Inclusive or intrusive?

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

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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

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[1] For a full definition, please see the report 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 the 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.

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[2] NB. This does not include discussions on a 'demographic data standard' being developed by YMCA George Williams 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 identity 'figured out') and, where demographic data relates to identity, it is directly

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

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).

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[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 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.

Introduction

> “Keep having these conversations, I have to admit when you first said, ‘identity forms’... the amount of times I have filled it in and you think, not another one! Before this session today I have never reflected on these topics and issues. I've never really had to think deeply about this, so it is good you are thinking about it in that way, and I would encourage organisations to do it more - I think these conversations are really good.”
> **Young person in E4P focus group**
>
> “It can be quite difficult, because I don’t think often that we have enough time...but it’s an honour to have those conversations.”
> **Practitioner in E4P interview**

Over the summer of 2021, YMCA George Williams College consulted with our Practitioners Panel – a group of 20 youth sector practitioners – to better understand how they gather, analyse, and use the demographic data collated through provision and evaluation of activities and services for young people.

This conversation was prompted by a pilot of the College’s suite of measurement tools focused on young people’s socio-emotional skills development. This suite consists of four tools that look at three areas of socio-emotional skills development: young people’s mental engagement in youth provision; the quality practices that adults can do to support young people’s development; and the socio-emotional skill outcomes themselves.

Discussions were initially focused on demographic data collection in relation to these tools. What demographic data were panel members collecting, for example, that could help them to interpret data from the measures, such as the relationship between quality of provision and socio-emotional skills outcomes for young people from different backgrounds, or the different ways and extent to which different young people might experience ‘engaging’ provision?

At the same time, as an organisation we were reflecting on the inequitable outcomes that young people experience across youth provision and into adult life, including access to and employment in good jobs; and the relationship between collecting, interpreting, and using demographic data, and progression towards more equitable outcomes for young people. This was the genesis of the E4P project.

A dedicated meeting explored Practitioner Panel members' experiences of gathering and using demographic data for the purposes of understanding a) who they're reaching and who they're not; b) whether young people from different communities experience and engage with their provision differently; and c) whether young people from different communities experience better or poorer outcomes in their provision. Through this engagement, the College identified multiple factors within demographic data practices that are currently limiting sector-wide action to improve engagement and support equity.

1. The youth sector lacks tools, guidance, and support to meet their duties under the Equality Act 2010

The EHRCs Statutory Code of Practice for Services, public functions, and associations makes clear that effective equality monitoring is an important step for service providers to lawfully take 'positive action' to reduce inequalities. Extensive evidence also shows the plethora of barriers and inequities faced by young people with multiple identities as they strive to seek out and secure ‘good jobs’.

Yet, over a decade since the passage of the Equality Act 2010, many youth organisations that we work with have told us that they only capture limited demographic data and have a weak understanding of what data is needed in order to take lawful positive action in their provision. Whilst many in the sector are aware of inequalities at a national (or population) level, informal feedback from youth sector leaders also suggests that equity data literacy is poor, with lack of knowledge of available national data sets (e.g. Census or IMD), low awareness of relevant local data (e.g. from JSNAs), and limited knowledge about how to contextualise and analyse this in relation to their community or provision.

Even when leaders do understand relevant inequities in relation to their work, they can struggle to apply data-driven insight to the specific design of their provision, the development of their theory of change, or in drafting monitoring and evaluation frameworks. Practitioners in our Regional Impact Networks shared challenges to being “evaluation ready”, especially in a manner that actively addresses gaps in equity, diversity, and inclusion.

2. The youth sector lacks tailored, appropriate, and consistent approaches to demographic data collection and action

Equity monitoring requirements that relate to demographic data are often organisation-wide. For many youth organisations, their first engagement with young people – especially for those furthest from the labour market – is in circumstances where collecting demographic data can be challenging (e.g. street-based, or in drop-in provision). As the young person transitions into more tailored or targeted opportunities, such as employability projects, poor initial data collection can move with them, and ‘recollection’ appears to be uncommon (i.e. data is rarely updated after the first collection opportunity). Poor and/or inconsistent demographic monitoring systems across provision can therefore lead to inaccurate reporting of who is being served, potential blindness to inequities, and even overreporting of reach into and towards minoritised communities.

Where organisations have collected demographic data, they frequently developed bespoke forms. Some may have adapted the approaches of others; some are led by the requirements of multiple funders. Some forms replicate the dominant demographic features of the local community (e.g. not including particular identities or experiences because it is perceived that they don't exist within the local area). Some of these forms use outmoded terms or are not routinely updated. Recently, for example, forms shared with the College from Practitioner Panel members included questions that were not in line with comparable data sets or established general 'good practice' in equity monitoring. Some organisations did not collect data against certain questions where they thought they were less relevant in their local area/provision, or where individual practitioners felt uncomfortable or ill-equipped to ask.

This inconsistency in types and quality of data collected can again lead to misrepresentation in analysis across and between organisations. With the aforementioned challenges in mind (e.g. overreporting), this poses significant difficulties in understanding which activities are reaching which groups – especially within minoritised communities. This makes it very difficult to build a clear picture of how and when provision is contributing to broader equity efforts.

3. The workforce struggles to meet the needs of the current generation of young people, who are both more ethnically diverse than ever, and more frequently and openly discussing and disclosing other dimensions of diversity.

Some youth workers struggle to understand what data is appropriate or 'necessary' to collect (and for what purpose), along with how to ask for, store, and analyse data in a way that is lawful (e.g. in terms of data protection) and ethical (e.g. in terms of 'good practice' – around which there is still much ambiguity and uncertainty, as this report seeks to demonstrate).

Alongside the process, capacity, and technical considerations above, we must also take stock of the social and cultural context for this work.

Today's social and cultural context means that we have a broader, richer, and more complex set of parameters within which young people are defining themselves. Young people can now be explicit about their nuanced and multifaceted identities, in ways that the generations before them were unable to. Increasing numbers of young people now identify outside the gender binary, and with a more contextualised understanding of disability. England – where YFF funding is focused – and the other countries of the UK are now increasingly multi-ethnic. On this basis, we can see ever more diversity within the generation of young people with which members of the youth workforce engage. Our current methods do not equip us to respond to this context.

Purpose of this project

The challenges outlined above are complex and interrelated. To further explore and understand some of these, the YMCA George Williams College (funded by Youth Futures Foundation) has begun an exploratory journey to examine, through the lens of young people and practitioners, their lived experiences, perspectives, and insights in relation to demographic data practices within the youth sector in England. Specifically, this project seeks to:

> A) Explore knowledge, practice, and views on the collection and use of demographic data relating to young people in youth provision; 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 project is in many ways a groundbreaking one, as there is such sparse evidence and experience that explores this issue in England or, more widely, the UK. Though the collection of demographic data has been built into England's formal, non-formal, and informal education and youth provision systems and structures for many years, there has not been a routine, formal review of demographic data collection to explore clarity, purpose, and impact for the charity/voluntary sector specifically - possibly because it is not clear who would lead this, and because the charity/voluntary sector is so broad with intersections across many other sectors such as healthcare, youth work, education, social care, youth justice, homelessness, and more.

Organisations like the Office for National Statistics (ONS) and parts of the education sector have reviewed and revised what demographic data gets collected and how it is collected. However, this has not led to a high level of consistency or clarity in practice. In the informal and non-formal education contexts, demographic data practices also lack co-ordination and oversight.

To fully explore A and B above, we will need to ask ourselves - can we capture good quality, 'accurate' demographic data that can be used to meaningfully tackle inequity? If so, can organisations collect this demographic data from the young people they are working with in an equitable, trauma-, gender-, and culturally- informed way?

Our initial exploration begins with a desk-based review and then, crucially, conversations and consultation with young people and practitioners. This first phase had specific aims, as follows. We 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.

What we have heard from this phase will feed into subsequent phases of this project and future work (see pages 61-63). This report seeks to summarise our initial explorations and to provide the **beginning of the conversation**: building the foundations of an evidence and practice base about how organisations working with young people can:

- Have honest and transparent conversations about young people's identities **and** how these relate to data practices within youth provision;
- Build strong and authentic relationships and engagement for sharing demographic data; and
- Consider and address the needs of both young people and practitioners, ensuring that they understand why data is collected, have clarity about how the data will be used, and therefore feel confident and competent to share and collect data because they are assured that the collected data will effectively contribute to promoting equitable practice.

Research considerations – an important note

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 be centred. This conversation begins by delving (with permission) into their lived experience, seeking to understand the perspectives of both those asking for demographic data and those being asked to provide it.

Firstly, a brief note on how we define 'demographic data'; we started this enquiry with 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.

In the initial focus groups, young people were provided with some examples of demographic data but also generated and suggested other categories themselves. In practitioner interviews, no specific categories were given as examples or in the interview questions – all categories were user-generated. For more information, please see the **Methodology** section.

Secondly, the history of demographic data collection is complex and long, dating back to at least the Roman Empire. Stakeholders' involvement in, motivations for, and discourse around personal data collection have all shifted over time (and with it, so have public perceptions and understanding) (Mahon, 2009). Who collects data and how they use it has always related to power, culture, and the priorities of wider society. With this in mind, as we start this conversation, we recognise that when the collection of additional demographic data categories commenced in earnest, including characteristics such as ethnicity and race in the UK Census in the 1990s (Laux, R., 2019), the UK and devolved country administrations' laws and acts on gender, race, and sexuality (amongst other things) were very different. Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion were not dominant considerations in the way they are today, in relation to both demographic data collection specifically, and community and service provision more widely. Nor were expectations and legislation around data security, control, ownership, and ethics.

Therefore, striving to 'fix' a process **that at its design excluded certain communities** (whether due to lack of acknowledgement or recognition, including in a discriminatory way, or to respect certain categories as 'private' to individuals), so that it meets the needs of previously excluded communities, should neither be quick nor reactive. This often results in achieving little more than what is colloquially described as a 'tick box exercise'. Such an approach would risk that we do not effectively address:

- Inequities in access to and experience of youth provision, including but not limited to data collection practices;
- Confusion about why demographic data is collected;

- The perpetuation of deficit narratives (e.g. where the focus of the experiences and attributes of certain communities are of interest for funding based primarily on deficits, without a true exploration of cause and effect, or systemic inequities); and
- Making the process of collecting data more respectful, humane, and considered.

The enduring impact of historical oppression is deeply ingrained within the UK and devolved countries' social, economic, and political structures. To progress this work authentically, we must keep an open mind and be prepared to be honest about the drivers and motivations for collecting demographic data, and the (many) implicit tensions.

The topic that we are seeking to explore through this project is fraught with such tensions, and you will find these highlighted throughout the report. We accept that we cannot necessarily relieve these tensions but believe that surfacing and seriously considering them is a vital first step in establishing more equitable demographic data practices.

Thought point

One might suggest that to address inequity, the sector needs to capture data about the identities of the young people that organisations are working with, so that we can understand who the sector is serving and how provision is meeting the needs of different communities. This might involve identifying disparities and inequities in access to high quality services, opportunities, and outcomes among different communities, and then acting on these observations to support equitable (re)distribution of resources.

However, collecting demographic data in an inequitable way - for example, reinforcing deficit narratives [6] , failing to communicate with young people in a transparent and honest way, or neglecting to act on data that has been collected - may in fact contribute to inequity, do harm, and undermine any intention to address inequity through demographic data monitoring.

The tension between potentially refinforcing deficit narratives or causing harm in other ways, and not underrepresenting the lived experience of minoritised or marginalised communities, is one which we cannot ignore and that we must address as a sector.

We believe that if we are to effectively tackle inequities, disparities, and discrimination, it is essential for organisations to be very clear and transparent about the data they collect, and how they use that data from the young people they serve.

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[6] For a definition of deficit narratives, see glossary on page 64.

With this in mind, we have taken time to conduct careful analysis and framing of the insights from our research, with an ambition to create space in the report to centralise the many and diverse voices of those who informed this study; highlighting some of the experiences, issues, and challenges they raised as well as their recommendations for improving the process. **For this reason, you will find that we have intentionally included a large number of quotes.** Wherever possible, we have also presented young people's and practitioners' perspectives through their verbatim (word-for-word) quotes.

In addition to the analysis, we held several internal discussions to draw on insight and knowledge from the wider YMCA George Williams College staff team, including our internal equity, diversity, and inclusion working group.

There is much work to do to make data and evaluation practices within the youth sector (and beyond) in England more equitable. This conversation is part of that work.

Thought point

The three core Principles of the Equitable Evaluation Framework™ (EEF) [7] offer a helpful way to frame the complexity of this work, with related orthodoxies, mindsets, tensions, and sticking points to traverse.

Three Principles of the Equitable Evaluation Framework ™
As defined by the Equitable Evaluation Initiative (EEI), these "foundational guideposts support reconceptualization of evaluative work, evaluative thinking, and decision-making. As such, the EEF Principles offer examination of the why and how and what of evaluation." (Equitable Evaluation Initiative, 2023).

- Principle 1: Evaluation and evaluative work should be in service of equity.

- Principle 2: Evaluative work should be designed and implemented commensurate with the values underlying equity work: multiculturally valid and oriented toward participant ownership.

- Principle 3: Evaluative work can and should answer critical questions about:
  - The ways in which historical and structural decisions have contributed to the condition to be addressed;
  - The effect of a strategy on different populations;
  - The effect of a strategy on the underlying systemic drivers of inequity; and
  - Ways in which cultural context is tangled up in both the structural conditions and the change initiative itself.

In thinking about the EEF Principles above for the purposes of this project more specifically, **how might we consider "demographic data practice"** - as these practices are a subset of 'evaluation and/or evaluative work' - **and the relationship and intertwining within and across the Principles?**

We are grateful to the EEI for sharing their work and Framework so that we might apply it to our work on this topic.

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[7] For more information on the Equitable Evaluation Initiative, the Equitable Evaluation FrameworkTM (EEF), and their work within US philanthropy and more broadly, see https://www.equitableeval.org/framework, and a full reference to the EEI's 2023 expanded paper, plus Jara Dean-Coffey's 2017 Framing Paper, in the reference list for this report.

Desk-based literature review

Before agreeing our research methodology (outlined below), we first conducted a desk-based narrative review of existing literature on the process of demographic data collection or demographic data best practice (and related terms), initially reviewing 21 core pieces of recent literature, Government-commissioned research, and reports from community organisations or 'grey literature'.

These items were studied to understand any current or previous research on demographic data collection with young people, and to explore whether there was existing guidance or any standardised tools available for the youth sector in England. We then reviewed an additional 20 items specifically on the topic of "deficit narratives", as we identified this as a significant factor and risk inherent in demographic data collection with young people. We found that literature articulating the relationship between deficit narratives and demographic data relating to young people is, again, extremely limited, and the scope is extremely large.

The original review was conducted in early 2023 and updated in mid 2024 prior to publication, with four additional papers added.

Crucially, with the exception of one piece of guidance from the Youth Endowment Fund (YEF) and some examples of data privacy notices on websites (that touch on demographic data in more or less detail) [8], we were unable to identify anything that was specific to England **and** to the context of working with young people. Anything relevant to young people was from America, and nothing published in the UK was specific to working with young people. This highlights a gap in the literature, underscoring the need for better understanding and guidance **specifically** for youth sector organisations in England and – to inform this – the need to have open conversations with those impacted by the process, so that guidance is informed by young people and youth work practitioners. We believe that this insight reinforces the need for further, thoughtful, and considered exploration through this project. NB. This does not include guidance on a 'demographic data standard' that is being developed by the College with Back Youth Alliance (BYA) Members through an iterative process, and aims to agree a common approach to describing the young people we work with. At the time of writing this report, the standards were not publicly available, however we anticipate they will be publicly available in the near future.

However, we did identify a wide range of studies, reports, and guides focused on improving the inclusivity and comprehensiveness of demographic data collection more broadly. These cover various aspects, including proposed best practices for question design, proactively encouraging ethnicity data disclosure, appropriately phrasing questions on gender and sexuality, and addressing challenges in collecting equity and diversity data from marginalised communities. Additionally, the literature provides insights into defining relevant data categories and ensuring meaningful consent in demographic data procurement, both in the private sector and public sector.

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[8] For example, Centrepoint, Mind, the Prince's Trust, and the Children's Commissioner for England.

Collecting and using demographic data

In England, the YEF has published a demographic data policy for any grantees that enter into a grant agreement with the Fund to carry out research (Youth Endowment Fund, 2023). The policy sets out why they collect data; data categories that are compulsory to collect (ethnicity, age, and sex); data categories that are optional (gender, sexual orientation; Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) and/or Education and Healthcare Plan (EHCP); Looked after children; Free School Meals (FSM) eligibility; Refugee status and/or asylum seeker status; English as Additional Language (EAL); School year); and additional guidance on ethnicity, age, and sex. It is not explicit whether the policy has been developed with young people or practitioners.

More broadly, there are or have been number of Government units working to ensure that data and evidence are serving the interests of those with protected characteristics (The Centre for Equality and Inclusion, the Inclusive Data Taskforce (now closed), UK Equalities Data dashboard, and the Equality Data programme).

Some US trusts and foundations have been leading and publishing work on demographic data collection. Peak Grantmaking published a comprehensive report on demographic data collection in the US, finding that just over half of survey respondents indicated that their organisations collect demographic date at some point in their grant making process. Overwhelmingly, this data was collected on who non-profit organisations were intended to serve and support, as opposed to staff and leadership of the delivery organisations (Brown, K., 2019).

Other trusts and foundations in the US have worked together to streamline demographic data collection and reduce the burden on grantees (Marrow, J., 2019). They have highlighted best practices from their work to date, including asking for demographic data once a funding decision has already been made (to reinforce that this data is not a factor in funding decision); ensuring that demographic data drives meaningful change and advances funders' institutional goals around diversity, equity, and inclusion (EDI) (Camarena, J., 2023); involving stakeholders in the design of data collection methods; being transparent about purpose; ensuring data privacy and protection (Nash, L., 2021); and using demographic data insights to drive an equitable response to the Covid-19 pandemic (Hare, C., Brown, K., Davis Parchment, C., Sines, M., 2020).

Inclusive and comprehensive approaches to demographic data collection

Some literature focuses on guidance for specific demographic data categories across different sectors: encouraging ethnicity data disclosure in the third sector (Holmes, J., Brown., Dr. D., CIPD, 2021); or discussing appropriate phrasing of questions on gender and sexuality to inform Public Health priorities (Gates, G. J., 2017). Other reports and articles discuss the broader challenges around collecting equity and diversity data from traditionally overlooked populations within the third sector (Buckingham, H. Dr., 2010) and the private sector (Almond, R., 2022; Andrus, M., Spizter, E., Brown, J., Xiang, A., 2021). Multiple articles focus on demographics of staff and leadership within the third/non-profit/voluntary sector (Clarke, M. 2019; Cooney, R., 2020; Chapman, T., 2020; Preston, R., 2022).

A report from the Trevor Project, the world's largest suicide prevention and crisis intervention organisation for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning (LGBTQ) young people, looks specifically at collecting sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) data from young people (2021). Their focus is on “best practices for measuring sexual orientation and gender identity among youth populations in ways that allow for nuanced individuality while still providing data that is useful for statistical analyses” (p.2) and includes some specific recommendations on pages 8-9, including a two-item measure of sexual identity (both a free-text response and a list of fixed categories). They also advise on item placement to avoid young people feeling that “their identity is viewed negatively by the researcher” (p.21), and flag the unique context of ‘measuring’ young people’s sexual orientation and gender due to the interaction of many aspects of their development and identity formation (p.4) – including changes over time (p.20) and “how multifaceted these constructs may be for youth.” (p.4). Finally, they – like others – emphasise the importance of providing rationale for asking specific questions. (p.18).

One 2016 paper, again from from the US, is a particularly robust example of research into demographic data question design. While it is focused on collecting data from College students in engineering, it explores variations of asking questions in more depth than any other study. It includes examples of “best use” questions and explores the topic in relation to gender identity; race, ethnicity, and culture; parents and family; socioeconomic status; sexual orientation; and ability and disability status (Fernandez, T., Godwin, A., Doyle, J., Verdin, D., Boone, H., 2016). In England, Devon County Council has also created a comprehensive guide on how equity and diversity questions should be asked (for their staff but also shared publicly to support other organisations). In addition, the Council compiles a yearly report on the data that expands on how it aims to act on the demographic data that it collects (Devon County Council, 2019).

One of the most recent papers that we found looks specifically at “a unified approach to demographic data collection for research with young children across diverse cultures” (Singh, L., Barokova, M. D., ; Baumgartner, H. A., ; Lopera-Perez, D. C., Omane, P. O., Sheskin, M.; Yuen, F. L., ; Wu, Y., Alcock, K. J.,; Altmann, E. C., et al., 2023). This is a particularly comprehensive piece that focused on demographic data collection in early childhood (0-3 years) research, exploring both the implications of different approaches for both data analysis and the participant/data provider’s experience, rights, and wellbeing. The authors make a case for standardisation of demographic data collection for research into early childhood from a global perspective [p.212] and highlight that “no standardized instrument currently exists to capture these details.” [p.213]. Through their research, they conclude that a single, standardized tool is not possible and so instead seek to “establish practices for cross-site harmonization” [p.222] – ultimately developing a framework for creating multiple tools across diverse contexts and goals. The paper promotes flexibility as key, provides reflections on data ethics and privacy, and encourages researchers to consider potential emotions and experiences around frustration, intrusion, and cognitive effort specifically when phrasing questions [p.220]. The also note that their work is in progress, inviting feedback on their open access resources that are tailored to specific contexts in language and content.

Finally, Advance HE have published guidance on collecting diversity monitoring data from university staff and students, which includes demographic data (Advance HE, 2024). One helpful aspect is that the guidance includes a dedicated section on ‘data for action’ (pp.7-8), with a suggestion that “institutions might wish to share examples of how diversity monitoring information has informed past initiatives in the institution and helped to remove barriers for staff and students. If there are no previous examples from within an institution, examples of how diversity data has led to improvements in similar contexts may be useful to include instead to illustrate the intended purpose.” [p.8] This speaks to some of the points made by young people and practitioners in focus groups and interviews around not understanding the purpose of specific data collection.

Whilst university students will be of varying ages, many will fall at the upper end of the National Youth Agency’s definition of a young person who may engage with youth services (11 to 19 years, or young adults up to the age of 25 depending on their needs.) [9] In addition, it serves as a reminder that young people accessing youth provision will be being asked for demographic data in multiple spheres of their lives, and in a variety of methods that is dependent on the context of that service or institution.

How relationships impact the quality of data collected

Little to no research has been done on how a sense of trust impacts the data being collected about young people (specifically) and their identities. Existing studies and articles focus primarily on effective and trustworthy engagement work within medical settings (Wilkins C. H., 2018); trust-based, values-aligned ways of collecting demographic data as a tool to spotlight gaps and opportunities in grant making (Salehi S. and Ford C., 2023); and using informed consent and mutuality to build trust and increase engagement with demographic surveys within grant making (Celosia A., 2021).

The aforementioned Advance HE guidance also includes advice on asking students about “how open [they] are about their sexual orientation across a variety of settings”, noting that “a variation of this question is recommended by the EHRC Employment Statutory Code of Practice.” (Advance HE, 2024). Whilst this does not touch on trust explicitly, it again highlights the different spheres and environments within which young people might or might not be asked to disclose personal information (which may indeed overlap if a young person seeks employment with their former youth provision or at their university). The extent to which a young person feels a sense of trust within these different environments will, inevitably, vary and be heavily influenced by relationships within those environements.

Deficit model thinking and demographic data collection

Literature is available that seeks to define deficit thinking and deficit narratives within research more broadly, primarily focused on how to identify and disrupt deficit thinking within educational research (Patton L. P., Museus, S. D., July 2019; Russell M., Oddleifson, C., Kish M.R., Kaplan L., 2022) and ascertaining “what actually constitutes deficit thinking in scholarly circles” (Patton L. P., Museus, S. D., 2019). The latter identifies four central themes that illustrate how deficit thinking is conceptualised and defined in existing research:

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[9] From the National Youth Agency (NYA) website article *What is Youth Work?* https://nya.org.uk/what-is-youth-work/

1. A blame the victim orientation;
2. A grounding in larger complex systems of oppression;
3. A pervasive and often implicit nature; and
4. Effects that reinforce hegemonic systems.

Patton and Museus' research suggests that these four interdependent themes are critical to the broader conceptualisation of deficit thinking. They argue that none are comprehensive enough by themselves to constitute 'deficit thinking' and that we must consider all four in order to fully understand its nature and impact.

How demographic data can perpetuate deficit narratives

There is limited literature that looks specifically at how demographic data practices can perpetuate deficit narratives, however Garfield Benjamin's 2021 paper offers an in-depth critique of data collection using data feminism [10] and a performative theory of privacy [11]. In their paper, they explore a wide range of considerations, including perceived stigmatisation, trust and privacy concerns, reinforcement of stereotypes, limited representation, emotional impact, power dynamics, intersectionality, inclusion and participation, ethical considerations, and opportunities for empowerment. They also critically assess the language and framing of demographic data "collection", exploring a number of alternatives including "creating", "curating", and "compiling". (Benjamin, G., 2021). Kevin Guyan's 2022 book, *Queer Data: Using Gender, Sex and Sexuality Data for Action*, is also the first to look exclusively at 'queer data' - defined as data relating to gender, sex, sexual orientation, and trans identity/history. Within this, Guyan explores how data practices currently reflect an incomplete account of LGBTQ lives and how data biases can be used to delegitimise the day-to-day experiences of queer people (Guyan, K., 2022).

Key findings from the literature referenced above are embedded and referenced within the core themes of the report, where relevant. A full list of the literature that was reviewed can be found in the bibliography on page 68.

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[10] 'Data feminism' refers to "a new way of thinking about data science and data ethics that is informed by the ideas of intersectional feminism" https://data-feminism.mitpress.mit.edu/

[11] 'Peformative theory of privacy' refers to a "new form of privacy is based on identity, consent and collective action, a process to be performed individually and together to create new structures that instil respect at the heart of our sociotechnical systems." https://digitalcommons.odu.edu/sociotechnicalcritique/vol1/iss1/1/

Research methodology

In this phase of our exploration, we aimed to engage and centre young people and practitioners – asking questions, listening, and learning about existing demographic data collection practices within the youth sector in England.

A mixed method approach to data collection was used: **semi-structured interviews** were the method of capturing perspectives from practitioners, whilst groups of young people shared their insights, lived experiences, and perceptions in **focus groups** that also functioned as **sharing spaces with their peers.**

We primarily focussed on groups who met on the basis of their shared experiences, which could be categorised as gender, sexuality, race/ethnicity, and disability. However, participants were often willing to explore and discuss areas of their broader or hidden characteristics and identities.

Example demographic data categories that relate to intersectional identities were introduced by the facilitators at the start of each focus group with young people, as they introduced themselves. Young people were then invited to come up with a 10-word sentence to explain how they would define their own identities. This was followed by questions around 'race, ethnicity, the language you speak, and other identities.' Young people were also provided with an example demographic monitoring form, which included questions on gender, age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion or belief, and caring responsibilities, so that they could annotate and provide feedback on it.

As already noted, no specific demographic data types were given as examples or in questions during the practitioner interviews – these were all user-generated.

YMCA George Williams College commissioned two external practitioner researchers, who are experienced in the fields of research and equality, diversity, and inclusion, to support and work alongside the project manager. These associates assisted in designing the methodology and collecting data from young people and practitioners, as well as a literature review and the production of this report.

Focus groups with young people

In planning this project, we are aware that asking young people to have conversations with researchers (who were relative strangers) around the purpose and process of collecting demographic data could make young people feel vulnerable. This was a key consideration in how we approached the research.

To begin, a diverse group of youth organisations that work with young people aged 14-24 were contacted, and practitioners at those organisations were invited to both engage in the project themselves and to share the project with the young people with whom they work, to gauge if they were willing to engage. These organisations were contacted because their provision was specifically 'targeting' and engaging young people from marginalised communities. This was intentional – the focus groups sought the views and lived experiences of young people who were being (or likely to be) asked to share demographic data, and thus we adopted a purposive sampling approach [12] to engage a cohort of organisations/young people most engaged in this practice. Our anecdotal experience suggested that organisations/practitioners offering universal youth provision were gathering demographic data either inconsistently or not at all. Given that this research is not a general enquiry into 'the state of affairs' or an assessment of quality practice, we did not prioritise these organisations for focus groups or semi-structured interviews. Equally, we acknowledge that those organisations/practitioners offering more targeted provision may have more developed practice – again, we note that this research is not an enquiry into or an assessment of quality. It is focused on the purpose and process of collecting demographic data, as experienced by young people and practitioners.

Where young people did want to engage in focus groups, the practitioners were the mediators between the young people and the researchers, using their knowledge of the groups to determine whether the young people were accompanied by practitioners or were introduced to the researchers with the practitioners then leaving the call or room, but being on hand to support if necessary on recognition that the content of sessions could be triggering for some young people.

The researchers considered the issues and impact of 'power' within the context and strove to reduce the hierarchy in the focus group process by ensuring that they immersed themselves in sharing insights into their own heritage and identities. As this research essentially took the form of an enquiry, rather than an 'objective' assessment of the state of practice, the researchers involved in focus groups and interviews were careful to contextualise their conversations with young people in their own experience, and share information they felt comfortable with to help build community. We acknowledge that this may have triggered or prompted certain responses from young people, and thus could be said to have introduced 'bias', but we maintain that a) this enquiry is built on trust and human connections, which requires disclosure and b) so-called 'objective' research is one element of the current 'system' or approach that both needed to be named/acknowledged, and interrogated. To increase engagement, the researchers told their stories supported by visuals, inviting young people to ask them questions for clarifications prior to commencing with asking questions of the young people.

The young people were then invited to share their lived experiences, perceptions, and knowledge of how they (as well as others) make assumptions or stereotype others, and how they themselves are stereotyped. This led into an exploration of their perspectives on how and why demographic data is collected from young people and, finally, the areas that they find problematic. The young people were also invited to share messages with those who are responsible for collecting or using the demographic data that is collected. A set of probe questions were introduced to guide these conversations, which resulted in a

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[12] 'Purposive Sampling' is a "form of non-probability sampling in which decisions concerning the individuals to be included in the sample are taken by the researcher, based upon a variety of criteria which may include specialist knowledge of the research issue, or capacity and willingness to participate in the research." (Oliver, 2013) https://www.betterevaluation.org/tools-resources/purposive-sampling

combination of discussion and turn-taking responses. These probe questions can be found in the report appendix on page 66.

The focus groups were delivered through a combination of online and face-to-face sessions, with the format being led by practitioners based on what was most preferable and appropriate for the young people at their organisation. Each session was planned for a maximum duration of 90 minutes. The young people were informed of the project's aims with a brief outline of how the data would be used and asked to consent to the practitioners using their anonymised data to populate the project's report. Each young person's participation was also rewarded with a voucher to the value of £20.00. All but one group quickly engaged with the process and, although the in-person sessions were more animated and sometimes more positively spirited, the levels of engagement from the young people were very much the same.

The exception referred to above was a specialised service, where the young people were less vocal in response to the semi-structured questions but confident enough to cross-examine the researchers about their identities and professional connections. They were suspicious about whether the researchers were somehow connected with law enforcement. These suspicions highlight the risks of exploring certain aspects of identity/ies within certain settings.

There was a total of 10 focus groups with young people, with 63 young people participating from areas including Northampton, Birmingham, Manchester, West Yorkshire, South Yorkshire, Canterbury, and London. The young people were aged from 14-24 and the average attendance at each session was five. Each session was facilitated by two researchers: one who led the questions and discussions and the second whose role was to capture the data with handwritten notes. The notes were typed and themed for analysis and to juxtapose with insights from the practitioners.

Semi-structured interviews with practitioners

15 practitioners were contacted from the same geographical areas as the young people's focus groups, as well as the Southwest and East Anglia. The practitioners who participated work in varied roles within the youth sector and, as their services and roles were diverse, so too was their involvement in supporting young people with providing demographic data.

The practitioners were informed of the aims of the project and were asked to consent to having their data inform the project. Each interview was scheduled for a maximum of 90 minutes, conducted online with one researcher, recorded, and then transcribed.

These interviews used a core set of questions to understand demographic data collection and equitable evaluation practice in organisations specifically reaching minoritised communities (see appendix page 66 for the questions used). Discussions were particularly focused on experiences of capturing and phrasing demographic information.

Analysis

Notes and transcripts from the 15 interviews and 10 focus groups were coded through NVivo, followed by inductive thematic analysis. This involved coding all the data before identifying and reviewing five key themes:

- Trust;
- Communication;
- Accessibility;
- Young people's perceptions of their identities; and
- Data and equity.

Each key theme was iteratively examined and collaboratively defined to gain a deeper understanding of participants' experiences.

The raw data and transcripts were then revisited by the research team for deeper understanding, comparisons, conflicts, and concrete examples of lived experiences. This analysis was reviewed alongside the key themes above, and we have drawn on both to present key insights in this report.

Findings

In this section, we introduce key findings from the focus groups with young people and interviews with practitioners. For presentation purposes, these findings are arranged under three headline sections, with specific sub-themes included underneath. Additional context is provided where relevant.

1 - Why do organisations collect demographic data?

Young people

Young people are not clear or confident on why demographic data is collected, but often 'conform' or 'concede' to sharing it. Communication from those asking for it is generally lacking. 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, and a reluctancy to engage in the process/request.

In England and Wales, data about identity characteristics has been collected through the Census for hundreds of years (since 1801), although the categorisations of data have required regular updating with the significant increase of people from the commonwealth and colonies. Across the UK, responsibility and reasoning for the collection and use of demographic data through national surveys has shifted in response to changing cultural and economic priorities (Mahon, 2009). More recently, the 2010 Equality Act included and drew attention to communities who were previously omitted from protection through legislation.

The rationale behind the collection of demographic data **within youth provision specifically** was explored during both the young people's focus groups and the practitioners' interviews. Discussions in each highlighted that both young people and practitioners lacked clarity on the reasons behind the collection of demographic data currently, although both groups associated the collection with funders and, in some cases, marketing or advertising provision. The views of the young people included:

> "I've never been told why but also haven't gone out of my way to find out."
>
> "No, I have no idea what people are doing with data."
>
> "To my knowledge, what I think about data being collected is about who to advertise to."

> "To access different funds/pots of money – been told it once..."
>
> "Nearly every school, workplace, some require info, but they don't let us know why. It would be beneficial."
>
> "I don't understand why they need to know all these things... like if they have my name and DOB, isn't that enough?"
>
> "I have never found out why they ask."
>
> "Marketing opportunity for people seeking business opportunity rather than addressing [the] problem."

Some of the other views held by young people about the collection of data included:

> "If it's just taken for the sake of it... if doing something about it, that's when we care about whether they're going to use that data for change."
>
> "Even if I weren't to tell them, they would know from looking at me - my name isn't British! They're gonna know, so even if I have doubts, I concede."
>
> "Data can feed into prejudice."

When conducting the analysis, it was interesting to read the words "conform" and "concede" associated with how the young people feel about being asked to provide demographic data. In a number of cases, young people were reluctant to provide the data because they were unsure of where the data ends up, and for what purposes it is used, and by whom. In some cases, young people shared vague ideas from conversations they may have been involved in or overheard, but they could not state with confidence that they knew why demographic data was collected.

The language of "conform" and "concede" are words associated with power. Garfield Benjamin (2021) writes about power imbalance in their paper, stating that "the shift in meaning of data over time towards something that needs to be "collected", no longer "given" but "found" or "taken", is tied to its more active use in exploiting data to control people and society based on previous observations." (p.4) They note how (among other factors) a lack of clarity on "what data is or should be" can make it "difficult for individuals and communities, particularly those already marginalised, to examine what data practices are happening to them, or to grasp the full reach of what data collection means." (p.3). It is clear from the focus groups that, though not explicitly stated by the young people, power or perceived lack of power was at play in their relationships with practitioners and/or the instituations for which the practitioners are a representative.

Young people also questioned the relevance of the data, perhaps a symptom of the lack of clarity around what the data would be used for. It was also highlighted that some demographic categories can feel more abstract or require more sensitivity than others. Some young people voiced their views in the following statements:

> "Information is randomly collected, what's the point? Why do they need to know if I'm Bengali. I just fill out random forms."
>
> "Sexuality – not relevant."

'Relevance' was a recurring issue in the focus groups, which led to the young people sharing more about their feelings when presented with forms for which they were questioning the relevance specifically:

> "I feel bored - you get the same forms every time."
>
> "Have to fill this in again!"
>
> "Generates fear."
>
> "I think once when we were doing the 6th Form applications, wondering what they will do with that information - all stressed about the application - ethnicity something we can't change about ourselves, will that affect the application...Applying is a stressful process - being asked demographic details adds to the stress."
>
> "In an equal world we wouldn't need to have different identities – because of the inequality in the world we need identities... I conform to expectations, don't feel comfortable expressing my culture. People not saying or not being able to pronounce my name. [It's] easier to express [my] identity when with others like me."
>
> "Feels different to some of the groups who aren't like me...Feel I have to change my identity to fit in, talk a certain way. Code switching – purposeful, self-aware of identity but not in control of it."

Boredom, fear, stress, and exasperation were some of the emotions generated in young people when they were presented with demographic data requests. Considered alongside young people's questions on the relevance of demographic data forms, this highlights that there is some work to be done to improve the **communication** around the purpose of collecting data. Specifically, there is work to do on the purpose for young people themselves, as opposed to the purpose solely for the organisation/s involved. Some young people explicitly felt that data collection primarily served the interests of the organisation or system, rather than benefiting them or young people more generally. This perception further contributed to their hesitancy to share their identity data when asked.

This view from young people resonated with the voices in a study by Chicago Beyond (2019), which found that:

> "... in many communities, the remembered history is that when the community and research institution interact, the institution benefits. Countless research surveys mine communities for the raw material of lived experiences, without yielding much for the community—or worse. Yet, there remains a lack of evidence about the value

> of interventions for those from whom the most has been taken. That 'lack of evidence' justifies investing less still."
>
> (Chicago Beyond, 2019, p. 15).

Lack of **communication** around the purpose of data collection is a key finding and theme that emerged from the analysis. Young people believed that straightforward explanations would encourage more open sharing of data. They also emphasised the need for readily accessible information that explains the reasons behind data collection. As one young person aptly put it:

> "Don't hide it in the terms and conditions, no one reads that!"

Benjamin's (2021) work further highlights the importance of ethical considerations in the collection of data from people, arguing that "thinking about collective data ethics and data protections must also lead towards more representative governance of data throughout the ecosystem and lifecycle." (p.13) Informed consent, clear communication about the purpose and use of data, and providing support for emotional wellbeing are essential to ensure a respectful and ethical process when collecting demographic data from young people. However, the lived experiences of young people in this study suggest this is not consistently happening across the sector.

Practitioners

Practitioners similarly feel ambiguity or confusion around purpose of demographic data collection, and in particular the likely impact on young people. This points to a need for improved communication around the purpose of demographic data collection in the youth sector itself.

Both young people and practitioners often associate demographic data with funders and, sometimes, marketing or advertising provision. Practitioners particularly associate inconsistent or differentiated requests with funders.

Views on what is 'relevant' data varies, and sometimes intersects with legal and medical responsibilities (e.g. allergies or specific legislation, including GDPR and the 2010 Equality Act). Other data does not but may still 'feel sensitive'. This again points to issues with communication. It further raises a question of "who gets to define 'relevance'?" within the context of demographic data requests.

Some practitioners understood (from their organisational perspectives) why demographic data was collected. This was predominantly linked to a request from funders, although there was no strong consensus, as most were either unsure or appeared to understand the reasons based on their bespoke services:

> "There's always an explanation. And the explanation varies depending on the project..."

> "I've always been shocked at how much demographic data they require...we have a couple of major funders... I hand it over to the funder. And, you know, they kind of deal with it...we've got our set demographic data that we collect for our own purposes."

> "I've got to say it tends to be more for the larger statutory bodies rather than the smaller funders; the smaller funders don't tend to ask, though they do ask us as an organisation... so when we fill out an application form, or [they] say, you know, do you work with people with 'a', you know, from an ethnic minority, with a disability, that identify as this or that, and it's you know... so they assume we collect that information and thereby able to, to analyse it first-hand for their report, their questions."

Echoing the young people's own reflections, practitioners also shared that the young people they worked with generally questioned the volume of the data that was requested, particularly when data was probed in ways that were less meaningful or felt irrelevant to them.

> "What is important for them to have for college – name, DOB, school, gender, ethnicity, religion - but disability and allergies... is it relevant? Sometimes it feels a bit unnecessary - sixth form applications asking about ethnicity - we were wondering what they are going to do with that information."

Views on what is 'relevant' varied, and sometimes intersected with legal and medical responsibilities, which again points to issues with communication (for example, it might be hoped that a College would explain to a young person why they need to know about allergies or disabilities).

> "Like the young people, most of the time I don't want to complete the form because it is just useless, I don't think it is important to have that stuff [information]."

This final quote, which indicates that both the young people and the practitioner did not want to engage in the process as it was deemed meaningless to them, reflects a view represented in almost all the young people's groups. There was what could be described as a sense of disconnectedness and apathy, some of which could be attributed to the fact that there are a range of inconsistent forms presented to young people that request (what appeared for some) a lot of personal information, and they did not understand why or what the information would be used for. This is likely to contribute to a lack of ('accurate') demographic data across the sector. It also raises a question of "who gets to define 'relevance'?" within the context of demographic data requests.

From the practitioner interviews, it could be argued that some associated the differentiated data requests with the different demands and interests of individual funding organisations. Again, this implies a lack of **communication** about the purpose of demographic data collection, as well as a lack of join up or consolidation of demographic data processes and requests.

This inconsistency in demographic data approaches – and a perceived lack of access or ownership for those who might be in a position to use the data to inform their practice - is recognised in the literature although, again, it is not specific to the youth sector in England or the UK.

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

In this section, we start with headline responses from young people in relation to how organisations might identify them. [13] We then introduce several sub-themes related to the types of demographic data that organisations collect and/or what they might do with it: the complexities of young people's identities; the language of demographic data collection; trust, disclosure, and representation; identifying gaps in practitioner competencies; and issues with a one-size-fits-all approach. These sub-themes include reflections from both young people and practitioners.

All the issues raised above are to some extent encapsulated in power dynamics. [14] This, interestingly, is not amongst the language used explicitly 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', assumes a passive position and therefore whether overtly named or not, we believe there is power at play.

Young people

> Demographic data categories have the potential to exacerbate existing stereotypes, enable bias, and reinforce deficit narratives - so they must be chosen carefully.

Young people were asked if it mattered to them how organisations identified them. What became clear from their responses, and those of the practitioners, was that the topic of identities was a complex one.

Multiple young people shared their experiences of others making assumptions about their identities. As previously mentioned, there was a top line acceptance that data was collected to support working towards equity. Young people highlighted that they were generally comfortable with the interpretation of their identities by organisations they **trusted.**

However, during the focus groups, young people introduced a range of words associated with 'identity', including 'stereotyped', 'labelled', and 'categorised' – words that generally hold negative connotations. The young people's comments present a mix of perspectives and feelings in relation to this:

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[13] As per page 17, we note again that 'identity' and 'demographic data' are not synonymous. In addition, whilst how organisations identify young people clearly does matter, they may also do this in a lot of ways other than collecting demographic data.
[14] 'Power dynamics' relate to the balance of power between different people and/or groups, including how power is distributed and maintained.

> "For me, I think everybody automatically makes assumptions, it is a human thing to do…Not letting those first assumptions or how you interpret people at face value first time get in the way of getting to know them is important…"

> "In terms of youth cabinets using me as a label to fit certain criteria, I have no problem with that because I value the values of the youth cabinet."

> "I don't mind me being labelled 'low income' if it means they get more funding - narrative that first came to mind."

> "Putting people into categories can highlight the ones that need more of them or less of them, it just shows what needs to be worked on and so I don't think it is a problem."

> "What am I comfortable with - sex, religion, sexual orientation - that is fine because [you're] showing that [you're] trying to remove that stigma of people…"

> "Yes, [it's] important that people are identified in a particular way - shows that you respect that person as an individual and individuality is important to me as a young person."

> "Yes, because it frames how they treat you. People have biases – fact. If perceived in a certain way, it impacts how they treat you. Bias exists and so it does matter."

In some groups, there were longer, emotive discussions on the subject of stereotyping, especially amongst young people who were associated with faith communities:

> "Whenever I have been stereotyped it is about my faith, not about my ethnicity or gender, I know when it happens it is always to do with my faith."

> "I think… people do stereotype, and it has happened to me as a Muslim, people have talked about me. People know because I wear a headscarf, people ask me why I wear it, why I am a Muslim…do you have hair, do you have to wear it?"

> "I am very conscious of stereotypes, sometimes it depends on the type of stereotype, I am offended. I haven't been stereotyped as a dangerous person but my friends who have similar identities to me have - like terrorists - my faith is stereotyped, gender, ethnicity."

> "I am not that conscious of stereotyping, but when I am, it is my skin colour or my age… I am short and in year 11 people think I am in year nine! I am Asian but I look white, I don't look Asian. Unless it is stereotyped in an offensive way, I don't mind being stereotyped."

Whilst some young people shared that they did not mind being labelled or 'placed into categories', they also highlighted the importance of being respected and the existence and impact of bias.

The perceptions of the young people were reflected in the literature, most notably in Chicago Beyond's guidebook (2019), which highlights the often unspoken of power imbalance between those asking people for data and those being asked for their information. The impact, when no effort is made to address the power imbalance, is that it can exacerbate existing disparities and stereotypes. Again, their study highlights the importance of responsive **communication** with groups who are accessed for data about what matters to them and any benefits of being involved and sharing information.

Stereotyping can also reinforce deficit narratives when communities were categorised by their perceived social, power, and economic deficits. In their analysis of deficit thinking, Davis et.al (2019) assert that "deficit thinking is historically grounded in dominant classist and racist ideologies that frame oppressed people as deficient…and can be traced back to misbeliefs about minoritised groups." (para 11). They further assert that, "deficit thinking is inextricably intertwined with meritocratic ideologies, which suggest that everyone has an equal chance to succeed within existing sociopolitical structures." (para 12). When demographic data is used to craft stories and meet a specific objective (for example in external marketing or in promotion of a funding opportunity), the risk of stereotyping and deficit narratives is exacerbated.

The complexities of young people's identities

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 identity 'figured out') and, where demographic data relates to identity, is directly influenced by the fact that young people are continually forming their identities as they grow up. Feeling pressure to have an answer about their identity can create feelings of pressure for young people.

Data-driven insights can only be generated from reliable, meaningful (and often comparable) data. However, in the current age, where demographic data relates to identity, categorisation can 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.

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identity, categorisation can 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.

Young people's own perceptions of their identities are often complex. Some young people felt that the options provided by the demographic data collection process represented identities that fit into simple compliance boxes. These narrow options were, in some cases, problematic, as young people felt that aspects of their identities were fluid and there was no place for recording fluidity or any cultural complexities. Focus group discussions of narrow options was predominantly related to ethnicity, sexuality, and disability. Their experiences were expressed in the following comments:

> "When you fill out category on sexuality - extremely fluid! One month might feel bisexual, next month lesbian, but there isn't an in between because it changes a lot - when you have to tick one box, that can be quite hard. One form I was filling in I had no idea what to say because it changes a lot and I think that is fair to say for a lot of people."
>
> "Names - my actual name isn't xxx; I have a xxx name, but my parents gave me an English name on my birth certificate because they thought it would be easier for me to live in England...And on exams I have to put my xxx name first and sometimes I forget which one to put down."
>
> "A lot of it is categorising yourself in boxes, tick boxes that make up you - you are a box, you're a tick - especially when using to collect data and stuff...Might not be true to how you actually feel but tick a box because that is what everyone has told you to do."
>
> "Because I am trans, sometimes it is hard to draw the distinction of where I use my given name and where I use xxx, or where I put my birth sex. At the moment, I like to be referred to as male but on some forms where it doesn't explicitly say, do they want me to put what I was given at birth or how I identify now – [it's] not a clear drawn line."
>
> "You have to make up an identity based on what you didn't really decide e.g. UCAS applications' nationality and ethnicity - never understood the difference, from a young age, told I was Chinese, my parents are Chinese, I look Chinese, so I thought that was my nationality and ethnicity - but someone said to me you're born in England, you're British. So, on forms, I do put I am British because I was born in England. It is a minor thing, but it is curious to me."
>
> "No, the options are definitely not me. They don't give me a space to write it out. The question makes me feel like I'm not being seen or recognised."
>
> "The personal identity that I am willing to share with anybody - depends on intention behind it, I have a disability I don't know if I would want everyone to know that and make assumptions about what I can and can't do?"

‘Gaps’ or ‘holes’ in data collection can lead to some people perceiving that their identities have been overlooked. Garfield Benjamin’s (2021) review further explores how demographic data collection methods can contribute to a sense of identity erasure, when presenting data in simplified ways without sufficient choice options and when intersectionality [15] is not acknowledged:

> On the one hand, data collection can impose fixed categories (such as gender and/or sexual identities and/or expressions) on people for whom such categories do not apply, while on the other hand, lack of acknowledgement of intersecting categories (such as being both Black and a woman) can perform and thereby impose deficit narratives. In both cases, people’s identities and experiences are often erased.
>
> (Benjamin, G., 2021, p.9.)

Benjamin also notes how ‘agency over one’s own life and experiences is subsumed under the imposition of categories for administration, monitoring or control by dominant actors.’ (p.10.) For example, vulnerable young people may perceive demographic data collection as stigmatising, especially if the questions focus on sensitive topics such as socioeconomic status, family background, or mental health. In these cases, young people are not asked about accomplishments, but asked to explain vulnerabilities, which they are expected to ‘perform’ or explain in a ‘socially acceptable’ way. Again, this approach risks promoting deficit narratives.

In our research, both young people and practitioners acknowledged the pressure that asking young people about their identities puts on them to obtain this knowledge themselves. The young people’s voices also showcase some of the wider internalised processes and (again) emotions generated when presented with requests for personal information, especially when there may be claims that the information will be used to support equity and underrepresentation, yet the processes are limited - which can validate some of the young people’s questions of relevance.

It is clear that the process of collecting demographic data related to identity can have an impact on young people’s own identity formation. This is something that Guyan (2022) explores in Queer Data (specifically in relation to gender, sex, and sexuality data) where he highlights how…

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[15] Intersectionality is rooted in Black feminism and activism and was coined by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw in the following paper: Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics. University of Chicago Legal Forum, 1989(1), 139–167.

> …collection methods can encourage participants to evaluate their identities in new and unexpected ways. The collection of data related to identity characteristics can therefore operate as a form of consciousness-raising that provides participants with information and ideas about how they relate to others. The back-and-forth between researcher and participant is not a one-way exchange of data."
>
> (Guyan, K., 2022, p.51)

Thought point

In presenting 'eight queer questions for those engaged in the collection, analysis, and use of gender, sex and sexuality data', Guyan (2022) advocates for the collection of data that present an authentic account of lived experience, suggesting that "rather than adopt methods that promise a tidy dataset, [we] recognise that data about identity characteristics is leaky, pluralistic and can change over time". (p.192)

This recommendation resonates with what we have heard through this research, highlighting another tension in relation to the sector's ability to generate meaningful insight. This tension is also explored in The Trevor Project's 2021 report on *Measuring Youth Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity*, where they note how "the LGBTQ youth who complete [their] surveys consistently indicate a desire to express SOGI with a level of detail and nuance that goes beyond the mutually exclusive options which provide the most utility for research practices." (p.21)

Demographic data - does the language need clarifying?

Lack of clarity is exacerbated by inconsistent use of language in the sector by those driving demographic data collection.

Practitioners are calling for training and support so that they feel better equipped to have conversations with young people about both identity and demographic data language.

The quotes from young people shared under previous themes also demonstrate a lack of clarity specifically in relation to questions about nationality and ethnicity. This was similarly raised by practitioners, who identified that there is a corresponding lack of education surrounding the meaning of terms relating to demographic data and/or identity. They noted how this results in confusion for both the practitioner and the young person, and articulated (amongst others) the following views:

> “What’s very interesting about ethnicity in the UK is that we don't educate between the difference between ethnicity and nationality. And we're very poor at that. You know? So, there's a thing on one of our forms for XXX… it talks about Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Black, Black African, Caribbean, White British. […] And every year, I put my head in my hands, and I think when is someone going to change this bloody form? Because it just does my head in. Because if you're born in the UK, 99% of the time, you're going to be British, and therefore all of the other ethnicities are not the same as your nationality. And that's what I mean by I think we often confuse young people, and we are certainly and in doing that we will enforce the negative stereotypes.”
>
> “My thing would be, what, what's the purpose around it [collecting demographic data]? And also, the thing about when we teach young people about it, we suddenly spring it on them. You know, tell me, tell me all about you. And they're a bit like ‘what?’ And as I say, we don't educate around ethnicity and nationality. And I think that can cause quite a few confusions.”
>
> “It's kind of hard for me because I'm aware of like other communities, but I haven't been in [or] worked with them enough, whereas communities that I've been working with are quite specifically, probably above 90%, white British, and issues around gender identity seem very kind of black and white.”

Practitioners shared that, in some instances, they felt as confused as the young people by the lack of clarity in language, as well as ill-equipped to effectively support young people with guidance on the data they share. Some attributed this to a lack of training to equip them to engage confidently or support the young people with clarity on concepts and definitions that can feel abstract.

There is limited research in response to this specific challenge, although Fernandez, et. al. (2016) recommend that suggestions and decisions on language and phrasing “must be treated within the unique context of each research project.” (Discussions and Conclusions section, para 1). Fernandez, et. al. (2016) , and Chicago Beyond (2019) both also highlight the importance of comprehensive choices, the option to select more than one identity, as well as the option to self-identify. However, this guidance has not been produced in the specific context of young people in England or the UK.

Trust, disclosure, and representation

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

Focus group conversations explored whether failure to connect with the options offered on forms – due to lack of clarity on purpose and use, limited options, and confusion caused by ambiguous language - can lead to young people misrepresenting themselves; not because they desire to, rather because the factors above compel them to.

At times the relationship between the young person and the practitioner, both as an individual and as a representative of the organisation, was an important consideration in what the young people disclosed and whether they provided false information - for example, the presence or absence of trust for the person and/or the organisation may be an influencing factor.

> "The credibility of persons/institution collecting the data kinda makes me hold back."

There were some young people who were willing to share that they were justified in misrepresenting themselves on forms. The practitioners' interviews also demonstrated that they are aware that young people use the strategies of avoidance and misrepresentation for what they described as 'protection'.

Some of the young people shared their responses to the question of "would/do you ever lie on forms?" in the following statements:

> "Depending on who is collecting the data - I have definitely lied on forms for school because I know that it could be identifiable…On some forms I don't lie because they don't know who it is coming from, so it feels anonymous."
>
> "I have lied on a couple of forms when I am just not comfortable with some of the information – 'prefer not to say option' I always tick that or if whatever I feel like isn't going to get questions, I can keep in my personal bubble."
>
> "Disability, I've had to hide my disability from jobs because a lot of jobs… I've been in some pretty bad jobs and they would've used it against me if they'd known, so I just say no disability or prefer not to say, in order to protect myself."

Another young person shared that they would avoid disclosures that would result in practitioners needing to elicit further personal details from them:

> "In school they already know me, they know what they need to know about my medical history and identity, so no point in me lying, but if someone else asks a

> question and if I put the honest answer, they'll want to talk to me about it...Helps me be the decision maker about what I want to talk about and to whom - generally I'm quite private and would rather not talk about it and if I tick a box, they will want to speak about it, then I don't put it."

The practitioners also provided insights into some of the challenges they face whilst thinking through the process of communicating about and collecting demographic data and navigating their relationships with young people. As with the young people, practitioners felt that relationships were important, as well as sometimes complex and dependent on the age of the young person. The different voices of the practitioners demonstrate some of the complexities and tensions they face when collecting personal data in diverse contexts, providing differentiated services with varied professional backgrounds, experience, and roles.

> "Sometimes, you got to have those conversations with them, sometimes about what it is you're actually asking? Sometimes questions aren't very clear. Sometimes they don't know what to say, or they're too, too embarrassed to say something on the form. Sometimes it's just like, 'Why are you asking me?', 'What's, you know, why do you need to know that for?', 'What difference does it make?'"

> "You've got to treat them as if they're an adult. And what are you doing with that information? Why do we want to collect it? What benefit is it to them? So, I think it's having honest conversations with them. I'm not saying it should be filled in one to one, but there needs to be some sort of level of supervision of completing the information as well, mainly, so they've got that they can ask those questions if they've got any extra questions. Some guide, you know, guidance..."

> "I've had a few where the, you know, they've gone shy, or look at you a bit blank. Or even, you know, I've had one or two where they've gone 'What do you need to know that for? I'm not telling you and that's it'. It's just that shutter come down...you've got to build a little bit of rapport first."

> "I think if you just left them to their own devices to answer them, then yes, they possibly would just tick whatever box they came across. Don't get me wrong. That's not everyone, every young person, some will happily share that information and be informed and comfortable to share. And that's what we always aim for, isn't it? But there will be some that don't?"

> "We explain how some of that information is used. And then we get them to fill it out. And then I have a quick look, and I go, oh, you've left all of this blank, have it back - because it's two sided. So, whilst some people understand why we're doing it, it's just a form. And nobody likes filling out forms. So sometimes they just refuse to do it. And that's fine enough."

> "You get young people wanting to avoid answering questions mainly around sexual orientation, or, and quite a lot of cases now around gender. Because some families don't agree with, you know, being anything other than, you know, straight, and

> female or male, there's no kind of, transgender allowed and there is kind of still that. So, they probably would lie and put that into something else."

Practitioners shared that they were aware that some young people required reassurance that the information they shared would not be shared with parents or carers.

They were also aware that with all the tensions generated by the collection and provision of demographic data, it has been a process that, if they feel safe, young people can use to share aspects of their emerging identities that they feel unable to share within their family or social settings (e.g. sexuality or immigration status). However, they also identified cultural and religious barriers that can result in young people feeling ostracised or excluded from the process.

Whilst **trust** is clearly an enormous part of the researcher/practitioner/young person relationship, little to no research has been done on how a sense of trust impacts the data being collected on/about young people. Existing studies and articles focus primarily on effective and trustworthy engagement work within medical settings (Wilkins C. H., 2018), and the role of within the context of collecting demographic data for grant making purposes within the US (Salehi S. and Ford C., 2023; Celosia A., 2021).

The relationships between funders, organisations, young people, and demographic data collection have also not been explored in depth in this study, but should be explored as an integral part of the review of equity, funding, and the building of healthy mutual relationships.

Identifying gaps in practitioner competencies

Practitioners feel discomfort 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 and would value opportunities for training in engaging creatively with sensitive subjects.

Requests from those driving data collection can feel in tension with the best interests of young people.

The practitioners that we spoke to were self-aware during the interviews and, in their pursuit to provide high quality services and experiences for the young people they serve, reflexive.
They were explicit in identifying deficits in their own professional competencies, alongside highlighting the impact of **inaccessible** demographic data collection methods that do not meet the needs of young people with lower levels of literacy and/or digital competency. This was highlighted as a factor resulting in both a need for them to be better prepared as staff, and another logical reason for limited engagement from young people. These issues were not raised or explored in the young people's focus groups.

One practitioner shared that:

> "Sometimes they [young people] have to read quite a lot. And I do think literacy levels aren't necessarily as good as they could be. I mean, we do allow the majority of young people in the UK to finish school without a GCSE in English. So, at that point, you know, forms are quite often inaccessible. And when we're using language or words that maybe they're not used to seeing on a form, you know, they're used to seeing what's your ethnicity, they're not always used to seeing other words or other statements. So that can be quite confusing for them... I ask, so why have you left all of this blank? But for some of them, they shrug, and they go, yeah well, it's not relevant... And I think, you're not okay to share that yet. And that's fine. You know, who wants to go around telling the world their personal business?"

Other practitioners shared their lack of ease at asking demographic data questions, because they understand the discomfort the questions create for some young people. One practitioner provided the example of young people needing to complete demographic forms in relation to social issues that are faced by their parent/s or carers rather than anything that is directly related to them:

> "They don't necessarily understand why I'm asking if you're on free school dinners. That that feels too much. Because that is something that is imposed on them. They experience some things because of their parents' situation, not because of their own. Some things are maybe a bit more personal...They write comments. Prefer not to say, or this isn't relevant. So, I get that feedback. And I completely understand, some will just leave it all blank, you know, and fill in the bits that they feel comfortable with."

Again, this relates to **young people's perceptions of their identities** and highlights a tension or disconnect between the reality of this and the intentions or motivations of those driving demographic data collection.

Other perceptions and experiences of the practitioners included:

> "They [the young people] switch off if it's inaccessible, because the language or it's too much, it's too overwhelming... And if the language is inappropriate, because it's not pitched at them, they just disengage. So, we really do need to work quite hard on making sure how we get the requests to them."

> "So, most of the time, my role is handing out equal opportunities forms, as we call them, demographic kind of thing, to workers and young people. Young people hate filling them out, because they're boring, and laborious and they don't often make a lot of sense to them. So, we often say if you don't want to, input your initial on it, and I know where you're from, you only have to do it once a year. But we do make them do at least annually."

One practitioner shared that they persisted with completing the forms despite their own discomfort, as the process supports them to gain insights into the young person's lived experiences and social context, but again flagged the need for skills and support for staff:

> "I do feel uncomfortable. And I think what makes me more uncomfortable isn't asking the question, because that's about understanding young people's needs and workers have also found this is the interesting thing, filling out those sheets with young people. And those particular answers to questions have allowed workers insight into their young people's lived experience... So, they didn't know, they were on free school dinners. So that means that they can improve their service, you know, so it does give us a way in to maybe some of the conversations we wouldn't normally have. But that's a skill in itself, you know, the worker has to be on the ball. If they're aware of what they're doing, why they're doing and how they can use the information, it makes it so much better when people don't just see it as a form to fill out, they see it as a tool to engage and to understand the person they're working with. If you can get the workers to understand that actually, you could be picking up on stuff, right?"

Generally, practitioners shared that they didn't necessarily feel equipped to have demographic data conversations. They identified that they would benefit from further explorations of the impact of the process on young people. They also shared that they would value opportunities for training in engaging creatively with sensitive subjects.

> "And I think also, like, people might not always feel equipped to talk about things like yeah, like gender and sexuality. Or like, you know, and there's so much more. And because I think over the last couple of years as well, there's been a lot more focus on equity and diversity".

> "And I know that I've struggled with the ethics a bit at times in terms of knowing at what point within that relationship with the young people we work with that we can then ask, because then people just say kind of like straightaway get them to fill in this, all of the kind of questionnaires or all of the data collection, so we have it, and then if they choose to opt out, then we can get rid of it, then. So, for me...I'm still kind of, I still feel not completely confident in terms of where I stand ethically, I'd say."

One practitioner also noted the risk of bias when practitioners are required to support young people's understanding of abstract terms or concepts related to identity:

> "And I think the difference, from my perspective, I learned that through being trained as an educator, which is all about delivering abstract ideas, but finding something relatable for them within that. And I kind of learned the hard way that you give young people one concrete thing, they just go, that's it."

In exploring self-identification and multiple response options (specifically for sexuality), the work of Fernandez, et, al. (2016) notes how bias can creep in at analysis stage specifically: "other research has offered solely write-in blanks to allow for complete self-identification, but this leads to either completely qualitative results or to researchers imposing their own interpretation onto students' self-identification as they categorize responses." (Improved approach section, para 1). They further suggest that demographic data response "items should be reasonably interpretable and representative of the spectrum of possible responses in the population under study", following piloting and testing of potential response options. (How to ask demographic questions section, para 3).

Issues with a 'one size fits all' approach

The process of collecting demographic data requires time, consideration, relationship building, and provision of specific support from practitioners to young people (e.g. in 'translating' language on forms, or facilitating supportive, trusting conversations about identity).

Demographic data collection takes place across a broad scope of youth provision and settings. As already noted in previous sections, practitioners raised consideration around ethics of collecting data from young people from ages 13 to 25 years. Several practitioners that we interviewed found that though the forms, paper-based or online, may appear to be "one size fits all", the approach to supporting the young people to complete them needed to be tailored according to their age. Again, **accessibility** and **communication** appear as key themes here.

> "Yeah, I think having like an agreed ethics especially when it comes to young people who, you know, between the ages of 13 to 25. So, when they're a bit older, you feel comfortable, to kind of you know, give them the autonomy, whereas when they're younger, you almost feel like, do I need to be more direct because they might not feel confident making that decision for themselves? Or do you go through parents? And then if so, how do you then get into that? It's still a bit of a murky one for me."
>
> "Um, I think that sometimes with some younger ones, we have to kind of almost like translate it a little bit more. I think, because the age range being 13 to 25, it's a big scope, in terms of their awareness and understanding. And isn't like a one size fits all."
>
> "Yeah, so we've been moving towards having like online forms. And that is, fine for the slightly older young people that we work with, because they can then just get their phone out, scan it, or I've given my laptop or whatever like that. And it's actually like a one-to-one basis. And I will sit with them, talk through the questions."
>
> "We've got work phones, which makes our life so much easier, we can then send the links out to the young people, and the young person that hasn't done it, we could pick it up in a one to one maybe, or the next session or so yeah, we do it electronically, though, we used to do it [on a] form."

Practitioners acknowledged that it that it takes quite a lot of courage from young people to share information about their personal context and lived experience with a funder:

> “But that takes quite a lot of courage, I think, to share, takes a lot of courage to say I'm looked after, because that talks about being looked after, that talks about being a young carer, that talks about those things.”

Finally, there were reflections on a ‘one and done’ approach to data collection, versus collecting data over time through repeated interactions. The former can create challenges, for example where a young person’s perception of their identity changes throughout the project (identity fluidity) or where there has been no or limited opportunity to build **trust** and relationships. Again, this can result in incomplete, or ‘inaccurate’ data (e.g. where the data does not represent how a young person truly identifies).

Practitioners have the will to do what is best for the young people, however they are openly sharing their desires for tailor-made professional development opportunities, which will support their confidence in engaging effectively, compassionately, and respectfully with young people. They also specifically question the ethics of the way they currently work with young people on the issue of collecting data, highlighting that they would value guidance that would lead to more ethical rigour.

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

Young people

Young people shared mixed views: some question 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.

Key messages that young people felt were important to them include: better communication and transparency; processes and methods that allow for fluidity; and recognising that being asked for identity data can feel intrusive, uncomfortable, and/or challenging.

As conversations moved into how demographic data practices might be changed, the young people found this question challenging, and there were discussions about whether they would even 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, although they generally conceded that they were unable to envision what a new approach would look like.

That said, the young people wanted to share some key points for consideration that were important to them. Their cumulative list is a long one, but worth outlining here as an integral part of the future considerations for collection of demographic data:

Purpose and communication

> “More transparency with why they are collecting the data.”
>
> “Giving context - we are not always familiar with the organisation - data collection is so fleeting and happens all the time - giving contextual information - give us a sense of what purpose is being served.”
>
> “[...] if they are using data for action and not telling us, that isn't transparent enough.”
>
> “I think I feel ok about purposeful data collection - if collection of the data brings in a benefit that comes back around to me or the identity they are collecting data on, I would feel ok about it.”

> "So, I can see how this is going to benefit me – not just you and your statistic. I don't see how I can benefit from you knowing my sexuality, ethnicity."

Process and methods

> "To me, telling them [young people] to do it individually, going up to them (young people) and collecting the data by themselves, giving them time to reflect, is probably better."

> "I understand that most data collected can be written or check boxes, but make it more accessible for deaf and blind people, or language interpreters, to help other people who are in need of that...Say for example, they might not understand the question and it needs to be interpreted in a different way there is a lot of advanced vocabulary - have to ask the person to explain what the question means."

> "Sometimes the options are limited/wrong."

> "Every option on the form should have some space for fluidity - other, not defined, would be good and inclusive."

Feelings and experience of being asked for data about their identity

> "I find those a bit intrusive."

> "Weird feeling – will this give me a better chance?"

> "Be inclusive but not intrusive...Tell us why you're asking...If you don't need it, don't ask."

> "A question of if you want to disclose when it isn't visible."

> "I feel like some of the questions are a bit intrusive, maybe some things some of us might not be comfortable sharing with organisations, for example gender, I am a transgender male, and sometimes I wouldn't want organisations to know that, and I wouldn't want others to know - work or school."

Comments on specific demographic data categories

> "Faith - I don't see how that is relevant when it comes to a young person."

> "Sexuality - I feel like even if you are using it for statistics, you can't get a good picture - not everyone is aware of what could be done with that form - they might lie about their sexuality or gender if they are worried about coming out."

> "Apart from sexuality, no other way it would be collected."

> "Safeguarding - in terms of gender, if you approach them, they might be more defensive, but with a form they can put it in they're comfortable and then can

> approach them and ask what they want to be done around pronouns or changing rooms."
>
> "There's recently been a big uprise against pronouns. Gender identity...If asked – you can see how I present. I am she/her – doesn't offend me. I understand why I'm being asked because I've seen so many people have been offended, respecting people's gender choices."
>
> "For the nationality and stuff, I would say have instead of tick boxes, have a line in the form where you put in what you want so you can put numerous things in. So I can say I am Indian, and British, so I can choose what I want rather than set things I have to choose from. And that could go for everything if you just have a line you can write in what you chose to identify as."
>
> "Having something simple like having one extra box or saying you can tick multiple boxes - ethnicity, ticking a few boxes and writing something - widens what you can say - rather than just you can tick one box and there isn't an appropriate box."

In addition, young people wanted to convey the message that they can't always tick boxes because as they are growing up, they are learning a lot about themselves, their preferences, what they do like and do not like, **and their own perceptions of their identity**. They need wider options if organisations want 'accuracy' in the data they collect – by which we mean, data which reflects how young people identify (which may include fluidity as a legitimate 'category').

Included in these conversations was a request that there should be a very brief and specific piece on why the data is being collected. As reflected in the opening quote of this report, young people also requested ongoing conversations in the format of focus groups on what they described as an important subject. They shared that they have never had to think deeply about this topic and found it a positive experience to be invited to use their voices to influence change on issues that affect them.

Again, it is important to note that the areas young people identified for revisiting are ones that are clearly presented as complex and triggering of emotions such as fear and stress (amongst others).

Practitioners

Some practitioners feel positioned between young people and funders, and that current demographic data processes do not meet the needs or best interests of young people (for example, that they take a checklist or tokenistic approach).

Practitioners 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.

It is worth acknowledging that practitioners were not a homogenous group; they ranged from managers, consultants, outreach workers working in diverse contexts, and more. A number of them felt that they were conflicted on the issue of collecting demographic data. Some felt that they were positioned between the young people and the funders, and expressed the challenges this presented for them:

> "Sometimes it's about educating staff as well as young people. But it frustrates me that I collect demographics on young people, because ultimately, they're young people first. And then they have a load of stuff that they come with. And I don't tattoo them. I'm not there to go, could all the free school mealers stand on left, please? You know, we don't do that. I don't stand there and say, could everybody who's LGBT, you know, could you just go in the corner? They're just young people. And whilst I understand financially, for funders, they want to know, that their money's going where it should go. Young people aren't grouping themselves. Because they're still discovering who they are. And some of these personal circumstances aren't things that they can make a difference to. They can't change whether they're poor or whether they're eligible for free school meals, or whether they get bullied. And what does mental health mean by the way, you know, it's always the thing. Or if they have a disability."
>
> "So, I suppose my, I'm more frustrated that I have to do this, to jump through a hoop so that a funder can feel good about themselves. And it's not about that, per se, is it? But it's that thing about they can justify their money, then actually, these young persons turned up because they're in need, you know, no one, no one goes through youth club, or youth group or youth council or anything because they don't need something."
>
> "There has to be another thing. And sometimes it can feel like we're getting to the point of we'll only fund you know, [the deficits] a blind donkey who's lame. And you're thinking, why? And that's it. That's sometimes how it feels. We have to go to the ends of the earth to prove that these young people are the lowest of the low and in deprivation. The forms never asked for anything positive. You know, they

> always focus on have you been bullied? Are you in low income? Are you this? Are you that? There was never a section on, do you feel confident? Are you proud of something? Have you personally achieved? And it's a very deficit model. And in fact, the whole equal opportunities monitoring thing tends to be quite a deficit model. Because it's proving who we work with as against, and you know, where are the gaps.”

> “Unless you understand that young people won't necessarily identify as living in a rural area where you might have a corner shop, and the school bus takes you in and out but that's the only thing, that is rurally isolated. That's relative. And I don't think funders get that. I don't think funders understand relative poverty. What's, low income? What's poverty? You know, what, what does that mean? I don't think funders completely understand that young people will only identify with what's happening to them locally. They're not going to compare themselves nationally.”

> “The forms are sent by the Government or by the funder. So, this is what the Government wants to know. So, the simpler way it sort of says, heterosexual, gay, lesbian, bi, and then other, and the young people have chosen to tell me what the other is. And they write their own terminology. It's whether they identify with it, they know what it is, they just don't necessarily have the language… I think for some faiths, having that question on there can be quite challenging.”

The practitioners’ viewpoints communicate what could be interpreted as tensions with the approaches that funders impose on both them and young people. With this tension in mind, we recognise that funders are a key stakeholder in this process, and currently missing from the dialogue. 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 a key next step and priority for this work.

In the interviews, practitioners also identified and shared what they would like funding organisations to know, as well as what they would find helpful as they further develop their competencies for working with young people on the matter of demographic data collection:

> “I feel like perhaps training for staff as well, I think is important to when collecting that to, to avoid bias too. Because we're dealing with things that are fairly abstract. It means we often cling to concrete examples. And you give one concrete example. And it's kind of like, that's the one thing that young people can attach themselves to.”

> “I think guidance, or any information is good, I mean, like a ‘how to’ toolkit, but maybe, some sort of short ten steps or something like that, just because it's easy to interpret. You know, people got the time. But I think if there is something that would actually inform people. Yeah, I think this is an area of interest, whether or not it's about data, but like identity in general. And we're working with young people to strengthen their ideas and their own identities. So whatever information we have, which seems to create a platform for us to ask those questions, and to be really sensitive, I think is good.”

> "So, in regard to the data collection on the ground level, so I'm still grassroots. We have now a youth board, which looks more in detail around how we collect data, making sure that we're doing the right recruitment, and putting in for the correct funding bids and not just going for everything and more of a targeted approach for the communities that we work in and making sure that we are going out into the right areas."

Finally, they shared suggestions for what a redesigned process and approach might look like or would need to take into consideration:

> "There's a whole range of identities that you could draw upon to ensure that you've got some level of representation. I suppose the challenge would be really, we should be working with young people to establish actually what that looks like. What sort of information would be helpful for people to ensure that there was some level of sort of equity and parity across our services. So, the wellbeing stuff, yeah, I agree."
>
> "There are some people who do not trust the process...They ask, why am I giving you that for? Why do you need to know that? You're exploring all sorts of contradictions that they're experiencing."
>
> "So, when I'm gathering this sort of information, people are naturally scared to put data down, because they don't know if it's going to be prejudiced against them after they're put data down. So, you have a situation in there where people again, do not trust the process."

Continuing the conversation: demographic data and funders

As previously stated, one of the main reasons that practitioners provided for collecting demographic data was to fulfil funder requirements. Practitioners commented on the value that funders place on data-driven insights, for example:

> "Funders love numbers. They love to look at data, they love to look at basically what they're getting for their money...what changes it [funding] is having on the community and how diverse those communities are."

Others also noted that this focus on numbers can lead to what feels like tokenism or a checklist approach when targeting specific communities; an approach that is not aligned with their organisational missions. Practitioners talked about the data being used in a way to suit a predefined narrative:

> "I feel like there's an outcome that's already been like, there's a desired outcome and data that can be used to achieve a desired outcome."

> "I think from a funding perspective, there's clearly a tick box and a chain of conversation...so the group of people they are helping falls into a certain category".

Some also expressed concerns about collecting excessive data, as well as the risks of potential data breaches:

> "I don't know if it's directly necessary to collect all of that data, I don't know".

Practitioners highlighted the importance of aligning data collection with the best interests of young people, rather than merely conforming to external requirements. This echoed the sentiments of some young people. It seems that data collection driven by funders may not always enable this. For example, practitioners shared that one of the ways in which funding organisations influence demographic data is by the precise wording used to ask questions. In such cases, youth organisations find that they must adapt their own data collection forms to align with their (often different) funders' questions. As young people have highlighted, this can contribute to confusion around language.

The interviews with practitioners highlighted the importance of involving young people in data collection processes. Some advocated for building young people's capacity to understand and shape demographic data practice, recognising the value of involving them in discussions around identity and related questions; for example, working together to ensure that language and terminology was better understood by young people, or more comfortable for them to engage with. Working together, there is also perhaps potential to collaboratively explore the purpose of demographic data collection.

Some practitioners pointed to situations where demographic data had proved useful, within their organisation, to demonstrate impact and to build evidence or justification for the work they are doing with young people:

> “I think it makes us better as professionals in regard to our staffing…and making sure that if we are going into an area that has a high demographic of a certain race, ethnicity, gender, that kind of thing, we are having relatable staff that young people can create those relationships with.”
>
> “By actually having that data, we can now start making adjustments by actually promoting it in different spaces, by recruiting young people in other spaces, so we can create a balance in that space…so we can monitor that level of representation.”

There is perhaps an opportunity for funders to shift the narrative, focus, and support for demographic data collection from ‘proving’ to improving:

> “Funders will say they want to know who we're working with. So that's your only explanation and bearing in mind that before we've even got the funding, we’ve had to explain to them who we're working with. So, then it feels a bit, told you once, told you twice. So, you've already applied for money to work with a particular group, you're then proving that you're working with a particular group. So, it's about proving not improving, which is a challenge. So, funders do say, you know, we want to make sure we're funding the piece of work we said we would.”

Young people’s own reflections reiterate this desire for action:

> “As long as your guiding thought is that you want to help young people - gathering data for the sake of it is pointless at best, but if you are gathering data for a reason to help people - if that is your guiding principle, I think that is best.”
>
> “I think I feel ok about purposeful data collection - if collection of the data brings in a benefit that comes back around to me or the identity, they are collecting data on I would feel ok about it.”
>
> “So, I can see how this is going to benefit me – not just you and your statistic. I don’t see how I can benefit from you knowing my sexuality, ethnicity.”
>
> “…but are you actually going to address issues causing disparities?”

Like practitioners, some young people also raised concerns about a tick-box approach, with one saying that they felt they were being asked about their identity *“to fill a diversity quota”*. It could also be understood that the young people’s views demonstrated that they separated their identities from the disparities. When the ‘issues causing disparities’ are identified as systemic, institutional, or behavioural, such conversations contribute to anti-deficit ways of thinking and seeing. The work of Davis, et, al. (2019) strongly states that:

> “...The power of such arguments to challenge deficit thinking lies in its ability to excavate systemic forces that shape the conditions that some populations face, the ways in which they navigate these contexts and the complexity of their realities (e.g. revealing both the challenges they face and their successes).”
>
> (Davis, et. Al., 2019, p.122).

The narratives and decisions that funders influence are clearly powerful factors within this.

It is worth specifically noting that young people do not associate 'problematic' data gathering practice with their youth workers/practitioners or organisations - they associate it with funders or the wider 'system'. Thus, the focus of support needs to continue to nurture that relationship, and perhaps focus on building practitioners' comfort, and the skills/framing of youth organisations and funders – empowering them to communicate well - rather than attempting to intervene directly with young people (i.e. trying to convince them that ‘demographic data collection is okay’).

With young people and practitioners’ lack of clarity about why demographic data is collected, and a clear message that demographic data practice is perceived to be driven by funders who (again, are perceived to) predominantly operate from a deficit thinking position, there is evidently work to do on how we theorise, justify, and communicate how and why demographic data is collected.

Conclusion

This report highlights a range of complexities associated with providing, collecting and using demographic data. The literature review highlighted that this issue is under-researched in both the England and UK contexts in particular. Amongst the practitioners we consulted would have been professionals with decades of experience working with young people. For this study, all the young people would have been relatively new to personal involvement in demographic data.

Notwithstanding the length of time these groups have engaged with the matter of demographic data, some of the questions, tensions, and confusions resonated between the groups. Neither group felt they possessed, with confidence, clarity on the purpose of collecting demographic data. They found that the processes for the collection of data and the range of data requested was inconsistent and, whilst accepting that there may be some logic, that the logic was not made clear to them. They want to know why the data is collected and needed and for those requesting data to be explicit about this, as well as about how it will be used, stored, and discarded. Indeed, this is in line with core youth work ethics and principles:

> *7. When we receive or collect personal information about young people, we make them aware of with whom and for what purpose that information will be shared. We do not disclose confidential information unless this is necessary to prevent harm or is legally required.*
>
> Institute for Youth Work. (n.d.) *The Institute for Youth Work's Code of Ethics.* https://iyw.org.uk/code-of-ethics/

Both groups found that the language associated with demographic data (including identities) is complex and confusing, with some of the confusion specifically created by the language presented from funders and others requesting data. They were again united in their requests for funders and others to demonstrate their acceptance that the binaries of decades ago imposed on people have in many cases been lifted, providing people, including young people, with the confidence to self-identify and to journey through the fluidity of their identities. If funders are clear and confident about their criteria for targeting communities for funding, then they should consider and make space for wider, more fluid representations of identity and provide opportunities for wider representation through self-identification.

The voices were again unified in asking that funders reconsider ways of allocating funds, ensuring that rather than depending on a deficit model of criteria, they engage with young people and practitioners to consider and develop new ways that unequivocally contribute to equity. The dominant focus on old deficit models as a method of allocating funding has been identified as a way of perpetuating historical inequities. Studies indicate that "the overreliance on burdensome transactional systems also inhibit funders' ability to be responsive and nimble" (Salehi S. and Ford C., 2023, para 2). Some argue that true equity will require funders to work harder to identify eligibility criteria that works towards flattening hierarchies, creating systems where learning and engagement is reciprocal, equitable, and responsive. In other words, consideration should be given to power redistribution, which builds trust through relationship, accountability, and reciprocal learning.

Again, the young people and the practitioners shared the views that the language and scope of option around demographic data requires revision, and that the fixed identities and ambiguous language creates frustrations and apathy. Young people also shared that these issues result in them misrepresenting and/or disengaging with processes. There was a call to resist the historical tidy data set and to create space and opportunities for young people to be transparent about the fluidity and realities of their identities.

Practitioners in this study took the opportunity to not only reflect on the systems and young people, but many were also reflexive. They shared both their own and the young peoples' frustrations with lack of clarity: on why the data is collected and what is done with the data. They question whether the processes are ethical or rigorous enough to achieve the purpose for which data is requested for. They identified that paper-based formats were inaccessible because of some of the literacy levels of the young people. They also found that online formats may be more accessible to 'older' young people, but the language and presentation failed to encourage engagement.

The practitioners also wanted to be upskilled, so that they could feel confident with the whole process. They perceived the process of data collection to be a relational one, for which some felt unprepared. They wanted guidance on how to effectively engage with young people on the sensitive issues they could potentially uncover through demographic data collection. They wanted the timelines of the engagement to be considered, so that it was not upfront, before they had opportunities to build relationships. Again, they wanted clarity on the language as well as consistency (which would reinforce clarity) – for example, between ethnicity and nationality, or equity and equality. They also shared that they would also benefit from quick reference guides and resources to use as they work across sectors and projects.

Though there was not a direct request, what has come to light as a result of the culmination of lived experiences is that there would be value in funders, young people, and practitioners working together to co-create the revised approaches and methodologies for equitable demographic data collection. The youth sector is huge, funders are diverse, and young people are experiencing (and able to confidently articulate the fact that they are experiencing) the multiple ways in which their identities are fluid; with these complexities in mind, it could be argued that it would be challenging to get these diverse groups together. Ethically, it is because of all these reasons that we should take on and overcome the challenge to ensure that the work going forward is co-created, informed by all, and that what results is as equitable as possible. To do less would arguably be to perpetuate the historical hierarchical, hegemonic approaches, which require significant personal investment but fail to promote the equity for which they strive or to which they claim.

Next steps for consultation

The next step in our exploration of this topic is to take these findings back to those who generously contributed through interviews and focus groups, as well as others. We will invite their feedback on the findings and check that we have summarised and presented them accurately and appropriately, 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 [16]
- 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).

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.

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[16] For more information on 'deficit narratives', please see the report appendix.

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 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.*

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.

Community/communities – individuals who share one or more identity characteristics (for the purpose of this report).

Marginalised – individuals and communities who experience discrimination and exclusion from the systems and societies around them,

Minoritised – individuals and communities who are actively experiencing minoritisation by the systems and societies around them, rather than 'passively' existing as a statistical minority.

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: 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.

Focus group probe questions

Young people were provided with a selection of the following questions and/or activities:

- Assumptions
    - Write, think of, record five sentences about your partner. Only use positive descriptions, for example: ("I think your family are from…"; "I think you like…"; "I think you like to listen to.…")
    - You have two minutes to think of a 10-word sentence that describes your identity – how did you find that?
- My story, my identit/y/ies, my preference
    - Does it matter how (schools/youth clubs/places that help young people) identity you?
    - Are you conscious of stereotypes?
    - What are your feelings on identities?
    - Do you feel you have been told why demographic data has been collected?
    - Are you aware of what information organisations collect about you?
- You choose!
    - How you want (schools/youth clubs/places that help young people) to identify you – think about the areas of your life which may not always be obvious, e.g. (dis)abilities, sexuality, gender?
    - Is that how they identify you now?
    - Do you feel your identity is reflected in the options you've been given? And if not, what would you like to put on there?
    - Do you (why do you) want change?
    - What would change mean to you?
    - Is there a message you would like to send organisations who collect demographic data on young people?
    - What do you think organisations need to or should consider?

Practitioner semi-structured interview questions

Interviews focused on four core topics:

1. Practitioner experience of collecting demographic data

2. Experience of phrasing and delivering questions
3. How is this information used to promote equity?
4. Next steps

Specific questions under each topic varied based on where conversation led to, but key questions were used to kick off discussion:

- What is it like asking young people about their identities/what has been your experience of collecting demographic data?
- How are these questions asked–what does this process look like? (e.g. is a sheet handed to the young person, does someone read out the questions?)
- Is the demographic data you collect used? How?
- What would you/your organisation find useful in terms of guidance?

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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

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