take time to explore and improve a process that, by design, excluded certain communities (for various reasons).

This report does not purport, as conventions would dictate, to have answers at this stage and considers that the ‘experts by experience’ – young people and practitioners – are the voices that should start and be central to this important conversation. The enduring impact of historical oppression is deeply ingrained within the UK’s social, economic, and political structures. To progress this work authentically, we must also keep an open mind and be prepared to be honest about the drivers and motivations for collecting demographic data, and the (many) implicit tensions involved.

To begin this work, the College has started out on a complex journey to:

- A) Explore knowledge, practice, and views on the collection and use of demographic data; and
- B) Co-create recommendations for any changes that would result in better practices – with the definition of ‘better’ to be first and foremost shaped by young people and practitioners.

This report summarises our initial exploration of the first point above and will serve as a basis for consultation and further action on the second.

Our work to explore the first point aimed to:

Learn from **young people about:**

- Their understanding of why organisations collect demographic data;
- The words they feel describe their identities;
- How it feels to be asked these questions; and
- What they would like to see organisations do next to change or improve practices.

Explore **practitioners'** experiences of:

- Collecting demographic data;
- The phrasing and delivery of questions about demographic data;
- How and why demographic information is used within their organisations; and
- Next steps and developments in which they would be particularly interested in relation to demographic data practice.

Methods

Our initial exploration comprised two phases:

1. **A desk-based review of literature on demographic data collection** to understand whether there was existing guidance or any standardised tools available for the youth sector in England, where YFF funding is focused. We also explored literature specifically on the topic of 'deficit narratives', as we identified this as a significant factor and risk inherent in demographic data collection.

Crucially, besides one item, we were unable to identify any literature or reference that was specific to the English context *and* to the context of working with young people. Anything relevant to young people was written/published in America. This highlights a gap in the literature, underscoring the need for better understanding and guidance specifically for youth sector organisations in England. ²

2. **Mixed-method research with young people and practitioners** to ask questions, listen, and learn about their experiences of being asked for and asking for demographic data. We held 15 semi-structured interviews with practitioners and 10 focus groups with young people. We coded and themed notes and transcripts from interviews and focus groups, and then revisited raw data and transcripts for further analysis. ³

Across our research we see themes of **trust; communication; accessibility; young people's perceptions of their identities; and data and equity** emerge frequently. These themes can be seen throughout our findings, which we have grouped into three headline sections (with additional sub-themes in the main report.) A summary of key findings under each category is shared below.

² NB. This does not include discussions on a 'demographic data standard' being developed by the College with Back Youth Alliance (BYA) Members, which aims to agree a common approach to describing the young people we work with. At the time of writing this report, this document is not yet publicly available.

³ For more information on the content and structure of the interviews and focus groups, please see the full report appendix.

Key findings

The research highlights a wide range of interrelated tensions and challenges. Many of the issues raised below are somewhat encapsulated in what we might refer to as ‘power dynamics’.⁴ This, interestingly, is not amongst the language used by either the young people or the practitioners. Yet, some of the issues highlighted and explored in this section, which emerge from the question of ‘being identified’, assume a passive position and therefore whether overtly named or not, there is power at play. We must recognise this as we move forward.

Why do organisations collect demographic data?

- Those collecting demographic data from young people often do not explain why they are collecting it or how they plan to handle it
- Young people are not clear or confident on why demographic data is collected, but often “conform” or “concede” to sharing it
- Because of this, requests for demographic data can generate in young people a sense of apathy or irrelevance, as well as emotions such as boredom, fear, stress, and exasperation
- Practitioners similarly feel ambiguity or confusion around the purpose of demographic data collection, especially the likely impact on young people
- Both young people and practitioners often associate demographic data with requests or requirements from funders and, sometimes, marketing or advertising provision
- Views on what is 'relevant' data varies, and sometimes intersects with legal and medical responsibilities, which again points to issues with communication. It further raises a question of “who gets to define 'relevance'?” within the context of demographic data requests.

Does it matter which demographic data organisations collect, or what they do with it?

- Demographic data categories have the potential to exacerbate existing stereotypes and reinforce deficit narratives - so they must be chosen carefully
- Data-driven insights can only be generated from reliable, meaningful (and often comparable) data. However, especially where demographic data relates to identity, categorisation can be difficult because of the fluidity and complexity of identities. This will inevitably have an impact on the insights that we are creating through demographic data practices
- Lack of clarity is exacerbated by inconsistent use of language in the sector by those driving demographic data collection
- Data collection can both have an impact on young people’s identity forming (e.g. not being seen or recognised, feeling stigmatised, feeling pressure to have their

⁴ ‘Power dynamics’ relates to the balance of power between different people and/or groups, including how power is distributed and maintained.

identity 'figured out') and, where demographic data relates to identity, it is directly influenced by the fact that young people are continually (re)forming their identities as they grow up

- Multiple barriers (e.g. lack of trust, irrelevant categories, and a 'one-size-fits-all' approach) prevent young people and practitioners from engaging with demographic data collection
- Practitioners feel uncomfortable and/or ill-equipped to facilitate demographic data collection. They identified that they would benefit from further explorations of the impact of the process on young people
- Practitioners are calling for training and support (e.g. in engaging creatively with sensitive subjects) so that they feel better equipped to have conversations with young people about identity and demographic data language
- Requests from those driving data collection can feel in tension with the best interests of young people
- The process of collecting demographic data requires time, consideration, relationship building, and specific support from practitioners to young people (e.g. in 'translating' language on forms, or facilitating supportive, trusting conversations about identity).

What message would young people and practitioners like to give organisations who collect demographic data? If young people and practitioners were to redesign a process, what would they suggest?

- Some young people questioned whether they would want to redesign a process that they generally found irrelevant; others identified that because the data could be used to support underrepresented communities, it would be worth consideration, but felt unable to envision what a new approach would look like; some requested ongoing conversations about this topic and felt it was the first time that they had thought deeply about it.
- However, some young people did share a number of key messages for organisations who collect demographic data:
 - There should be better communication and more transparency on context, purpose, and action;
 - There should be improved process and methods by giving space for fluidity, increasing accessibility, and allowing time to reflect; and
 - Organisations should recognise that being asked for identity data can feel intrusive or uncomfortable.
- They also shared reflections on a number of specific demographic categories including faith, sexuality, gender, nationality and ethnicity (these can be seen on pages 51-52 of the main report)
- In addition, some young people wanted to convey that they cannot always tick boxes because they need a wider variety of options if organisations want 'accuracy'

in the data they collect, so that options are more likely to truly represent how young people identify (which may include ‘fluid’)

- A number of young people found it a positive experience to be invited to use their voices to influence change on issues that affect them
- A number of practitioners, who held a diverse range of roles within the sector, felt conflicted on the issue of collecting demographic data. For example, some felt that they were positioned between young people and the funders, and that current processes do not meet the needs or best interests of young people
- Specifically, practitioners flagged concerns about current methods being used in a way to suit a predefined narrative about specific communities of young people, and a checklist or tokenistic approach
- As already mentioned, they also highlighted a need for training and more guidance, and to work with young people to establish what representation genuinely looks like within demographic data practices
- There was some sense and examples of demographic data being used to improve provision, but this was limited and a clear area for attention.

Next steps

We will be revisiting those we spoke to, and others, to consult on our summary of findings on the purpose, process, and experience of demographic data practices. We will invite individuals to share their responses via an online survey or in a conversation with us.

As part of this, we will seek to prioritise which of the multiple challenges and tensions we start to address first. Based on what we have heard so far, there is a wide range of behaviours, practices, and actions that *those of us involved in demographic data practice* need to both stop and start in order to make progress. For example:

Behaviours, practices, and actions that we need to stop

- Creating and contributing to ambiguity or confusion around the purpose of demographic data collection
- Using approaches (including categories and methods) that exacerbate stereotypes and reinforce deficit narratives ⁵
- Using approaches that reinforce a checklist or tokenistic approach to demographic data collection
- Collecting demographic data in a way that invokes negative feelings and emotions in young people, such as apathy, irrelevance, boredom, fear, stress, or exasperation
- Prioritising the needs of funders or marketing/advertising above the needs of young people; and
- Creating multiple barriers to engagement and access (including collection tools, language, and age appropriateness).

⁵ For more information on ‘deficit narratives’, please see the full report appendix.

Behaviours, practices, and actions that we need to start

- Build in and protect sufficient time for the process of demographic data collection, e.g. to enable reflection, for trust and relationships to be built, and for conversations about identity
- Co-create approaches (including categories and methods) with young people that truly represent (as much as possible) how young people identify, which may include 'fluid' and/or be complex in other ways
- Build our understanding of what constitutes data 'accuracy' from the perspective of different stakeholders and/or different uses for demographic data
- Develop and improve support, training, and resources for practitioners
- Develop nuanced, tailored approaches for specific data categories (e.g. sexuality, ethnicity)
- Develop and use consistent language across the sector; and
- Develop clear, brief, and specific guidance on why data is being collected and how it will be used.

As we do this, we need to prioritise:

- Ongoing conversations and co-creation so that young people can influence change on issues that affect them (being mindful of the extent to which young people might want to be involved, given that some have expressed a sense of apathy or disconnect)
- Approaches that support underrepresented communities
- Supporting improvements to practice and provision (over simply 'proving' that something is happening)
- An awareness of the multiple impacts that demographic data collection can have on young people's identity and wellbeing; and
- Addressing tensions between the requests of funders and the interests and needs of young people.

The specific recommendations from these conversations will be influenced by participants, but we expect them to cover ideas such as:

- Professional development sessions;
- Resource toolkits for those who are engaging young people in sharing information and data related to their identity;
- Opportunities for participants to test and review new resources and approaches;
- Reflection, learning, and refinements; and
- Wider dissemination across the sector.

We note that funders are a key stakeholder in this process, and currently missing from the the report dialogue. **We particularly invite funders to contribute to the next consultation stage.**

The project timeline and resources will end in October 2024. Before this, we will be writing up a clear set of recommendations, informed by the consultation and tailored for different audiences such as youth organisations and practitioners, researchers and evaluators, and funders. We will also be advocating for additional funding to continue or support this work in the future, drawing on what we have heard and learnt so far.

In future work, facilitating young people, practitioners, and a selection of funders to be in a room in an attempt to understand each other's perspectives will be important. The aims here would be twofold:

- To share perspectives between those involved in and impacted by demographic data practice; and
- To co-create ways forward that are grounded in empathy and lived experience.

Improving demographic data practice will need to be a sustained and collective effort beyond the life of this project, as we work together to understand if we can capture good quality, 'accurate' demographic data that can be used to meaningfully tackle inequity and, if so, whether organisations can collect this demographic data from the young people they are working with in an equitable and trauma, gender, and culturally informed way.

We invite you to contribute your perspective as we enter the next stage of consultation – whether you are impacted by the process of demographic data collection, and/or have the power and influence to improve it. Information about how to contribute can be found on our website: www.ymcageorgewilliams.uk/e4p.

Conclusion

This report highlights a range of complexities associated with providing and collecting demographic data, and that this issue is under-researched in both the England and UK contexts. Consistent sentiments were shared by both young people and practitioners across a range of themes, and there are many possible implications for how we, as a sector, justify, design, implement, support, and improve demographic data practices. It is clear that there is value in funders, young people, and practitioners working together to co-create the revised approaches and methodologies for equitable demographic data collection.

Appendix

Definitions

To facilitate a meaningful discussion, it is essential that we all use the same words to mean the same thing. As such, we have defined some key terms *for the purpose of this report* below.

Individuals

Young people – all young people aged 11 to 18, or 25 for young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

Practitioner – the person who is supporting young people to develop in the context of youth provision. This may be a paid staff member or a volunteer. There are numerous names for the roles of practitioners across the young people's workforce.

Researcher – staff and associates working on behalf of YMCA George Williams College to deliver the Embedding Equitable Evaluation in Employment Provision (E4P) project.

Youth provision

Youth sector – the organisations and agencies working with and for young people in out of school settings and provision.

Youth provision – all non-formal and informal work supporting young people to develop positively towards adulthood in a range of professions and settings, employing different practices.

Informal and non-formal youth provision – formal learning happens in the education setting where national curricula, schemes of work, subject curricula, and session plans define what is delivered. In contrast, informal learning refers to learning that is acquired through engagement in a range of entirely unstructured activities e.g. visiting a new town. Non-formal learning is situated between the two and refers to any organised educational activity outside the established formal system – whether operating separately or as an important feature of some broader activity – that is intended to serve identifiable learning clienteles and learning objectives.

Programme / project / service / intervention – the structural arrangement of the work delivered to young people that includes a number of 'sessions'.

Trauma Informed Practice - an approach grounded in the understanding that trauma exposure can impact an individual's neurological, biological, psychological and social development.

Employability provision – put simply, this is work that supports young people to get jobs. The [Youth Futures Foundation’s Youth Employment Toolkit](#) focuses on seven kinds of intervention: one-the-job training, basic skills training, off-the-job training, life skills training, wage subsidy programmes, apprenticeships, and mentoring and coaching.

Equity and equality

Equity is the concept of fairness and justice. It entails ensuring that everyone, regardless of their background or circumstances, has an equal opportunity to succeed. Equity acknowledges that people may start from different positions due to historical and systemic disadvantages or varying circumstances. Therefore, equity involves providing additional support, resources, or accommodations to those who need them in order to level the playing field; equity is a means to achieve equality (see definition below) by accounting for and rectifying existing disparities.

Equality seeks to treat everyone the same, whereby each individual or group of people is given the same resources or opportunities.

Demographic data

Demographic data refers to information that describes personal characteristics and background. These characteristics typically include factors such as age, gender identity, ethnicity, income, education level, sexual orientation, religion, disability status, occupation, and geographic location. Other kinds of demographic data may also be collected to reflect the concerns of particular projects or organisations.

In our report and in this report, we have taken a deliberately broad view, to include everything from date of birth and postcode, through to Free School Meal (FSM) status and gender identity. Through our enquiries, it became very clear to us that demographic data is largely considered synonymous with ‘identity’ by many that we spoke to, although we acknowledge that, in practice, the gathering of demographic data will include other elements, which may not be considered synonymous in the same way.

Demographic data is collected by organisations, researchers, and policymakers for a wide range of different reasons, including the intention of better understanding and serving individuals and communities.

Deficit narratives

We understand deficit thinking and **deficit narratives** to be that which frames people in terms of their deficiencies or weaknesses, seeing people as the problem rather than systems. Patton and Museus (2019) describe how deficit thinking largely consists of four

attributes ⁶ : blame the victim orientation, placing blame on individuals or their communities for their failures or challenges; is a symptom of larger systemic oppression, often perpetuating racist, classist and meritocratic ideologies; pervasive across social and educational systems, often implicit in cultural values, assumptions, and language; and reinforces oppressive systems and inequities. For more information, see the literature review on page 21 in the main report.

⁶ Patton L. P. & Museus, S. D. (2019), What Is Deficit Thinking? An Analysis of Conceptualizations of Deficit Thinking and Implications for Scholarly Research. *Currents: Connecting Diversity Scholarship to Practice and Society*, Volume 1 Issue 1. DOI: <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/c/currents/17387731.0001.110?view=text;rgn=main>

About us

YMCA
GEORGE WILLIAMS
COLLEGE

At YMCA George Williams College, our vision is for a just and equitable society that invests in support for all young people to learn, grow, and explore their relationships with the world around them. Established in 1970, the College works to provide transformational support to practitioners, funders, and policy makers across the sector, to improve the quality and impact of provision and outcomes for children and young people across the UK. This support is characterised by safe spaces, high quality socio-emotional skill development opportunities, and relationships with trusted adults.

As part of its work, the College now hosts three Centres of Expertise. The Centre for Youth Impact at YMCA George Williams College supports organisations to generate and act on evidence of the impact of their provision. Using a robust evidence base, The Centre for Youth Impact designs, tests, and champions shared approaches to quality and impact that facilitate collective insight and learning, consolidating and sharing open access resources, research, and training for all those working in informal and non-formal youth provision.

To find out more about our work, visit ymcageorgewilliams.uk or follow us on [Twitter](#) and [LinkedIn](#).

youth
futures
FOUNDATION

This report has been funded by [Youth Futures Foundation](#), the What Works Centre for youth employment.

YMCA George Williams College is a registered charity in England and Wales (No. 1044624) and in Scotland (No. SC042186), and a company limited by guarantee (No. 02978406)