

A country that works for all  
children and young people

An evidence-based plan  
for addressing childhood  
vulnerability, crime and justice



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## Foreword by Anne Longfield and Camilla Kingdon



Every year, thousands of children become involved in the criminal justice system or become victims of serious violence or crime. While increasingly fewer young people are going into secure custody, and usually only those who have committed an extremely serious offence, most children involved in the criminal justice system share very similar experiences of childhood adversity.

These children are very likely to be highly vulnerable. Life at home can be extremely challenging or dangerous. Some can fall through gaps in the education, social care, or health systems which is often associated with no longer attending school or struggling with unsupported mental health problems or neurodivergent conditions.

In fact, eight out of ten children in the youth justice system are identified as having Special Educational Needs or Disability (SEND), and 85% of boys in Young Offender Institutions have previously been excluded from school. Approximately half of children in custody have previously been in care at some point in their life.

For professionals working with children and young people, the pathways that lead a child towards involvement with the criminal justice system have become frustratingly familiar. Frequently, a failure to intervene, or to support children and families when they need help in the early years, can see problems escalate and lead to crisis during the teenage years. It is almost like a blueprint.

There is a chilling sense of inevitability for many of these children. We have heard so many stories of vulnerable children who have been groomed into criminal or sexual exploitation or caught up in gangs and serious violence. Too often, they are the children whose families needed help even before they started school and too often, they have failed to meet the very high thresholds for support from an underfunded and overstretched system. We have met too many parents who have not known where to turn when their child has been at risk of harm and have not been able to find any services to help them.

Supporting those young people and their families is crucial. Failing to do so reduces life chances and in the worst cases can lead to serious violence and

even the loss of life. It also places more stress on public services and the public purse.

This report is the 11th in our year-long series of reports produced by the Child of the North and the Centre for Young Lives. It puts forward an evidence-based plan to Government for addressing childhood vulnerability, crime, and justice.

It argues for a whole-child and whole-system approach to childhood vulnerability. It argues that the focus must be on need and putting children and families at the centre of coordinated services. Doing so can identify and address the reasons why children offend or become the victims of crime and thus support those young people to flourish.

Bringing services together to create a comprehensive support network for adolescents, particularly those affected by adverse childhood experiences, is the only way forward. That means embedding support in local communities, especially in the most disadvantaged and often overlooked areas.

The report builds on many of the recommendations of the Centre for Young Lives' predecessor, the Commission on Young Lives, and calls for mental health services to be available in community hubs, youth centres, and schools, and positioning schools at the frontline of mental health and trauma support. It argues that teachers, school staff, youth workers, and dedicated mental health teams should be working collaboratively to spot signs of harm and offer a support system for those vulnerable children who are at risk.

All of this should be part of a holistic, place-based approach that understands cultural factors and recognises the key drivers of vulnerability.

The long-term impact of greater investment in much earlier intervention through trusted relationships with youth workers and family support workers is obvious – not only in reducing the number of children involved in the criminal justice system, but also building stronger and more inclusive communities.

**A failure to intervene, or to support children and families when they need help in the early years, can see problems escalate.**

**Helping our young people to succeed and diverting them away from the criminal justice system has never been more necessary or more urgent.**

We also need to tackle the underlying vulnerabilities and disadvantages that are often driving young people into the criminal justice system. That means reducing exclusions from school – often the tipping point towards susceptibility to grooming and exploitation – and which disproportionately affects disadvantaged and neurodivergent children.

A more inclusive, stable school environment, delivered by teachers and school staff trained to recognise the signs of distress and trauma, can be the difference between a vulnerable child thriving in education or falling out of it altogether.

By necessity, this also means tackling poverty, poor housing, domestic violence, and poor parental mental health.

As this report sets out, there are already many community-based programmes which are offering brilliant interventions to steer vulnerable children away from harm and exploitation. Some of them are funded by the Violence Reduction Partnership to tackle serious violence in hotspots across the country.

Many of them involve schools working with local charities or not-for-profits to deliver support to children.

As we have argued throughout our series of reports, schools are community anchors and are uniquely placed to help reduce the risk of children becoming involved in crime. After school clubs and playschemes offering art, sport, new skills, mentorship, and building friendships and strong relationships with trusted adults are not just “nice things to have”. They should be a central part of the Government’s strategy to tackle crime, exploitation, and serious violence and to open opportunities for all.

It is very welcome to hear the new Government already making clear that its approach to tackling serious violence and exploitation will include intervention and diversion programmes to support vulnerable teenagers. The Commission on Young Lives was instrumental in proposing the core elements of the Government’s forthcoming Young Futures programme – a “Sure Start for teenagers”.

We cannot afford to wait any longer. Hardly a week passes by without another horror story involving the serious injury or death of a teenager, often at the hands of a person of the same age. There are countless serious case reviews setting out how some vulnerable children step onto a conveyor belt that begins with trouble at home or exclusion, and which ends in tragedy and prison.

The promise of almost £100m in Government funding for Youth Futures provides a vital opportunity to start to rebuild and refresh the community-based, targeted interventions that we know can divert young people away from harm, boosting life chances, and saving lives. The recommendations set out in this report should be at the heart of that programme.

As a society, we can no longer afford to lock up more and more people or to waste the promise of so many young lives. Helping our young people to succeed and diverting them away from the criminal justice system has never been more necessary or more urgent.

**Anne Longfield CBE,**  
Executive Chair of  
the Centre for Young Lives

**Dr Camilla Kingdon,**  
Former President of the  
Royal College of Paediatrics  
and Child Health

## Guest editorial by Jon Yates



Fifty children lose their lives each year after being attacked by a weapon, 500 end up in hospital. And yet, this is the tip of a fearful iceberg. When surveyed, 1 in 25 adolescents revealed they have carried a knife in the last year and a horrifying 1 in 2 said that they had changed their behaviour in the last year because of the fear of violence. This is not ok. Our children need us to take action.

The Youth Endowment Foundation was created to find the very best way to keep all our children safe from violence. For too long, we have debated whether the answer is to be tough on crime, or soft on crime but this debate helps no-one. We don't debate whether to implement a tough or soft transport policy. Of course we don't. We focus on finding out what works. Enough of being soft or tough on crime. For all our children's sake, it is time to be smart on crime. What we need is an evidence-based approach to protect and support young people. This isn't rocket science. We simply have to put in the work (and public funding) to identify the children that most need support and make sure they get the support that is most likely to help them. At the very least, that means high-quality mentoring and access to therapy.

As a result, I hugely welcome this excellent report. It is an important blueprint for building a future where all our children can be safe. I very much welcome the focus on evidence and the emphasis on "place-based working". The data show clearly that violence is most likely to afflict our children in certain places. Serious violence tends to be committed within clear geographical "hot spots". These are often just one or two non-residential streets where people pass through at pace. It is a no-brainer that we should focus our support and action in these areas.

I am also pleased to see the report focus on supporting children with and through education settings. Many young people who encounter the criminal justice system carry with them unaddressed traumas. These experiences—such as witnessing or being a victim of violence, family breakdown, and other adverse childhood experiences (ACEs)—often go unnoticed until

they manifest as behavioural issues. One of the most urgent issues highlighted in the report is the need to do all we can to keep our children in school and college. Why? Because schools and colleges are some of the safest places for our children. We have to support school and college leaders to get help to children who are frequently absent, who have been permanently excluded, or are at risk of being permanently excluded.

This Child of the North report is a rallying cry for us to act together— and essential reading for everyone throughout the UK as we seek to build a country that works for all children and young people. The nurturing of children and young people is not just the responsibility of schools or social services, but a shared duty. The Youth Endowment Foundation wants to play its role in decreasing crime, but we recognise that all organisations need to work together to achieve this goal.

This report is a timely reminder that we must not only focus on the symptoms of violence but also build the foundations of love, resilience, belonging, and opportunity that protect all young people from harm. Together, we can help every child in the North of England, and across the UK, realise their potential, and build a brighter, safer future for us all.

**Jon Yates,**  
Executive Director of the  
Youth Endowment Foundation



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A full list of authors and contributors can be found at the end of the report.

### A note about language

This report focuses on children and young people under the age of 18, here on referred to as CYP. Eighteen is the age at which most policies in the UK tend to assign children the same range of obligations and entitlements as adults, as in the criminal justice system for example. It is important to note that this does vary, for example, in relation to looked after children and disabled children. The contested nature of “youth” is well documented and CYP’s developmental pathways are much more diverse than policy frameworks imply.

In the area of childhood, vulnerability, crime and justice, there are many insights from research undertaken with young adults and older adults, for example, through life course research. This can be especially useful in sensitive or more hidden areas where there are important ethical considerations to take account of in research. This means those aged 18 and over appear in the report as well as those under 18.

The report focuses especially on CYP who experience particular circumstances, life histories, and/or structural injustices which mean they are more exposed to situations of harm. Although the report assumes that all CYP are vulnerable in certain ways, it focuses especially on more exceptional experiences of vulnerability, which are important in terms of young people’s experiences of crime and justice.

### About Child of the North initiative

Child of the North is a partnership between the N8 Research Partnership and Health Equity North, which aims to build a fairer future for children across the North of England by building a platform for collaboration, high quality research, and policy engagement. [@ChildoftheNorth](#)

### Who is the Child of the North?

The “Child of the North” is an archetype (like the “unknown soldier”), representing all the millions of children throughout the UK whose lives are blighted by inequalities. We use the Child of the North as a means of illustrating the inequities that affect children and young people. These inequalities are well captured by the differences in opportunities available to the child growing up in the North of England versus the South. But inequalities are present throughout the UK at both a national and regional level. These inequalities are bad for almost everyone and the future of the UK depends on their urgent eradication. The Child of the North represents every child who deserves a better start to life, regardless of where they live.

### About the N8 Research Partnership

The N8 Research Partnership is a collaboration of the eight most research-intensive Universities in the North of England: Durham, Lancaster, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester, Newcastle, Sheffield, and York. Working with partner universities, industry, and society (N8+), the N8 aims to maximise the impact of this research base by promoting collaboration, establishing innovative research capabilities and programmes of national and international prominence, and driving economic growth. [www.n8research.org.uk @N8research](#)

### Health Equity North

Health Equity North is a virtual institute focused on place-based solutions to public health problems and health inequalities across the North of England. It brings together world-leading academic expertise, from the Northern Health Science Alliance’s members of leading universities and hospitals, to fight health inequalities through research excellence and collaboration.

[www.healthequitynorth.co.uk @HENorth](#)

### About the Centre for Young Lives

The Centre for Young Lives is a dynamic and highly experienced innovation organisation dedicated to improving the lives of children, young people, and families in the UK – particularly the most vulnerable. Led by former Children’s Commissioner, Anne Longfield CBE, who has been at the forefront of children’s issues for decades, the Centre’s agile team is highly skilled, experienced, and regarded. It is already widely known and well respected across government departments, Parliament, local and regional government, academia, the voluntary sector, and national and local media. The Centre wants to see children and young people’s futures placed at the heart of policy making, a high priority for Government and at the core of the drive for a future for our country which can be much stronger and more prosperous.

[www.centreforyounglives.org.uk @CfYoungLives](#)

### About the N8+

Collaboration lies at the heart of “Child of The North”. The N8 has proved a useful organising structure but the Child of The North vision is to: (i) use the North-South England divide to show the impact of inequity on all children in the UK; (ii) bring together stakeholders from across the UK to build a better country for CYP. One aspiration is to link researchers from across the UK to support evidence-based approaches to policymaking. In particular, there is a desire to unite Higher Education institutes across the North of England so we can address problems in partnership.

### About the ESRC Vulnerability & Policing Futures Research Centre

This report is written in collaboration with the ESRC Vulnerability & Policing Futures Research Centre which aims to reshape how the police and other organisations work together in order to reduce harm among vulnerable people in society. The Centre explores how vulnerabilities are produced, exacerbated, and addressed by policing and how the police and other services can best work together to prevent and reduce vulnerabilities, such as exploitation by county lines drug networks, online child sexual victimisation, domestic abuse, modern slavery, mental illness, and homelessness. The Vulnerability & Policing Futures Research Centre is jointly hosted by the [University of York](#) and the [University of Leeds](#), and is funded by the [Economic and Social Research Council](#) (ESRC). [vulnerabilitypolicing.org.uk](#)

### Acknowledgements

We would also like to thank everyone who participated in the research that is described in this report and would like to particularly highlight the contributions made by the participants working with organisations that provided the case studies and the quotes.



## Key insights



**1 in 4** surveyed 13–17-year-olds said they'd been either a **victim or perpetrator of violence**.

A survey suggests that in 2023-24, the highest rates of **youth violence victimisation** were:

- 25% in **London**,
- 19% in **Yorkshire and the Humber**, and
- 17% in the **North West**.

While 94% of looked after children in England and Wales do not get into trouble with the law, approximately

# HALF

of children in custody have previously **been in care** at some point.

In 2023-24, **15–19-year-olds** comprise:


- 6%** of the population but account for **13%** of firearm victims.

In the past five years, UK recorded crimes involving online grooming of children has increased by

# 82%

Between 2006-07 and 2021-22, the proportion of children from an **ethnic minority in youth custody** nearly doubled to

# 52%



**44%** of the potential **victims of modern slavery** referred to the Home Office were under 18, in 2023.

# 8 in 10

Children in the youth justice system are identified as having **special educational needs and disabilities**.

# 1 in 5


Children aged under 18 accounted for over a **fifth of stop and searches** in 2022-23.

# 97%

Of the **youth custody population** are male.

# 53%

Of girls surveyed aged 11-21 don't feel safe outside alone.



In 2023, there was an **8%** rise in **sentencing of children** in court. The first increase in ten years.

While making up 4% of the 10–17-year-old population, Black children were involved in

# 20%

of **stop and searches** of children.

In 2019, approximately

# 3.1 MILLION

adults aged 18-74 years reported experiencing **sexual abuse** before the age of 16.

In 2022, children accounted for **10%** of all **first-time-entrants** to the criminal justice system.

# 85%

Of boys in young offender institutions have been **previously excluded** from school.

# Policy recommendations

Children who are victims of crime and those drawn into offending behaviours are amongst the most vulnerable in society. The evidence is clear: life chances of young people are significantly affected by childhood experiences of crime, harm, abuse, and victimisation, as well as engagement with the criminal justice system. This is not deterministic and many children find ways to cope with the adversities they face. However, adverse childhood experiences greatly elevate the probability of a young person becoming involved with the police and we must act to support these children before they become trapped within the criminal justice system. It is therefore of the utmost importance that we promote a whole-child approach to childhood vulnerability that focuses on needs – one that is informed by the evidence base on best practice throughout the UK and internationally.

We make three evidence-based recommendations that align with the new government's Opportunity Mission to improve outcomes for CYP and reduce crime.

1

**We need to place children at the heart of service provision and consider the “whole child”. A holistic and coordinated “whole-system” approach means public services working together to identify and address the reasons why children offend or become victims of crime. We must adopt evidence-based interventions across services with a shared goal: helping all children achieve positive outcomes regardless of their circumstances.**

Child welfare should be at the heart of all youth justice policy. We need to bring public services together to create a comprehensive support network for CYP, especially those affected by adverse childhood experiences including abuse, family instability, or exposure to community violence. Such experiences, without proper intervention, too often correlate with increased disengagement from school, behavioural issues, and future criminal justice system involvement. We need to connect our services through frontline support structures embedded within local communities, particularly in the most disadvantaged areas. The placement of trauma-informed mental health services in community hubs, youth centres, and schools can help ensure that CYP have accessible and immediate support. Social workers, mental health professionals, and youth workers should work collaboratively to identify early signs of distress, building a proactive, stable support system for young people who might otherwise be overlooked.

One way that this recommendation could be operationalised is through the effective use of education settings. Teachers, school staff, and dedicated mental health teams should work collaboratively to identify early signs of distress, offering a responsive, stable support system for pupils who may otherwise fall through the cracks. Partnerships with local health services and community organisations would further strengthen this approach by bringing a wider range of expertise together, creating a holistic, “whole-system” safety net. Another way this could be operationalised is through the wider adoption of contextual safeguarding, by targeting the social and physical contexts of extra-familial risks that reside in peer relationships, schools and neighbourhood locations to make these environments safer. As well as listening to, and acting on, the views and experiences of CYP, families and communities, this necessitates good quality and open inter-professional collaboration, notably between youth workers and social workers to inform decisions about safety.

2

**We need to address children’s underlying vulnerabilities and disadvantages, rather than their behaviours. This is key to preventing children becoming victims of crime and reducing offending. It is also the best way of improving outcomes, not only in childhood but across the life-course.**

A key factor in reducing involvement in the criminal justice system and improving outcomes is addressing children’s underlying vulnerabilities and disadvantages, rather than their behaviours. As the evidence from county lines and child sexual abuse abundantly illustrates, we need to recognise the overlap between victimisation and offending and support children to develop positive relationships with trusted adults. Interventions should incorporate voices of children, contextual safeguarding, and provide multi-service support to tackle the systemic factors influencing youth crime and exploitation. Focusing on early interventions that build resilience and prevent escalation is essential for improved lifelong outcomes and reduced justice system involvement. Given the strong association between being in care and criminal exploitation and criminalisation, there is a need also to focus on providing greater social work and welfare support for looked after children in different care environments.

Schools are key battlegrounds in separating the link between vulnerability and punishment. School exclusion often marks the first step in the “school-to-prison pipeline”, disproportionately affecting disadvantaged and neurodivergent pupils. Schools should be supported to establish restorative practices, where pupils resolve conflicts and reflect on the impact of their actions. If schools limit exclusions and foster an inclusive and supportive atmosphere, they will retain vulnerable pupils, giving them a stable foundation for academic and social success, and ultimately reduce justice system involvement. There is also a need to provide training that helps school staff to recognise Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), neurodiversity, and signs of distress and trauma and be upskilled in de-escalation techniques that help pupils remain engaged and supported. The adoption of an inclusive approach across the whole school would not only enhance pupils’ educational experience but also play a critical role in reducing involvement in crime, giving all CYP an equal chance to succeed.

3

**Promote prevention and upstream health, social, and educational programmes for children, young people, their families, and communities to keep young people out of the criminal justice system through diversion schemes.**

Community-based programmes can provide safe and constructive outlets for CYP, steering them away from harmful environments and potential criminal involvement. This requires funding of community groups in disadvantaged areas but provides a return on investment through reducing the demands on policing and other services. Schools, as community anchors, are well-positioned to provide premises for such groups and promote sustained involvement in these programmes, empowering young people with positive experiences that reduce their chances of involvement in criminal activities. Thus, schools should be supported to collaborate with local organisations capable of offering extracurricular programmes that build skills, self-worth, and community connection. These programmes need investment because they are more than just “after-school activities”— they are community wellbeing and crime prevention measures that build resilience, a sense of belonging, and self-worth. The provision of such opportunities would allow young people to gain life skills and encourage them to pursue constructive paths in life. This would ultimately help grow the UK economy and decrease a young person’s susceptibility to criminal involvement.

For those CYP who are drawn into contact with the justice system there is so much more that can and should be done to limit their pathways to custody through diversion programmes, restorative justice, and other out of court resolutions that address their offending behaviour and its causes. There is promising evidence that these not only reduced reoffending and the chances of CYP persisting in patterns of criminality but also they can reduce the demands on police youth justice resources while preserving community safety. Similarly, there is a desperate need for appropriately tailored support for the small number of violent young offenders. Furthermore, there are wider benefits within and across generations of limiting CYP’s involvement in criminal court proceedings, given the known negative impacts on families of both offender and victims.

These policy recommendations are supported by substantial evidence demonstrating their positive impact on the development and wellbeing of CYP. Implementing and scaling these programmes can lead to significant long-term benefits for individuals and society as a whole. These recommendations offer immense potential for decreasing the long-term costs associated with not acting early enough (e.g., the health, social care, and criminal justice bills that result from not supporting children’s needs sooner); they will help the UK benefit from the sustainable economic growth available when the talents of every child can be deployed effectively within the workforce. Whilst there are resource implications, the recommendations do not require unfeasible levels of investment.

## Key messages

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Alongside our recommendations, we also provide ten key messages to consider when addressing childhood vulnerability, crime, and justice.

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## Our ten key messages

**1**

Experiences of youth crime, violence, and victimisation are not evenly distributed. They are compounded by multiple forms of vulnerability, deprivation, and disadvantage. Many children who face adverse experiences and victimisation in childhood find ways to manage, survive, and thrive in their lives, but those who face the most accumulated disadvantages throughout childhood are those most likely to be vulnerable to the criminal justice system.

**2**

There are porous boundaries and considerable overlap between victimisation and offending. Many of those children who offend are also at risk of, and have experienced, victimisation and abuse. Ways that some children cope with adversity include behaviours which are considered “challenging” or “troublesome”.

**3**

The likelihood of young people being drawn into the criminal justice system is strongly influenced by where they live, their race, ethnicity, experiences of care, and social opportunities and deprivation.

**4**

Experiences of violence are heavily concentrated among children more vulnerable to crime and exploitation. Similarly, serious violence tends to be committed by a small number of children who need concerted and holistic support.

**5**

While many young people find ways to cope with and adapt to challenging circumstances, the life chances of young people are significantly affected by childhood experiences of crime, harm, abuse, and victimisation, as well as their engagement with policing and criminal justice. Long-term outcomes can be shaped by events, support, and interventions in the early years.

**6**

Although many young people who go through the justice system overcome challenges to lead stable and positive adult lives, interactions with the criminal justice system can heighten risks of negative long-term outcomes.

**7**

Developing positive relationships with children based on trust, respect, empathy, and stability are key alongside securing parent/carer support and working with and alongside children and families.

**8**

Place-based approaches that recognise the importance of understanding and addressing youth offending and violence in the context of the local environment are essential. Contextual safeguarding and building systemic resilience are promising approaches that highlight the need for collective actions to be taken across agencies.

**9**

As an alternative to criminal justice, restorative justice can provide victims with accountability, prevent reoffending and foster community safety; by bringing those harmed by crime and young people responsible for the harm into communication, to understand the impact of their actions and find a positive way forward.

**10**

CYP’s views are too often missing from policy, practice, and service provision. It is vital to include the voices of CYP in debates about how vulnerability, crime, and justice might be addressed.

# Principles

Our recommendations are based on seven principles, and the evidence that underpins the recommendations is laid out within this report. The recommendations are pragmatic in nature and recognise that the UK is in a perilous financial state. These recommendations do not pretend there is a magic wand that will immediately fix the system. Rather, they avoid the trap where the impossibility of perfection prevents change. Further, they provide a platform that allows us to harness research and scientific evidence to learn what works best for which community – noting that science is one of society’s most powerful tools for improving children's life outcomes.

## Our seven principles

1

**Putting our children first** – The future of a country requires its young people to be equipped with the resilience, skills, and support that all individuals need to thrive in society. It is critically important to address the factors associated with youth justice and vulnerability, as CYP facing adverse circumstances have increased likelihood of interacting with the criminal justice system over the course of their life. We can strengthen communities, decrease long-term societal costs, and reduce the long-term demand on our criminal justice system by putting children first. This approach will ultimately benefit our society and the economy of the entire UK.

2

**Addressing inequity** – Children in socioeconomically deprived areas are more likely to face barriers to obtaining high quality education, mental health resources, and social support. This is worrying because all of these are protective factors against involvement in crime. The removal of these inequities - through investment in early interventions, mental health services, and schools - helps mitigate the risk of criminal justice involvement. Moreover, communities that lack such resources often experience cycles of disadvantage, where intergenerational poverty perpetuates vulnerability to crime. These inequalities can be seen in the relatively small number of children involved in violent crime, and this suggests that an approach of “proportionate universalism” would be most effective in decreasing the pressure on the UK’s prisons. The breaking of these intergenerational cycles would allow children from all backgrounds to develop safely and securely. This approach not only benefits vulnerable children but also strengthens communities and contributes to a safer, healthier society for everyone.

3

**Adopting place-based approaches** – Geography, culture, economic activity, and other factors vary between localities, changing how support needs manifest and how communities prefer to engage with public services. Thus, approaches to addressing vulnerability and crime must be planned and aligned to the needs and preferences of a locality and its communities, considering the social and economic circumstances. The use of local knowledge and resources means more impactful interventions can be

delivered, ultimately leading to long-term reductions in crime and improved outcomes for children. Moreover, the concentration of vulnerabilities and the presence of geographical “hot spots” suggests a place-based approach would be most effective. This aligns with the need to adopt an approach of “proportionate universalism” to focus support on the relatively small number of children involved in violent crime. A place-based focus would strengthen resilience within communities and offer CYP the support they need to thrive in the context of their own local areas.

4

### **Working together effectively across our public services**

– Public services should work in partnership to develop targeted initiatives that provide the right interventions for children who show early signs of disengagement and vulnerability, particularly in areas of socioeconomic deprivation. A coordinated, multi-agency response is required to address issues such as poverty, family instability, and mental health needs. A harmonised frontline service can create a safety net for communities capable of identifying and supporting vulnerable children and reducing the likelihood of criminal justice interactions later in life. A holistic approach can empower communities to work together with public service providers to build resilience, address vulnerabilities, and ensure that children receive the support they need to thrive and avoid involvement in crime.

5

### **Putting education at the heart of public service delivery**

– Schools and education settings are one of the most consistent and accessible environments for CYP and can play a crucial role in intervention by identifying vulnerabilities early, and providing locations where integrated service support can be located. Schools can address broader challenges that contribute to childhood vulnerability - such as poverty, family instability, and mental health needs - when they collaborate with social, health, and justice services. For instance, children identified in school as struggling due to external factors can be connected to mental health or social service teams, reducing the likelihood of disengagement, absenteeism, and later criminal justice involvement. This approach not only supports the wellbeing of CYP but also reduces the long-term costs for social and criminal justice services, fostering a safer and more equitable society.

6

### **Establishing universities as the “Research and Development” departments for local public services**

– Universities can bring together insights from across multiple disciplines about the factors driving vulnerability and involvement in crime, ensure decisions are based on the best possible evidence, oversee evaluation of innovative approaches, and train the professionals of the future to have the knowledge base necessary to support all children. Universities can provide rigorous, real-time research through public services partnerships. This would allow the best evidence to inform effective policies and programmes tailored to local needs. Universities can also encourage their students to support young people in their localities via mentoring schemes and the provision of extracurricular activities. This “R&D” approach ensures that interventions are not only effective but also sustainable and tailored to the community’s unique context, supporting better outcomes for vulnerable children, and ultimately reducing rates of crime.

7

### **Using and sharing information across public service providers**

– Data are currently collected within organisational silos, which fails to reflect the reality of how families interact with services. There are often multiple risk factors for involvement in the justice system and these span health, education, and social services. Consequently, sharing information across public service providers is essential for effectively addressing childhood vulnerability and breaking the link between vulnerability and crime. Where police and criminal justice agencies are involved, information sharing needs to be appropriately balanced with privacy concerns and the risks of unintended criminalisation. Proactively developing lawful, transparent, and proportionate approaches to information sharing would enable early identification of at-risk children and provide consistent, comprehensive support that addresses all aspects of a young person’s wellbeing. This approach would reduce system inefficiencies, align services towards common goals, and minimise the likelihood of children falling through the cracks and becoming victims or perpetrators of crime. Such coordinated agency support through transparent information sharing would also help build trust with families and children, providing a unified support network that could promote long-term resilience and reduce the risk of future involvement in the justice system.

# The evidence

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It remains the case that most children do not have contact with the formal criminal justice system. Many CYP who are victims of crime find ways to adapt to challenging circumstances and those who commit crimes often go on to have stable and fulfilling lives. However, there is mounting evidence that those who face the most cumulative and significant vulnerabilities are those most likely to be caught up in the youth justice system (YJS).

To prevent CYP from becoming involved in the criminal justice system, organisations need to work together in a coordinated “whole-system” approach to tackle underlying vulnerabilities earlier in children’s lives and help them achieve positive outcomes. To ensure the best prevention, child welfare rather than crime needs to be the focus, and CYP need to play an active role in shaping the policies and practices that are so important in their lives.

The recommendations within this report are based on the following evidence section.

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## Youth victimisation

CYP are often victims of crime. CYP who commit crimes are also in many cases vulnerable. There is mounting evidence showing those most heavily justice-involved are those that experience the most accumulated disadvantages, including victimisation and abuse. Children adapt and cope with adversity in different ways, including through behaviour that can bring them into contact with the justice system. These dynamics play out differently for different groups of CYP, with older children's vulnerabilities most likely to be missed.

A recent survey on self-reported experiences of violence among 13-17-year-olds in England and Wales found that 16% of children had been victims of violence in the past 12 months – violence often resulting in physical injury [1]. Chances of victimisation greatly increased for those missing school, in contact with a social worker, using drugs, and reporting being in a gang or carrying a weapon. Markers of economic deprivation were also associated with greater risk. Only a quarter of the victims had reported the incident to the police.

The vast majority of looked after children in England and Wales do not get into trouble with the law. However, being in care is a considerable risk factor for crime and exploitation. CYP housed away from familial settings are more vulnerable to becoming both a victim of crime and a victim of criminal exploitation [2]. This may be particularly true for females in out-of-home care, who are highly vulnerable to sexual and criminal exploitation, especially when there are drug and alcohol misuse issues [3].

As the Children's Commissioner has recently pointed out, where the perpetrators of crimes against children are prosecuted, "child victims... are among the most vulnerable – too often excluded from a justice process designed with adults in mind, and overlooked when it comes to specialist support to recover" [4].

### Child sexual exploitation and abuse

Until the end of the 1990s, those involved in child sexual exploitation (CSE) were deemed "child prostitutes", technically criminals even though they could not consent to sex. Since landmark policy guidance in 2000, CSE is now treated as child abuse [5]. However, the legacy of blaming CYP for their own abuse has been long-lasting and deep-rooted. Institutional failures to protect CYP from abuse in towns and cities across the North of England and beyond eventually came to light in a series of high-profile media scandals and official investigations [6]. This scrutiny and the scale of the injustice it revealed was a wake-up call for many public services.

CSE is a term used to refer to a process where abusive adults target and groom CYP, using affection, violence, and/or the threat of violence, to coerce them into sexual activities with adults for gain. CSE policy tends to focus most on the issue of abusing adults who have power over victims "by virtue of their age, gender, intellect, physical strength and/or economic or other resources" and who take advantage of an "imbalance of power" to coerce young people into sexual activities in exchange for things [7, 8]. Dynamics of abuse are varied and debated but common forms of CSE include older men posing as boyfriends, the "party model", online abuse, and sexual exploitation by criminal gangs [9-12]. CSE is a highly sensitive and largely hidden issue, posing challenges for research. Nevertheless, there is a large and growing evidence base which seeks to advance understanding of the issue within a wider context of child sexual abuse research.

Although anyone can be a victim of CSE, a variety of vulnerabilities are evident in patterns of victimisation; primarily based on life experiences and population groups. Most children who experience CSE are female, but studies have stressed the diversity of those affected. One study

"... some guy pulled up in a car next to me and started asking me stuff. At first, I was a bit like, I didn't want to, but then it was, 'I'll buy you this and I'll buy you that.' I didn't have no money when I was in care; you weren't allowed it. It was like, I might as well do it, and then it got more serious".

– Young person

of over 9,000 CSE service-users in the UK found that nearly one-third were male and around one in five children were "Black or minority ethnicity" [13]. CYP with disabilities and special educational needs are also an important group affected [14, 15]. A Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (CEOP) study found that looked after children (disproportionately from disadvantaged backgrounds) made up over one-third of cases. Studies have also shown how CYP "in trouble" are also over-represented in CSE cases, with "anti-social behaviour", drug use, crime, absconding from school or care, aggressive behaviour, and association with gangs all appearing as significant in terms of who is most vulnerable [12, 16-19]. One study of 80 West Midlands Youth Justice-involved young people found that 31% had been subject to multi-agency referrals as potential victims of sexual exploitation, which included all the females in the sample [20].

Older children are less likely to be deemed vulnerable and less entitled to welfare provision at age 16, 17, and above [21]. Empirical youth justice research has indicated that CSE

interventions are more punitive than they may appear [18]. Mainstream CSE services can struggle to meet the needs of racially minoritised children due to their "white nature" [22].

CYP may be violently or coercively manipulated into what has been termed "abused consent", where they are influenced by societal attitudes which normalise violence/coercion in sexual relationships, or they may be involved in what has been termed "survival consent", where poverty is a key "push factor" [23]. CYP's own perspectives on their experiences of CSE often underline how unmet need features commonly in participatory projects focusing on young people's lived experiences of CSE [21, 24].

[Breaking Through: Moving on From Child Sexual Exploitation](#) is a set of resources developed in partnership between the University of York and Basis Yorkshire, co-produced with a group of young women with experience of CSE and Yorkshire-based participatory artist Lucy Barker. The [animation](#) and [set of print resources](#) feature the voices and experiences of those who have experienced CSE and then moved on in some way, with words of wisdom for other young people and professionals.

"He gets my cigs and my money and he used to buy [my daughter] stuff... Sometimes he gives me my bus fare for college and then sometimes he gives me money for food or clothes, stuff that I need, stuff like that. I know what I'm doing is wrong... but I keep going just for my cigs and my money."

– Young person

The resources highlight how CSE happens to young people from a wide range of backgrounds, males and females, but also how some young people are especially vulnerable. Young people recount being seen as “troublesome” – blamed for their situation – underlining that if services are to be effective, they need to reach those with behaviour which might be seen as challenging as well as young people considered as deserving of support. Central messages were that interventions and services need to provide safety, validate self-worth, and support decision-making. Educational interventions, support from specialist CSE projects, appropriate therapeutic support, social care, and housing assistance were all described as key in the process of “moving on”. Criminal justice responses to abuse and “being believed” were crucial for those who reported. Adults “listening” was also important for young people, alongside material provision such as places of safety.

The life stories and resources show how important it is for professionals to build trust with young people, taking time to listen and keep them informed about what is going on, as the animation urges; “Workers need to be on your side, until you actually believe they’re going to be there for you.” [25].

**“I was put in a private children’s home, which pretty much saved my life. [...] There was me and another girl that lived there. There were only three bed spaces at that home and so it didn’t feel like a children’s home. They actually listened to you”.**

– Young person

### **Child criminal exploitation in drug distribution networks**

While not a new phenomenon, in recent years Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE) and the involvement of children in organised drug distribution networks has risen up the agenda in terms of identifying and recognising abuse of children. This is sometimes described as “county lines” exploitation, referring to criminal networks that typically transport illegal drugs from urban areas to smaller towns and rural communities, using dedicated mobile phone lines. These operations commonly exploit vulnerable people and frequently manipulate or coerce young people into dangerous roles. In 2023, of the 17,004 potential victims of modern slavery referred to the Home Office, 7,432 (44%) were under the age of 18. Out of 1,559 modern slavery referrals specifically flagged as relating to county lines, 1,158 (74%) were male and 401 (26%) were female [26]. However, these statistics are likely to be an underestimation.

Children caught up in CCE have often faced multiple disadvantages, and they face significant physical and emotional harm as well as experiencing trauma and abuse. While they may be involved in criminal activities, criminally exploited children are victims of coercion and exploitation. Progress has been made in terms of official policy understanding and addressing these situations as forms of exploitation and abuse. However, the criminalisation of young people or concerns about “youth violence” remain common responses, with underlying drivers of exploitation worsening due to the cost-of-living crisis, cuts to public services, and lack of opportunity. Welfare and safeguarding interventions are subject to high levels of variability and resource constraints. Reduced funding for youth services, social care, mental health support, and education has left many without the support they need. Areas most affected by deprivation have seen higher levels of county lines concern [27]. A recent study into county lines policing found that

practitioners perceived poverty and unemployment as key drivers in young people’s involvement in drug networks. Preliminary findings show how young people involved in county lines often do not fit easily with the image of a child victim, particularly to the police, and their victimhood and vulnerability can be missed [28]. Some CYP’s physical appearance and behaviour can lead to them being misidentified simply as offenders acting through volition rather than as victims: a process described as “adultification”. As other research has highlighted, this is especially pernicious in relation to Black and racially minoritised boys, and where initiatives to address “gangs”, knife crime, and youth violence have deep connections with racialised policing and other minoritised communities such as drug users [29].

Research has also highlighted how girls and women involved in county lines are frequently overlooked as victims, with law enforcement tending to focus on male offenders. Girls may be used for couriering drugs or concealing cash, but they remain comparatively invisible to authorities due to traditional gender assumptions around males dominating drug markets or because of assumptions that young people are “willingly” involved. As with CSE, many young people are exploited through relationships, which further complicates their identification as victims.

One group of young people identified as posing particular dilemmas for police responses were “alpha victims”, a term that refers to individuals who, after being exploited, move on to engage in violence and coercion of others. These young people blur the line between victim and perpetrator, complicating their treatment by authorities. Once they are involved in the recruitment of others, they are often no longer seen as victims, even though they were also initially manipulated or coerced into the criminal network and may still be subject to coercion or other forms of control. Histories of victimisation may be

**“...deprivation is absolutely our biggest challenge because that’s where the exploitation of vulnerability comes in...”**

– Senior Police Officer

considered in terms of mitigation in the YJS, but “special treatment” as vulnerable offenders is no substitute for victim-centred responses and welfare-based provision that adequately addresses unmet need.

Addressing county lines exploitation requires moving out a focus on behaviour and crime reduction to addressing contextual and structural factors that drive involvement [30]. Overcoming barriers to identifying victims, especially women, girls, “adultified” boys, and “alpha victims”, calls for more research-informed approaches. Early intervention and structural reforms are essential to mitigating these risks and addressing the root cause of county lines exploitation, with child welfare rather than crime reduction as the central concern.

[Expert lived experience advisors from Revolving Doors recently emphasised how people being exploited by county lines need to be supported rather than criminalised.](#) The group called for person-centred approaches which seek to understand the reasons underpinning behaviour. What they say is needed in addressing county lines is holistic support, peer support and more equal opportunities for young people in life as well as in access to diversion from criminal justice.

## Youth offending and vulnerability

Figures for youth offending only capture those matters which receive a formal sanction. As most offending by and against young people does not enter the YJS, self-report studies are an especially important means of examining the nature and drivers of crime related to children [31]. This is borne out by the Youth Endowment Fund survey of 13-17-year-olds referred to previously, which found that 15% of the sample reported perpetrating a violent act over the previous 12 months. Moreover, of the victims in this survey, only a quarter had reported the offence to the police.

Significant diversity exists in youth justice practice, but in recent years there has been a dramatic overall decrease in the proven offences that have been reported to, and recorded by, the police. Although still high relative to the post-war era, this figure has been decreasing over a long period, with a decline of two-thirds between 2013 and 2023. This has been attributed to policy change towards more welfare-oriented, multi-agency approaches, targeting young people before they start offending, and improvements in security which have decreased car theft, burglary, and other acquisitive crime [32, 33]. The “child first model” of youth justice has also been developed and widely adopted during recent years, although the impacts of this are debated [34].

Longitudinal studies have provided some of the richest evidence internationally about how long-term outcomes can be shaped by events and interventions in the early years. In Scotland, the Edinburgh Study of Youth Transitions and Crime has been critical in shaping the direction of youth justice policy, including the creation of a new whole system approach to dealing with CYP involved in offending in Scotland, increasing the age of criminal responsibility, and the abolition of custody for under 18s.

Like many other studies, the Edinburgh Study shows that offending behaviour in adolescence is

a relatively normal aspect of human development. However, a relatively small proportion of the cohort reported involvement in persistent and serious forms of offending, often from an early age.

A recurrent theme of the study’s analysis was that these young people were far more likely to be exposed to disadvantage, vulnerability, trauma, and poverty [35-38]. For example, involvement in violence (e.g., assault, weapon carrying, and robbery) at age 13 was associated with various vulnerabilities and adversities, including: household poverty and neighbourhood deprivation; childhood exposure to violence as a victim or offender (often both); drug use and frequent alcohol consumption; truancy and poor school attachment; and ineffective parenting practices (including frequent conflict and lack of supervision) [37].

By age 15, involvement in violence was also associated with exposure to harmful situations such as frequent victimisation, self-harm, and under-age sexual intercourse [36]. For many CYP, involvement in offending and other risky behaviours is symptomatic of a broader spectrum of underlying hardships, including structural disadvantage, family crises, poor supervision, exposure to trauma, and extreme vulnerability. These are problems that CYP have little or no capacity to change or control, and which do not respond to punishment or censure [39].

### Trends in youth justice

It remains the case that the core business of the YJS is to process those children routinely exposed to vulnerability, poverty, abuse, health problems, poor housing, and educational disadvantage, as well as criminal behaviour. However, there have been marked changes in youth justice in recent years [34].

Under 18s account for over one in five stop and searches, with 107,800 in 2022-23 [40]. Drugs were the grounds for 40% of stop and searches and

offensive weapons for 29%. Ten percent of stop and searches result in arrest, while 77% had no further action. Arrests (only some of which will have come from stop and search) have declined by over a half since 2013 but 2023 witnessed a 9% increase on the previous year to 59,045. The majority receive a youth caution, half of which are conditional. Of those sentenced at court, 70% receive a community sentence and 5% immediate custody.

Although youth custody remains tied to the worst outcomes for CYP, there has been a pronounced reduction over the past 20 years in the imprisonment of CYP in England and Wales. In July 2024, there were 437 under 18s in custody in England and Wales, reflecting a virtually continuous decline since 2013, when the figure stood at 1,544: a decline of 72%. This appears to be due to increased diversion from the YJS and increased diversion from youth custody [41].

Behind the basic statistics lie several serious inequalities and disproportionalities – all of them closely interlinked with each other. There are long-standing failures to address heavily racialised patterns evident in which CYP enter and remain in the YJS. There is also mounting evidence about disproportionality in relation to children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and those who experience compound social disadvantage and vulnerability.

### Regional variation

The national data obscure some regional variations. There are particularly high rates of child arrests and proven offences in the North East and Yorkshire [40]. Rates of children given a caution or a court sentence are high here but also in London and the North West. The proportions of children in custody are highest in London, the North West, and West Midlands.

### Inequalities

Societal inequality is heavily correlated with violence rates at a national level – it is considered a key “macro-social determinant” of violence.

Ethnographic research has demonstrated that highly unequal societies generate “multiple marginality” among those who are socially excluded in multiple, compounding ways – due to their class and racialisation, for instance [42]. Substantial marginalisation within a highly unequal society can engender what some scholars have termed “structural humiliation” which is a sense of profound belittlement induced by an individual’s experiences of a society’s unequal political economy, systems, and structures [43, 44]. Research into CYP’s perspectives shows how they often see certain behaviours as a way to get by in a deeply unequal society.

Britain’s inequalities have worsened in recent years. The UK ranks as the 8th most unequal of the 37 OECD countries as measured by the Gini coefficient [45]. In the UK, the number of children living in relative poverty (after housing costs) was 4.2 million in 2021-22 [46]. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation has raised urgent concerns about the growing problem of destitution in this country. Approximately 3.8 million people experienced destitution in 2022, including around one million children [47]. This was almost two-and-a-half times the number of people than in 2017, and nearly triple the number of children.

The Resolution Foundation has forecast that relative child poverty will continue to increase and reach its highest levels on record in 2027-28. In practical terms, this means that many children find themselves living in insecure and inadequate accommodation, with their families unable to afford bills, food, and other basic household items.

## Race and ethnicity

There are long standing and profound disproportionalities in the involvement of racially minoritised CYP in the YJS. While making up 4% of the 10–17-year-old population, Black children in 2023 accounted for 20% of the stop and searches of children (where ethnicity was known), 12% of arrests, 33% of remands in youth custody, 23% of sentences of immediate custody and 26% of children in custody [40]. Black children are also more likely to be strip-searched, with 37% of strip-searched children being of Black or mixed ethnicity [48]. A high-profile review noted that while many of the causes of racial disparity lie outside the criminal justice system, much more must be done to ensure equality of treatment within it [49].

“[The statistics are a] **sobering reminder of the work we collectively need to do to address disproportionality, find and use alternatives to remand, and to keep children out of the justice system**”

– Chair of the Youth Justice Board

## Looked after children

Children who are involved with child welfare services experience disadvantage in health, education, and opportunity, which equates to a perfect storm of vulnerability for criminal exploitation and criminalisation. Compared with children who have no such experience, children who have been in care are disproportionately more likely to be involved with the YJS, convicted rather than cautioned, and receive a custodial sentence. Although the vast majority of looked after children in England and Wales do not get in trouble with the law, approximately half of children in custody have previously been in care at some point [41].

More recently, a large cohort study of children born between 1996-1999, employing linked data from the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) and Department for Education (DfE) has shown that [50]:

- Children who have experience of social care were disproportionately more likely to have youth justice involvement and more likely to have custodial sentences compared to those without care experience.
- Custodial sentences were twice as common among Black and Mixed ethnicity care-experienced children compared to White care-experienced children.
- The gap in youth justice involvement between children with care experience and non-care-experienced children widened over time.

Care-experienced children have often experienced the most severe and enduring levels of abuse and neglect, but they also encounter some unique and additional vulnerabilities partly because of their out of home placements. For example, children living in care homes are more likely to have contact with the police due to their behaviour within the home, including for minor incidents, that can lead to criminal cautions or convictions [51-54].

“Care-experienced” is defined as having been in foster care, kinship care, a children’s home, or other residential settings. However, evidence also shows that other levels of the child welfare system are also associated with engagement with the YJS. Children in need and on child protection plans are two to three times more likely than their peers to have at least one criminal caution or conviction by early adulthood [55].

While the focus is often on males, given higher rates of offending and incarceration, females’ child welfare involvement of any type presents a greater risk of being cautioned or convicted of a criminal offence and of receiving a custodial sentence compared to girls in the general population [55].

## Learning needs and neurodivergence

Recent government data demonstrate that 80% of children in the YJS are identified as having SEND [55]. Most of these children will not have been identified as having SEND until they enter the justice system, often because their needs are missed within mainstream education. A recent report by the Centre for Justice Innovation has highlighted that children with SEND are not benefitting from diversionary support to the same extent as children without identified SEND [56].

One study of 80 youth justice cases in the West Midlands found 79% of the children had a diagnosed or suspected issue related to physical or mental health, neurodivergence, or learning disability and 26% had more than one diagnosed health condition or disability [20].

This overrepresentation of children with SEND and/or neurodivergence is associated with a range of concomitant adversities but there is also a direct link with how children are dealt with in the YJS. For example, previous research suggests that difficulties with communication and understanding can influence various legal processes, such as charges, cautions, bail conditions, or court orders. For

instance, a child who struggles to grasp questions during an interview may unintentionally make misleading statements or overly truthful remarks, which could compromise their defence [57].

## School exclusion

Exclusion from school often exacerbates vulnerability, exposing excluded pupils to risk and harms associated with longer-term consequences, such as poor mental and physical health, low educational attainment, unemployment, and homelessness [58]. Permanent exclusion further damages CYP’s self-esteem, identity formation, and development, while simultaneously closing off avenues for them to pursue healthy and prosocial lives [59]. In addition, school exclusion has been found to accelerate involvement into criminal and/or sexual exploitation and entry into the criminal justice system, which has been described as the “school-to-prison pipeline” [60]. There is a clear statistical relationship between school exclusion (particularly permanent exclusion) and later youth custody, although the causality behind this relationship is complex [60, 61]. Many first-time entrants (FTEs) to the justice system have been excluded. Indeed, 85% of males in young offender institutions have previously been excluded from school [62]. Rates of suspensions and permanent exclusions are gradually increasing and there are considerably higher than average permanent exclusion rates for Roma Gypsy, Irish Traveller, and Mixed White and Black Caribbean pupils [63]. There is also evidence of geographical variation, with schools in the North East experiencing particularly high rates of permanent exclusion [64]. There are higher rates of neurodivergent traits among children excluded from school, and as noted previously, neurodivergence is greatly overrepresented in the YJS.

## Adverse childhood experiences

Justice-involved children have often faced cumulative adversity and vulnerability over the course of their childhoods. There is a well-

established evidence base that shows how the underlying causes of behaviours of many justice-involved children is most often child abuse, trauma, loss, and other adversity. One regional study focused on 80 Youth Justice cases in the West Midlands found the vast majority have suffered abuse or family violence as well as educational exclusion, alongside other discriminations related to a range of factors including, gender, ethnic origin, neurodiversity, and migration [20]. This study, entitled Punishing Abuse, showed how justice-involved children had interacted with a range of services including the care system, education provision, and health services, indicating systemic failure to meet the children's needs.

Justice-involved children are often exposed to adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). Examples of

ACEs include violence, abuse, or neglect; witnessing domestic violence; bereavement; substance misuse within the family; mental health problems within the family; parental separation; or having a family member in prison. Research suggests that ACEs have enduring, harmful effects of CYP's health, wellbeing, and life opportunities. Some research also suggests that ACEs are associated with an increased risk of future involvement in violence, both as a perpetrator and as a victim [65]. This finding has been associated with the adoption of a "trauma-informed care" approach to working with children with a history of ACEs (i.e., seeking to understand the impact of children's pasts on their lives and providing appropriate support accordingly) [66]. It is important that CYP's experiences do not simply become aggregate patterns discussed in abstract ways.

**“Above all, we must always remember that youth justice statistics are about children, their lives, their trauma and their needs which we, collectively, must meet”.**

– Chair of the Youth Justice Board

## Interventions

CYP attending education settings cannot be seen as isolated islands. They are part of a much wider ecosystem of peers, neighbourhoods, and other social influences (see Figure 1). When considering some of the issues and influences affecting CYP and interventions to prevent youth offending and victimisation, it is important to understand these as both nested and interconnected.

We also need to consider not only the physical, real-world influences, but also the wider networks informed by social media and the messages they impart. A whole-child approach demands situating the experiences of CYP, both within and beyond their families and schools, the same is true for upstream harm and crime prevention opportunities.

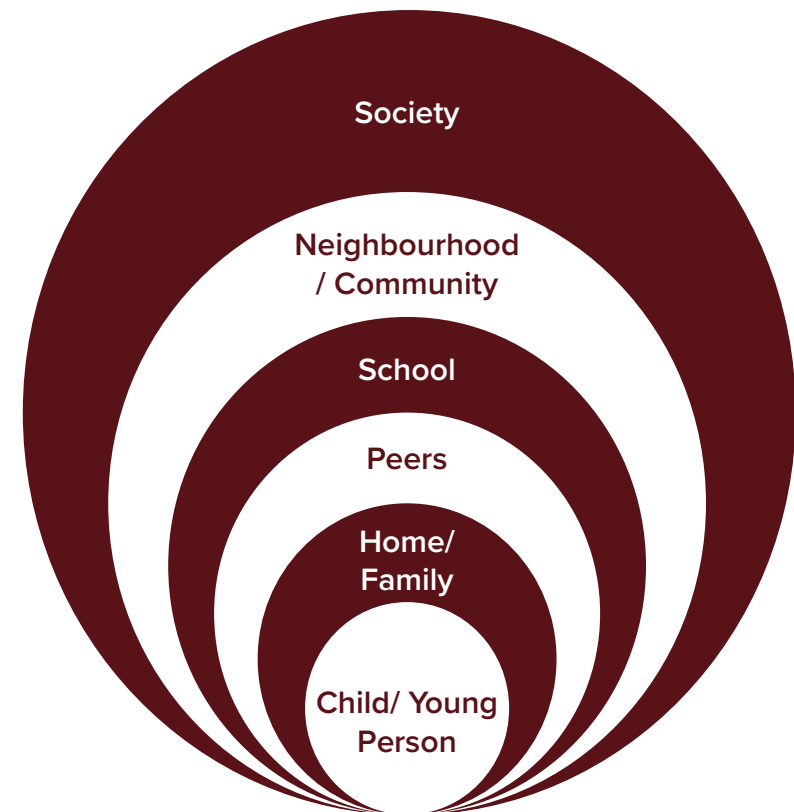


Figure 1: Social contexts in which CYP are vulnerable to abuse and exposed to risks of offending

## Diversions

Arguments for diverting CYP from the YJS are predicated on two key research findings. Firstly, there is a wealth of research showing that most children will mature out of crime naturally, without intervention. The “age crime curve” shows how offending behaviour (whether or not it is detected) peaks in the mid-teens and then drops abruptly over the late teens, after which it declines more slowly [67]. Most young people who commit offences are “adolescent-limited offenders”. “Life-course persistent offenders” constitute a much smaller group, continuing offending into adulthood. The second finding is that formal interventions with young people appear to have a negative effect on their future offending and their wider social development [36, 68]. Diversion from the formal YJS is therefore a key imperative preventing the development of “delinquent identities” and longer criminal careers.

Evidence demonstrates that early diversion away from formal system intervention supports the process of desistance from criminal offending. Analyses were undertaken to determine what factors influenced decision-making processes at key stages of the youth justice process and what impact this had on subsequent behaviour [35]. The study found that police decision-making was influenced by both deeds (including serious offending) and needs (including poverty and vulnerability), whereas decision making within the YJS was driven more by needs than deeds. Nevertheless, children with “previous form” were most likely to be subject to formal intervention rather than diverted away [69].

Those who were diverted away from formal measures showed greatest progress in desisting from further serious offending. However, those who were subject to the most intervention were unlikely to have stopped or reduced their offending. The study shows that selection and

labelling processes that operate within youth justice propel certain young people (the “usual suspects”) more deeply into formal systems of intervention [70]. However, these young people are typically exposed to the greatest levels of physical, social, and economic adversity [35, 36].

Evidence on the effectiveness of police-initiated diversion (“at the point of arrest”) is positive, being associated with a small decline in offending in comparison with traditional YJS processing [71, 72].

As already discussed, ethnic minority children are overrepresented in the YJS from stop and search onwards. Moreover, decisions made within the criminal justice system contribute to this disproportionality. Black children are considerably less likely than White children to receive a caution instead of being charged, and they often face harsher penalties for comparable offenses. In the year ending March 2022, Black children were responsible for less than 12% of all recorded offenses but represented 20% of those with custodial sentences. Part of this disproportionality relates to ethnic minority children being less likely to be diverted from more serious youth justice disposals [73].

### Age of criminal responsibility

One way to divert children from the YJS is to prevent them from being responsible for offences in the first place. The age of criminal responsibility in England and Wales is aged 10, one of the lowest ages in Europe. This means that a 10-year-old can be deemed criminally responsible for their actions in the same way as adults are [74]. The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child has concluded that “a minimum age of criminal responsibility below the age of 12 years is considered by the Committee not to be internationally acceptable” and has strongly encouraged countries to introduce a higher minimum age of criminal

responsibility, for instance 14 or 16 years [75]. Many comparative European countries have minimum ages of between 12 to 14 years. Scotland recently increased the age of criminal responsibility via the Age of Criminal Responsibility (Scotland) Act 2019, such that now children under the age of 12 can no longer be charged or arrested.

The negative impacts of criminal justice system contact during childhood and adolescence predicts negative outcomes in adulthood. Examining patterns of “conviction” (from adult or youth justice) from age 8 (the age of criminal responsibility at the time in Scotland) found clear differences in the onset, shape, and duration of offending trajectories. Most CYP had a relatively short-term pattern of convictions during the mid-late teenage years. However, some began receiving convictions at a much earlier age (typically 10-12). Amongst these “early onset” offenders, one group grew out of it before early adulthood, while another went on to have a “chronic” offending pathway. Studying the differences between these two early onset groups, chronic offenders were more likely to have had formal system contact with a range of agencies. The period between age 12-15 marked a significant turning point, especially in terms of school truancy and exclusion, adversarial police contact, police warnings or charges, offence referrals to the Children’s Reporter, and periods of statutory supervision. Importantly, there was no difference between the two groups in terms of their self-reported involvement in serious offending over this period. In other words, a sustained increase in formal agency intervention, including the police and children’s hearing system, during early adolescence played a defining role in raising the likelihood, severity, and duration of criminal careers in early adulthood [36].

Improving children’s outcomes and creating the conditions for a happier and healthier future does not always require more formal system

intervention, especially when it comes to justice agencies. Young people are largely powerless to alter the majority of the factors that propel them into contact with youth justice agencies and are rendered even more powerless through processes of labelling and criminalisation [35].

The evidence strongly supports the use of welfare-based systems that respond to youth offending by tackling the problems that underpin it, while diverting young people away from justice measures as much as possible [39].

The age of criminal responsibility in England and Wales is aged 10, one of the lowest ages in Europe.

## Innovating youth justice: a cautionary yet inspirational tale

The system for dealing with children who commit offences in Scotland diverged from approaches in other parts of the UK in the early 1970s, when the Social Work (Scotland) Act 1968 enabled the creation of a new welfare-based system of juvenile justice known as the Children's Hearings System (CHS). Based on the recommendations of the Kilbrandon Committee (1964), the CHS was a tribunal system designed to deal with referrals about children from birth to age 15 who may need care and protection as well as referrals for those aged 8 to 15 who were involved in offending. Paid officials, known as Children's Reporters, were responsible for reviewing individual referrals and establishing whether compulsory measures of care might be necessary. Where this was considered the case, children could be brought in front of a Children's Panel, consisting of three specially trained members of the public, who would hear the case and decide what action should be taken in the best interest of the child [76]. At the time of its creation, the CHS was the only non-judicial system for dealing with CYP who offend in the UK, and one of very few internationally.

For 30 years, the CHS was the beating heart of youth justice in Scotland and remained relatively unchallenged. Following devolution, however, a new Labour-Liberal Democrat coalition government sought to take a tougher stance on youth offending in Scotland [77]. A more punitive focus on young people who offend was evident at the opening of the first youth court in Scotland for over three decades, when the then Cabinet Secretary for Justice in Scotland asserted that "punishment was an essential part of the youth justice process" [78]. A raft of legislative provisions was introduced

under the Antisocial Behaviour etc. (Scotland) Act 2004, including Dispersal Orders, Parenting Orders, and Anti-Social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs) for 12–15-year-olds. New "fast-track" hearings were designed to improve the speed and efficiency of dealing with so-called persistent offenders (referred on offence grounds at least five times within six months), and government performance targets were set for reducing the total number of persistent offenders by 10% [79].

Scotland's brief use of this punitive approach to youth justice ended in "glorious failure" [39]. The fast-track hearings proved to be no more effective in reducing youth offending. Indeed, an evaluation showed that offending rates reduced more steeply in non-affected comparison sites [80]. Moreover, fast-track hearings widened the net of young people drawn into the CHS, including young people in residential care who were criminalised for behaviour that, under other circumstances, would have been considered minor [81]. Instead of reducing the number of persistent offenders by the target of 10%, the government's new approach to youth justice increased it by 15% [82]. In addition, there was a 63% increase in the rate of referrals to the CHS, as well as a 19% increase in the rate of criminal convictions and a 23% increase in receptions to youth custody for 16–17-year-olds over this period [83]. The fast-track hearings were abolished (mainly on cost grounds), and the raft of other measures introduced under this regime were largely abandoned. Dispersal zones were barely used [84]. Less than a dozen ASBOs were issued to children under the age of 16 and no Parenting Orders were issued [85]. The Scottish Executive's flagship youth justice policies ran aground at a cost of £13.5m [86].

Over the last 20 years, the CHS has continued to sit at the heart of youth justice in Scotland, resilient in the face of challenges to weaken its welfare-based principles and replace it with youth courts. Nevertheless, important changes have occurred to further strengthen it in the context of an emerging social justice agenda in Scottish politics. The introduction of a landmark new children's policy framework, known as Getting It Right for Every Child or GIRFEC, re-emphasised the importance of better integrated children's services in delivering positive outcomes [87]. It heralded a shift in emphasis away from offending and towards wellbeing. Juvenile justice has been subsumed under a broader government narrative of creating safer, more resilient communities and the populist rhetoric has disappeared from official reports. Bolstered by evidence from the Edinburgh Study of Youth Transitions and Crime a "whole systems approach" to dealing with CYP who offend was rolled out nationally in 2011 [83]. Predicated on multi-agency decision making and upstream investment in services for CYP and families, it focuses on diverting young people away from formal interventions wherever possible.

In the period since GIRFEC was introduced, there has been a substantial decline in the number of children engaging with the justice system in Scotland. The rate of offence referrals to the Children's Reporter for 8–15-year-olds has fallen by 89%, while the rate of criminal conviction and custodial receptions amongst 16-17-year-olds have reduced by 92% and 98%, respectively, their lowest for at least 50 years [83]. Such success paved the way for an increase in the age of criminal responsibility, from 8 to 12 years, under the Age of

Criminal Responsibility (Scotland) Act 2019. More recently, the Care and Justice (Scotland) Act 2024 abolished the use of custody for all under 18s. These remarkable reforms are testament to both the strength and fragility of systems in the context of political flux. One of the strongest lessons from the Scottish experience is that the best interests of CYP must sit at the heart of any system designed to deal those who need care and support, whether as a result of offending or otherwise. The best interests of CYP can only be addressed through multi-agency cooperation, including policing, education, social services, health, the third sector, and others with a core responsibility for child wellbeing.

### Preventing exclusion from school

The evidence on the effectiveness of interventions specifically designed to prevent school exclusions is mixed with some studies showing school-based interventions have only a low impact on violent crime even if it successfully reduces school exclusions [88].

Other popular school-based youth violence interventions such as trauma-informed design, police in schools, knife crime education, anti-bullying and after-school programmes also have limited effectiveness or insufficient evidence to support their widespread adoption [88].

Nevertheless, the effect of social skills training remains high when implemented in school contexts, and especially when serving children ages 9-10 (especially boys) who need intensive support, leading to an average of a 32% reduction in crime involvement [88]. School-based interventions targeting specific types of violence such as relationship violence and sexual assault have also proven moderately effective [89, 90].

Given the association between neurodivergence and exclusion, there is also merit in considering how neurodivergence can be identified earlier on (while avoiding stigmatisation) and a pressing need to develop more preventive approaches to avoid exclusion among this group [91].

### Youth participation in the development and delivery of interventions

Although Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) mandates that CYP's views should be considered in all matters impacting them, the degree to which this is actually implemented within youth justice systems remains uncertain. [92]. There is increasing support for involving children with justice system experience in shaping youth justice policy and practice. This

participatory approach aligns with the "Child First" principle, which prioritises the rights and voices of young people. Research shows that when children and practitioners work together to develop participation, engagement, and inclusion practices, it leads to stronger, more effective relationships in practice settings [92-94].

### Contextual safeguarding

Contextual safeguarding (see also Innovative approaches) is an approach that keeps CYP safe in public places, schools, and peer groups [95]. It recognises the importance of the wider social environments and contexts in which CYP live, beyond their homes or families. It was developed in response to extra familial harm or "risk outside the home", such as CSE and criminal exploitation, peer-instigated sexual abuse, and street-based or weapon-enabled violence.

Contextual safeguarding focuses on protecting CYP through targeting the context in which abuse and exploitation is taking place, changing the social conditions of those contexts. Young people's welfare, rather than crime, is the central concern in this approach [30]. The approach addresses risks of victim churn, ensuring that the environments that create risk are tackled rather than just individual-level protections or interventions put in place with risks transferred to other young people.

The approach involves assessing the broader social environment in which a child or young person operates. This means looking at how relationships in school, online, or within the community affect a child's safety, with interventions also undertaken with these communities. It involves a multi-agency approach, involving collaboration between social workers, schools, community safety, police, health professionals, youth workers, and community organisations, but always with welfare at the forefront and crime reduction subsumed within this.

### Restorative youth justice

Restorative justice is a process that supports the victim of a crime and the young person responsible to communicate, repair harm, and find a positive way forward. It focuses on making the person responsible aware of the harm they caused and helps them to make reparations.

Restorative justice has been used in a variety of settings, including schools. However, this summary focuses on the use of restorative justice in a criminal justice context. Restorative justice can take place at any stage of the criminal justice process including as a:

- Form of final warning to young offenders
- Diversion from prosecution altogether
- Pre-sentencing, post-conviction add-on to the sentencing process
- Supplement to a community sentence
- Preparation for release from imprisonment to resettlement.

There have been a range of different activities involved in restorative justice interventions.

Some of the different types of interventions that adhere (more or less) to restorative values and principles include:

- Restorative conferences: This involves a face-to-face meeting between the individual who committed the crime and the victim, led by a trained facilitator. Much of the existing research has focused on restorative justice conferences.
- Community conferences: A restorative conference which involves several members of the community who have been affected

by the crime and may involve more than one perpetrator.

- Reparations to a victim: The person responsible for the crime might pay financial compensation to the victim or repair an item damaged in an act of vandalism.
- Indirect mediation: The participants do not meet in person, and messages are passed between them, usually by a trained mediator.

Forms of restorative justice are widely used within Youth Offending Teams across England and Wales, notably through a Youth Conditional Caution, pre-sentence, a Referral Order and Youth Rehabilitation Order. MoJ and Youth Justice Board (YJB) guidance states that restorative justice should form part of a youth caution wherever appropriate. Referral order guidance from the MoJ and YJB states that referral order panels should be based on restorative principles. It also states that it is essential that referral order panels allow victims the chance to become involved in the process. The best way to do this is by offering them the chance to take part in a face-to-face restorative justice conference.

The model of youth restorative justice in Northern Ireland provides Youth Conferences where referral can occur pre-conviction (diversionary youth conferencing) or post-conviction (court-ordered conferencing). A conference is attended by the offender, victim (or a representative), professionals, and others. The purpose of the conference is to discuss the offence and its consequences. In Northern Ireland, restorative justice has become more "integral" in youth justice as compared to England and Wales where it operates more as a "bolt on" [96].

On average, restorative justice has had a positive impact on preventing crime and violence. The research suggests that restorative justice has reduced reoffending by an average of 13% [97].



The international evidence shows that restorative justice works differently for different kinds of people. Researchers have tried to investigate the conditions where restorative justice might be particularly effective. However, this analysis is based on a small number of studies and more research is needed. The evidence also suggests that the impact on reoffending is dependent on the quality of the implementation of the restorative process. With CYP, it is likely to have a more beneficial impact where participation in restorative justice is not forced, the process involves face-to-face encounters through conferencing and victim-offender mediation, and facilitators are not police officers.

The benefits of restorative justice are that it empowers victims and gives them a voice in the criminal justice process, helping them to move on with their lives. It also helps offenders to turn their lives around by giving them an opportunity to hear from their victim, to take responsibility, and to make amends.

Research shows a high level of satisfaction from victims who have engaged in restorative justice. MoJ research demonstrates that 85% of victims are satisfied or very satisfied after meeting an offender face-to-face [98]. The evaluation of a pathfinder offering pre-sentence restorative justice to victims and offenders in ten Crown Courts in England and Wales reported that, on a ten-point scale, 77% of participants ranked their experience either nine or ten [99]. Victim satisfaction with diversionary youth conferencing in Northern Ireland was reported to be 84% by the Department of Justice [100].

Restorative justice is relatively inexpensive, notably when compared to the costly criminal justice system. Additionally, it is estimated that for every £1 spent on restorative justice, £8 is saved through a reduction in reoffending [97].

In schools, restorative approaches similarly focus on repairing harm rather than punishing the pupil. They allow those involved in a behaviour incident to help resolve conflict and tackle the root of the problem. This often takes the form of a restorative conversation, either with a child and a teacher or between two or more children.

Often, conversations revolve around restorative questions, such as:

- What happened?
- What did you think or feel as the situation happened?
- Who has this affected and how has this affected them?
- How can things be put right or restored?

This might end with an opportunity for the child to do something to put things right.

The intention is that by addressing the incident, the emotions and thoughts behind it and the effect it has had on others, CYP may recognise the impact of their choices. Crucially, the restorative conversation will seek to restore and mend damaged relationships and even damaged self-esteem. The aim is not to just punish, but to help children to reflect, take responsibility, and repair harm.

Experience and evidence at local and national levels has shown that restorative processes have a positive impact in changing school cultures, especially regarding attendance and behaviour, when embedded in a wider restorative context, and within clear school improvement strategies. When systematically employed on a whole-school basis, restorative practices can help transform negative school environments by engaging pupils in taking responsibility for making their own schools better.

Restorative practices stand in stark contrast to the prevailing reliance on punishment and exclusion employed in many schools.

A report published by the DfE gave whole-school restorative approaches the highest rating of effectiveness at preventing bullying, with a survey of schools showing 97% rated restorative approaches as effective [101].

An independent evaluation of restorative justice in Bristol schools found that restorative justice

improved school attendance and reduced exclusion rates [102]. The evaluation concluded that restorative approaches are likely to have the biggest impact on the climate for learning in schools employing a whole-school approach to implementation.

**For every £1 spent  
on restorative  
justice, £8 is saved  
through a reduction  
in reoffending.**

## Using administrative data for public good

This report highlights the stark realities experienced by CYP with vulnerabilities as they encounter the criminal justice system in many parts of the UK. The evidence section details how the most vulnerable often interact with a host of service providers including the police. Yet in many cases, interaction with the criminal justice system – as victim or perpetrator – worsens life outcomes, and thus, for the most vulnerable, is emblematic of missed opportunities to intervene up-stream.

Justice-involved CYP have often interacted with the care system, struggled with school engagement, shown poor attendance, have unmet SEND needs, and have faced adverse childhood experiences of various types in early life. At the same time, it is important to understand that the overwhelming majority of CYP who experience these challenges do not go on to be criminally exploited or involved in serious violence. Consequently, if we are to support CYP to live healthy and fulfilled lives, it is critical for society to understand these pathways, what differentiates them, and how they are experienced.

One key element in solving this complex problem is developing a suite of complementary tools to understand these interconnected strands of CYP's lives. One part of the solution lies in devising scientifically and ethically robust ways to link routinely collected data across the different public services that exist to support CYP. Pseudonymised data are the raw materials that will allow scientists, working with policy makers, practitioners, and people with lived experiences, to undertake holistic and impactful data science that can shine a light onto critical social issues that span disparate services. These datasets are made available

securely through platforms such as Administrative Data Research UK's Data-First initiative (linking MoJ and DfE data) and the NHS-E hosted Connected Bradford Research Database (health, education, and care).

To improve outcomes for the most vulnerable, we must also recognise that routinely collected data often represent just the tip of the iceberg. It is only by combining data-driven insights with person-centred approaches and community engagement that we can truly understand how to make meaningful progress. This is no easy task. Data sharing between disparate organisations introduces considerable logistical and legal complexities, as well as prompting fundamental ethical debates that society must address together. Public trust and consent are as critical as modern data infrastructure and a rigorous scientific approach if we are to build an evidence base that works for all CYP.

Through a series of exploratory projects, the ESRC Vulnerability & Policing Futures Research Centre's Connected Data Analytics programme is working with practitioners and policy makers to determine how best to utilise administrative data to understand the trajectories of young people at increased risk of criminal justice involvement. The work has commenced in Bradford and used the powerful Connected Bradford Research database which brings together health, education, social care, and policing data.

Projects have explored a range of topics including:

- The relationship between unauthorised absence and mental health referrals
  - Estimating the nature and scale of police response demand
  - Exploring the characteristics and trajectories of individuals referred to Social Care via police
  - The relationship between school absence and being Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEET)
  - The relationship between early years school assessment and NEET
  - Mapping overlap and gaps in vulnerability-related police and ambulance service provision
  - Exploring the wider health determinants associated with Looked After Children
- Geospatial and demographic patterns of unauthorised school absence



# Innovative approaches trialled in the real world

This section of the report highlights how various sectors have risen to the challenges of supporting vulnerable CYP and preventing involvement in the criminal justice system. These approaches are responsive to local need, in the context of limited resources and growing demand. They are offered here not as blueprints for copying, but to inspire new thinking and practice to tackle the childhood vulnerability, crime, and justice crisis. Our hope is that these inspire other areas to be equally creative. Moreover, we hope that the new government's Opportunity Mission will allow better sharing of learning across the UK as everyone works together to build a country that works for all CYP.

## 1

Child First approaches  
for violence reduction

“Bring a child first lens to tackling all forms of violence within our communities”

This manifesto pledge from West Yorkshire’s Mayor Tracy Brabin quickly became a reality within the pioneering northern region. Starting as an ambition of the West Yorkshire Violence Reduction Partnership (VRP), a focus on “child first” has grown into a region-wide meaningful collaboration with children across West Yorkshire in violence reduction work.

Child First is the central guiding principle in the Youth Justice Board’s strategic plan, resting on a well-established evidence base of “what works” and centring the needs, rights, and wellbeing of children at every stage of Youth Justice. Children in contact with the YJS engage with many other services, so making this vision a reality involved wide-ranging partners and collaborations.

The VRP and partners co-produced a framework with over 450 children from across West Yorkshire, placing children at the heart of decision making. This framework emphasises meaningful collaboration, whether this be through co-production, co-design, or consultation to ensure that any adult-led vision for the future aligns with our children’s. The framework is for all professionals who make decisions that may impact the lives of children across the county, either directly or indirectly.

This was developed through face-to-face workshops with a key focus on going to spaces where CYP felt comfortable, rather than expecting them to come to us, and in spaces where engagement and consultations do not always take place. This included YJS, alternative provisions, youth clubs, and football pitches. The team used a variety of engagement methods to meet individual needs, with some sessions run by the VRP and others led by other trusted partner organisations. Engagement methods were tailored to specific needs and preferences of different children. For example, some used drawing methods rather than talking, with one-to-one sessions undertaken with children with SEND.

To launch the framework, CYP were very clear that it must not be boring, so the VRP hosted an art exhibition about CYP’s experiences of growing up in West Yorkshire. This included over 60 pieces of art on display including poems, dance, raps, collages, sculptures, and photography. Many who hadn’t participated in the workshops were keen to submit work in the exhibition, which provided even wider-ranging perspectives to emerge.

The framework aims to outline how Child First can be incorporated at every level of an organisation. It is split into key themes highlighted through engagement activities, with key questions for each which ask: What can you do differently to demonstrate you have listened to children’s voices?

Following the framework allows the VRP and allied partners to understand how they can work with CYP to inform their decisions. This ensures regional investments are best placed and sustainable whilst also encouraging more creative responses to the issues faced in communities. The ambition is to now move beyond consultation and engagement to see children treated as equal partners in violence reduction work, such as in this co-produced communications campaign with the region’s Youth Commission in response to their [Big Conversation](#) report. There is now a growing “Child First” network of partner organisations, each using the framework to drive forward recognition of children as equal stakeholders, prioritising meaningful engagement with CYP to influence violence reduction work.

## 2

Risk Outside the Home  
(ROTH) Pathway

Criminal and sexual exploitation, peer-instigated sexual abuse, and street-based or weapon-enabled violence, can all pose a risk of significant harm to young people. When they do, they are, in theory, child protection issues. In practice, however, a traditional child protection response is likely to focus on changing the actions of parents as a source of protection instead of changing peer, school, and community contexts where extra-familial harm occurs.

Facing increasing resource pressures, and in recognition of the parenting-focus of many child protection practices, many social care departments have refused to use child protection processes in these situations. Yet without a child protection response, young people at risk of significant extra-familial harm can be left without statutory social work oversight. In instances of exploitation and violence, criminal justice agencies and police or community safety teams often act as lead agencies. Young people's behaviour (e.g., involvement in dealing drugs) can become the key focus of interventions rather than unmet need, vulnerability, and child welfare.

Through an approach based on "Contextual Safeguarding", the team articulated the risks of this gap in local systems and began piloting an alternative pathway in cases that included responses to criminal exploitation of young people, that they co-produced with local authorities; the [Risk Outside the Home \(ROTH\) Pathway](#). ROTH Pathways create opportunities for improving safeguarding responses to extrafamilial harm that are; "structural", "ethical", "relational", and "practical".

Funded by the DfE, a series of local pilots tested an alternative child protection response for risks outside of the family, including criminal exploitation and other forms of violence and abuse. The team worked closely with three areas who wished to pilot a ROTH Child Protection Pathway, building on the learning and resources produced from the first ROTH pilot in Wiltshire. These areas were supported to design their own ROTH pathways. Fifty-eight young people and families were supported via a ROTH Pathway across the three sites. The research team collected information from assessments and plans that were developed during the pilots, observed conferences that were held to coordinate support, and spoke to young people, parents/carers, and professionals who participated in the pilots. With this information they identified key features of these ROTH Pathways as well as opportunities and challenges faced in implementing them. The local and national conditions that would best facilitate the ethical and effective use of ROTH pathways in the future was also identified.

Across all assessments in the pilots, young people's welfare, rather than crime, was a central concern. Concerns about "youth violence" were addressed through re-situating social work within communities, enabling relationships with non-statutory and community partners to be a common feature of the practice; with criminal justice responses to extra-familial harm as secondary to (or subsumed under) safeguarding responses. Prior responses had been the remit of community safety partnerships, but social work assessments being the primary intervention route was noted as significant by professionals.

The [learning from pathway pilots](#) has been converted into a suite of resources; and are included as part of wider [Contextual Safeguarding Scale-up Toolkit](#) which is now being utilised widely. The need for a child protection pathway for risk outside the home has since been recommended in the Independent Review of Children's Social Care and the Jay Inquiry into Child Criminal Exploitation.

**"It is most definitely what we need, it's brought together thoughts and discussions that people have been having for a long time. It means we can focus in and bring some clarity and hopefully then some solutions to what's happening for these young people. And a better understanding of how manipulation and everything else around Child Criminal Exploitation works."**

– Child Protection Conference Chair

3

## Co-designing community resilience to online child sexual exploitation and abuse

Child sexual exploitation and abuse increasingly manifests online or is facilitated by technology. This presents several challenges for practitioners, parents, CYP, and communities feeling as though the solution to this problem is out of their reach. However, crimes involving a child in the production of child sexual abuse media often start offline. More scrutiny for social media providers and policies focusing on the identification of perpetrators of online child sexual exploitation and abuse (OCSEA), such as the UK Online Safety Act 2023, are important. But to allow for early intervention and early identification of risk and harm, we need to start the response to OCSEA in the community.

One [Vulnerability & Policing Futures Research Centre project](#) took a community-based approach to develop quality standards, improve local prevention efforts, and build community resilience to OCSEA. The project commenced in May 2022 and used a mixed-methods approach involving a rapid appraisal, co-production with practitioners, parents, and CYP, as well as a police case file analysis.

Data were collected between October 2022 and April 2024. Researchers talked to over 50 representatives from local youth organisations, police, social work, children’s services, health, local authority, young people, parent support services, and parents as part of a rapid appraisal. Working with an artist from the community, an animated video was coproduced with children, highlighting their views on online safety and responses to OCSEA.

Discussions revealed that community practitioners struggle to respond to OCSEA crimes due to their volume, complexity, and the lack of relevant evidence-informed guidance. This means local practitioners try to rationalise the way in which they approach this problem and set boundaries in who can and should respond and why.

Primary prevention efforts occur offline through schools, mainly in PSHE, including information that CYP find unhelpful or outdated. There is very little activity at the secondary prevention level, such as

routine screening mechanisms, and regular opportunities to talk and update, for police, parents, social workers, and others in the child-care workforce to identify what works or take children’s voices into account.

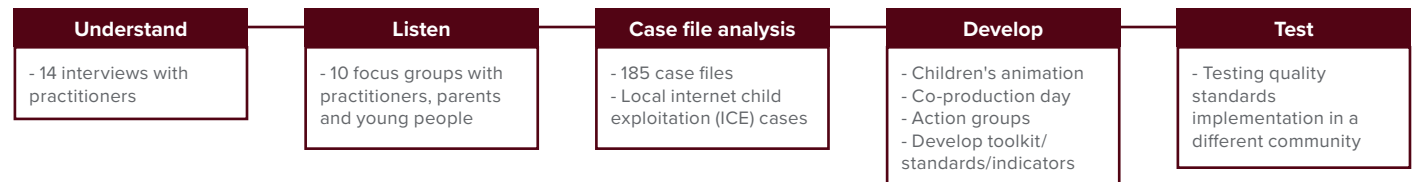
Police reactions to peer-on-peer abuse can influence the extent to which enforcement, social care or educational approaches dominate local community responses, impacting on both the criminalisation of young people and a lack of trauma-informed support for children who are victims. Holistic and multi-agency informed practices are needed to combat the problem.

Based on these discussions, the team co-developed, with local practitioners, parents, and CYP, 11 local priorities in the response to OCSEA. These were ranked and are focused on offline responses to support community-focused interventions. In conjunction with local partners, the research team developed six quality standards which are currently being taken forward by local action groups, including parents and children in the implementation process.

Quality standards in the response and prevention of OCSEA:

- Prioritising multi-agency responses
- Children and young people-led responses
- Consistent and evidence-based messaging
- Consistent recording and monitoring systems
- Public awareness about impact and responses
- Support interventions

The team are consolidating their findings into a transferable template that local authorities can use to further improve their own response to OCSEA. As part of this endeavour, they are in discussions with different stakeholders in other parts of the UK to identify communities where they can apply the methodology and tool.



# 4

## Safer Parks: Improving access for women and girls

Public parks play a significant role in the lives of CYP, offering spaces for recreation, socialisation, and physical activity. However, teenage girls often avoid these areas due to concerns about safety, experiences of harassment, and a lack of facilities that meet their specific needs. To address these issues, the Safer Parks Consortium, comprising the University of Leeds, West Yorkshire Combined Authority, Make Space for Girls, and Keep Britain Tidy, developed new guidelines aimed at making parks safer and more welcoming for women and girls. This was part of a project funded by the Mayor of West Yorkshire, Tracy Brabin, through the Home Office “Safer Streets” initiative and the Economic and Social Research Council.

[The Safer Parks: Improving Access for Women and Girls](#) guidance is rooted in research exploring the experiences and views of women and girls regarding safety in West Yorkshire’s parks, alongside a review of wider evidence. The guidance was created with input from professionals in park management, urban planning, landscape design, policing, and women’s safety organisations. It focuses on addressing gender disparities in park access, using 10 principles organised around three core themes: Eyes on the Park, Awareness, and Inclusion. These principles emphasise the importance of investing in parks as the presence of others - especially women - enhances feelings of safety. They also highlight the need for design features that promote (feelings of) security and the involvement of a diverse group of young women in co-designing parks to address their intersectional needs. The guidelines provide practical examples of how to implement changes on different budgets and scales and have been incorporated into the [Green Flag Award](#) programme, which sets the standard for public parks and green spaces in the UK and globally.

Using an approach called Q methodology and photo elicitation activities, this research revealed key factors that contribute to a sense of safety and inclusion for teenage girls. A prevalent concern was male-dominated park spaces, such as multi-use game areas and skateparks, where girls often felt uncomfortable, out of place, or at risk of harassment. These spaces frequently have designs that limit escape routes, making girls feel trapped. Visibility and openness in parks were also crucial. Girls preferred open areas with clear sightlines and well-signposted exits, avoiding dense vegetation or enclosed spaces that could conceal threats. Good lighting was important, particularly in winter when parks become dark early, affecting girls’ decisions about using these spaces after school. Additionally, the availability of seating and social areas where girls can gather safely while remaining visible to others is important. Gender-sensitive designs and activities that appeal to teenage girls, such as hammocks, age-appropriate swings, and sheltered seating areas, made parks feel more welcoming. Finally, harassment and fears of sexual violence significantly shape girls’ perceptions of park safety, often leading them to avoid parks altogether, particularly when alone or at certain times of day. Girls emphasised that changing male behaviour is crucial for making outdoor spaces safer for everyone.

The co-produced evidence enabled the development of guidance that serves as a foundational step toward creating change. This underscores the need to involve teenage girls in park design, ensuring their perspectives and diverse needs are addressed through holistic, coordinated partnerships. Actively listening to their voices at every stage is essential for fostering their use and enjoyment of these community spaces.



## 5

Trauma-informed  
policing in child sexual  
exploitation cases

In response to the growing complexities surrounding child sexual exploitation (CSE), a collaborative project was initiated between the Centre for Child Protection (CCP) and Kent Police, led by the University of Kent, and supported by the Economic and Social Research Council. The result was an award-winning immersive simulation training tool to improve police officers' responses to girls with lived experience of CSE. The simulation integrates a trauma-informed approach, addressing the urgent need for more sensitive, effective, and empathetic policing practices in CSE cases.

The training tool was developed through a series of collaborative workshops between CCP and Kent Police. In these workshops, stakeholders including police officers and academic researchers participated in a co-designed process of learning in the following areas:

1. Developing knowledge around identifying and recognising CSE
2. Understanding how to support girls with lived experience of CSE using a trauma-informed approach
3. Building skills for actively investigating CSE cases
4. Preparing and presenting CSE cases effectively to the Crown Prosecution Service
5. Recognising and responding to secondary trauma in oneself and colleagues
6. Engaging empathetically with CSE victims

This learning was then integrated to develop the innovative and immersive simulation-based training experience titled [Robyn and Molly](#), designed to equip professionals with the expertise needed to carry out trauma-informed CSE assessments and investigations, and to support victims during cases of CSE.

The serious game simulation training programme and supporting materials such as worksheets, training packs, and academic overviews were all developed collaboratively. The iterative design process allowed for continuous refinement, ensuring that the programme was both practical and grounded in the latest research on trauma-informed approaches.

Between July and October 2023, nine pilot training sessions were delivered to 77 detectives from Kent Police. These sessions incorporated interactive elements and case scenarios designed to reflect real-life CSE situations. This allowed participants to practise and refine their responses in a safe, controlled environment. Facilitators from both CCP and Kent Police provided expert guidance, drawing on frontline experiences to lead discussions and deepen the learning experience.

A key result of the training was a 133% increase in the recording and consideration of trauma in police assessments involving females with experience of CSE cases. This dramatic improvement illustrates the effectiveness of the training in not only increasing awareness but also transforming the quality of police work in these sensitive cases. Pre- and post-training evaluations showed significant gains in participants' confidence and knowledge across all learning outcomes.

Feedback was overwhelmingly positive, and the training led to a substantial shift in how investigators documented trauma, moving away from victim-blaming language to a more empathetic, trauma-informed understanding of victims' behaviours and experiences.

The adoption of a trauma-informed approach has far-reaching implications, not just for police assessments, but for prosecution outcomes as well. By better understanding and addressing the trauma experienced by girls who have lived experience of CSE, investigators can gather more accurate testimonies and evidence, improving the likelihood of successful prosecutions. This shift towards more sensitive, victim-centred practices enhances justice for survivors of CSE. Given the positive results, Kent Police is considering making this trauma-informed training mandatory. There is also national interest in a broader implementation, with the potential for widespread adoption across UK policing.

The transformative effect of trauma-informed simulation training on police responses to CSE has potential to support wider trauma-informed approaches which would improve both the quality of police work and the potential for better prosecution outcomes. By equipping law enforcement with trauma-informed skills, this project sets a powerful precedent for effective, empathetic policing of CSE.

# 6

## Bradford SAFE Taskforce

**"A lot of the boys absolutely love it. It's someone they like and respect who isn't part of the school community."**

– Staff member at Bradford SAFE Taskforce

As part of the DfE's £30 million SAFE Taskforce initiative, Bradford was identified as one of 10 areas in the country where youth violence is a significant concern. In 2022, the DfE allocated £3.3 million to Bradford to unite local schools in reducing children's vulnerability to serious violence. This funding led to the creation of the Bradford SAFE Taskforce, spearheaded by Exceed Academies Trust. Through this innovative initiative, a variety of carefully designed, evidence-based interventions were introduced across 18 schools in the city, all aligned with the Youth Endowment Fund's latest guidance and evidence. The primary focus of these interventions is to improve children's attendance, behaviour, and engagement with their education.

The additional resources provided by the Bradford SAFE Taskforce are crucial, as the city faces increasing suspensions, permanent exclusions, and below-average attendance.

Through consultations with young people and communities, a lack of positive role models was identified as a significant gap in local services. One initiative to address this need is a gender-specific mentoring scheme, where girls at risk of violence or coercive relationships are paired with women from the local community for one-to-one mentoring support. Research shows that structured mentoring programmes, which foster trusting relationships, boost self-esteem, and provide emotional support, can significantly impact, reducing violence by 21% and all offending by 14%.

Additionally, the programme is delivering an attendance-focused intervention which directly supports CYP who have poor attendance to school and aims to re-engage them back into education. The project takes a whole-child approach, which includes support for the family alongside the child. Interventions include assisting with transport and liaising with both school and careers to bridge the gap between home and school.

Other initiatives, such as a character education programme aimed at developing CYP's social and emotional skills, have also been introduced.

Although the SAFE Taskforce programme's evaluation is ongoing, the significant improvement in individual pupils' attendance is an encouraging sign for the Bradford team. Recent data has highlighted the impact of the Bradford SAFE Taskforce projects:

### *Attendance:*

- An average of 43% of the SAFE cohort recorded improved half-termly attendance at school.
- An average of 44.5% of the SAFE cohort recorded improved termly attendance.

### *Suspensions:*

- The Suspension Rate for SAFE Taskforce schools for academic year 2023-24 so far stands at 64.1% compared to 80.4% for the full academic year 2022-23.
- Suspension for physical assault against a pupil has seen a reduction in the number of days lost to suspension in 2023 when compared to 2022.
- Suspension for physical assault against a pupil has also seen a significant reduction in the proportion of days lost; in 2021 this made up approximately 20% of all days lost but makes up only 10% in 2023 to date.

The Bradford SAFE Taskforce aims to leverage schools' leadership, facilities, and local networks to deliver timely and effective support to children vulnerable to violence. A key advantage of this approach is that it brings services directly to the places where most children spend their daily lives. Schools' close relationships with families also allow for support to be extended to siblings, parents, and carers when necessary.

This approach also addresses logistical challenges. In Bradford, variable costs and availability of public transportation and car ownership can limit children's and families' access to positive activities and support.

So far, school-based programmes funded by the Bradford SAFE Taskforce have reached over 1,300 children across 18 schools. The hope is that the lessons learned from this model's development, implementation, and evaluation will serve as a blueprint for other agencies, organisations and schools looking to adopt evidence-based interventions to prevent children's involvement in serious violence.

# 7

## Getting Out for Good

The charity Positive Steps in Oldham worked with the Manchester Centre for Youth Studies on the Getting Out for Good (GOFG) programme. GOFG is a rigorous [five-year research project](#) exploring the experiences of over 100 girls and young women at risk of sexual exploitation and gang involvement. It offered mentoring with sporting and cultural activities for girls and young women referred into the project. By working closely with mentors, sporting activities were enhanced for the young women with the intention of contributing towards resilience building, enhancing personal aspirations, facilitating teamwork, and fostering positive peer networks. It also simultaneously up-skilled them for the job market with nationally recognised AQA qualifications in partnership with Manchester Metropolitan University.

Starting life as a programme aimed at supporting young women at risk of sexual exploitation and involvement in “gangs”, it became evident that young women involved in the programme were not “gang members” or affiliated to any version of a gang typology. The girls and young women were experiencing gangs very differently, and exploitation and its consequences were much more evident. As found in other gender-specific research study findings, the girls and young women had more specific vulnerabilities; severe childhood behavioural issues and mental ill health were common, as were attainment struggles and disengagement with school. Other common issues were parental neglect, care experience, school exclusion, drugs and alcohol use, significant emotional needs, and low self-esteem.

Characterised by a bespoke approach at both community and individual levels, the programme took the needs of girls and young women seriously. As well as providing small group work sessions with a focus on increasing positive networks, GOFG supported individuals at key turning points in their lives; this included supporting those who were NEET to find employment and educational placements, as well as advocating for the girls with other services such as Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), social care, and youth justice. The mentoring aspect was key. Girls and young women had twice weekly contact with them to ascertain any needs or presenting issues, with mentors staffing group work and sports sessions. The GOFG programme was embedded in Positive Steps’ service delivery at the end of the five-year funding period.

### Chloe’s Story

Chloe was a 21-year-old young woman who had almost completed her engagement with the GOFG project. She recounted a complex life story that began with an unstable childhood that led to drug use, crime, gang engagement and onwards into spiralling drug use and suicide attempts. Chloe identified a significant and enduring friendship as a high point of her life story and that after her most recent overdose, she had reflected upon her life and wanted to make positive change. The GOFG offer coincided with this turning point, and she engaged with GOFG because it gave her something to do and a place where she could “escape” and “be normal”. Over the year the GOFG project met Chloe’s needs and enabled her to improve her relationships with other females and to engage with services and employment. Chloe identified sports activities and her relationship with her mentor as being particularly important elements of GOFG and motivated her engagement and progress towards her sought outcomes, both intermediate and longer-term outcomes.

## 8

Tackling online harms  
in West Yorkshire

“I’m more aware  
of safer privacy  
settings on apps.”

– Young person

There is increasing concern across the globe about the possible impacts of social media and online experiences on young people’s mental health, with fears that use of social media and online platforms may be linked to negative outcomes among young people in particular, such as mental health problems, poor sleep, violence, and poor academic attainment.

The West Yorkshire Violence Reduction Partnership (VRP) sought to understand this emerging harm further, treating online harms as a public health concern. The VRP commissioned [research](#) to capture young people’s experiences online and to understand the potential impacts that this has. This research highlighted that:

1. Young people are exposed to a range of potentially harmful experiences online, with cyberbullying and harassment being the most common types of harmful online experience.
2. Many young people, professionals, and parents/carers felt these experiences directly contribute to poor psychological outcomes including anxiety, low self-esteem, self-harm, and suicidality. The review established that there are many resources and some interventions focused on online harms among CYP, yet very little information is available globally on what works to prevent, reduce, and mitigate harm.

The VRP embraced the opportunity to address the identified gap in evidence-based, evaluated, education-based interventions for addressing online harms. Guided by the evidence and principles established in the research, the next step was to pilot an online harms educational and support provision within a school in Bradford. This took the form of universal in-class workshops with young people aged 9-15, as well as one-to-one and group-based support for those who had been identified as having experienced some form of harm as a result of online activity.

Evaluation was a core element from the outset, to establish the effectiveness and delivery of the pilot and importantly to contribute to the evidence based in addressing and mitigating online harms. [This evaluation work](#) reiterated the need for education about online harms and support for those affected, demonstrated the impact the pilot had on awareness and knowledge of online harms, and showed some changes in young people’s behaviour, with recommendations for future adjustments to delivery and session content also provided.

In the Year 10 focus group, some of the students reflected that, especially for younger years, they may fear the consequences of reporting an incident as they might have been “doing something they shouldn’t have been,” but that it is good to learn that the “people talking to you are too” and that “it is not your fault.”

Through commitment to evidence-based practices, continuous learning, and rigorous evaluation, the VRP aims to ensure that the findings from this work provide valuable support to organisations nationwide that are addressing or seeking to address online harms.

“I’d tell them to tell a  
trusted adult or teacher.  
Always talk to a parent  
or teacher.”

– Young person

## 9

## Encouraging Potential Inspiring Change

Doncaster's specialist targeted youth provision, Encouraging Potential Inspiring Change team (EPIC) has helped divert first time entrants into the criminal justice system. They focus especially on supporting children at risk of criminal exploitation and educational prevention interventions in schools utilising innovative approaches such as virtual reality. EPIC represents a commitment from Doncaster Council to invest in wide-ranging support for young people that most need support to avoid contact with the criminal justice system – from education settings through to place-based youth offers.

Working with several partners including the Frenchgate shopping centre, South Yorkshire Police and local authority services, EPIC set up a “pop-up youth zone” within Doncaster centre in response to concerns about youth-related anti-social behaviour (ASB) issues within the shopping centre. The hub was created to allow CYP an opportunity to access a safe space where they can gather, whilst allowing partners from a number of agencies to meet with young people to offer advice, information, and guidance. Over a seven-month period in 2023, 2,316 CYP accessed provision within the hub. This work took services to young people and along with strong partnership working has led to a decrease in youth-related ASB and criminality within the shopping centre.

EPIC's “Team around the Street” is also an outreach-based approach, where youth support workers work in the community with CYP through a range of positive activities. Staff spend time with CYP, building positive relationships and supporting them to engage in activities that interest them; from exploring education options, looking for work opportunities to getting them involved in fun community projects to help keep young people active and engaged.

Within schools, EPIC delivers both a universal and targeted offer. Staff deliver assemblies to whole year groups around risks associated with being involved in ASB and crime, as well as information, education, and guidance around child criminal exploitation and where to go for help. Targeted approaches within both secondary and primary schools involve cohorts of eight young people for up to 12 weeks using the “Think Forward” (secondary) and “Young and Safe” (primary) programmes, reaching 1,700 students in the period from April-October 2023.

EPIC also delivers alternative learning provision within the City of Doncaster Council's framework. Piloted in 2019, this aims to prevent permanent exclusions for young people who had taken a bladed article into school. The success of this led to a permanent provision and a broadened referral criterion. EPIC Learning now provides a crime and consequence programme for pupils aged 11-16, supporting CYP who find mainstream schooling difficult to engage with and who are at risk of exclusion or have been excluded due to ASB. The educational model is founded on experiential learning. Students receive an intensive programme including the core national curriculum (Maths, English, Science, Humanities, PSHE) supported by real-world learning through connecting with local businesses. The curriculum is broad and balanced and designed to support CYP's strengths and develop key skills and knowledge along with enhancing progression onto positive pathways.

# 10

## The Boathouse Youth

The Boathouse Youth is a registered charity working with children and young people aged 5-17 from socioeconomically deprived communities across Blackpool, to help tackle the challenges they are experiencing and enable CYP to lead their best lives.

One of The Boathouse Youth's most successful implementations is its "grow our own" initiative, which enables young people who have accessed the youth provision to become fully qualified youth workers as they transition into adulthood, all within the confinements of a space they feel safe, understood, and connected in. Through a focus on enabling young people to thrive, this makes a powerful and positive contribution to the wider community.

The "grow our own" initiative started in September 2022 when the Boathouse Youth recognised that those young people who were "hard to reach" and had many adverse childhood experiences were thriving in one environment that had been created: the youth club. This was an environment which was familiar, within their community, where they were listened to, and where they could see their ideas informing practice directly. The youth club provided an environment that allowed young people to leave their worries at the door, where they were not challenged about the ongoings of home life, or school or any external factors that may be causing upset or frustration.

Initially, the "grow our own" initiative was a bolt on to the delivery of The Duke of Edinburgh's Award (DofE). It was used as the "skill and volunteering" element of the award, with 22 young people (aged 14-16) not only achieving their Silver DofE, but also achieving their Level 2 in Youth Work Principles.

To achieve this Level 2 Award, The Boathouse Youth had to ensure there was a clear understanding behind their learning and putting their learning into practice. Young people worked with a team of youth workers to create a workbook which was then used to upload evidence of learning, explore examples and best practice, as well as refer back to as and when needed. The whole process was led by young people, who were in control of their own learning.

To ensure the young people had a complete understanding of their learning, they were each allocated a placement to support the running and delivering of the youth club sessions. They were issued uniforms and ID badges and were introduced to the world of work whilst being protected and educated along the way, again in a space where they felt accepted, and trusted. The group would meet weekly to go over their

theory, share practice, and engage in reflective sessions with one another. They also took part in a canal boat residential experience focused on teamwork, budgeting, life skills, and navigating challenging situations.

Strengthening opportunities for paid employment is again something The Boathouse Youth learnt about from listening to young people. The organisation had previously delivered sessions about employability and supported young people with creating CVs, but for many of the young people, there was little to nothing to be added to a CV, not even GCSEs in many cases. They lacked communication skills, and often did not have the right attire to attend interviews, nor the ability to understand how to answer questions which may be asked. As part of the "grow our own" initiative, all these areas were covered in depth, and young people were given the opportunity to apply for a paid role at The Boathouse Youth. For those that decided that wasn't what they wanted to do, they had successfully achieved an award to go on to their CVs, recognition of their length of service at the organisation, and had undergone training to support them through any interview process.

The success of this model has been incredible. In 2022, 22 young people successfully completed their Level 2 Award in Youth Work Principles, 14 of them gained employment with The Boathouse Youth. In 2023, The Boathouse Youth expanded its "grow our own" offer, extending its age range up to 25, and offering apprenticeships. There were 10 Level 2 completions, two Level 3 Youth Work apprenticeships, and two staff (who are also former members) received JNC Youth Work status from university, thanks to the support and flexibility The Boathouse Youth were able to offer.

This year, The Boathouse Youth has been able to offer 15 places on its Level 2 Award, 10 Apprenticeships to its 16-year-olds who are studying their Level 3 in Youth Work, and has five Level 6 JNC Youth Work Apprentices working for the organisation. Based on this learning, understanding, and willingness to enable young people to lead their best lives, The Boathouse Youth has been able to provide multiple opportunities to gain qualifications or employment to ultimately break that cycle of deprivation, as well as build a team of youth workers who have real life experience of attending the youth club. By focusing on what young people need to thrive in society, The Boathouse Youth interventions such as "grow our own" are powerful examples of community-based work that benefits communities and society as well as young people themselves.

## 11

Participatory  
Youth Practice

Participatory Youth Practice (PYP) is a groundbreaking framework co-created with justice-involved young people based on their lived experiences. The Greater Manchester Youth Justice Services and the Manchester Centre for Youth Studies at Manchester Metropolitan University worked in partnership to create PYP; working with CYP every step of the way.

Each step laid out in the framework is based on the recognition that CYP have the right to be heard, and have their opinions meaningfully considered, at all stages of decision-making in the YJS. At the foundation of PYP are eight youth-led objectives which were co-developed with the CYP themselves:

1. Let them participate
2. Always unpick why
3. Acknowledge limited life chances
4. Avoid threats and sanctions
5. Help problem solve
6. Develop ambitions
7. Remember it's their choice
8. Afford them a fresh start

The CYP involved in co-creating PYP said they wanted more opportunities to have their voices heard at each stage of the process. They wished to not only be consulted about their opinions, but to participate in decision-making.

A series of co-designed accompanying session guides help practitioners to apply these principles in their sessions with children; these are also applicable in the context of early intervention and prevention work. The PYP framework is integrated into the training and induction of practitioners in youth justice teams. An explainer film, featuring lyrics and messages from the CYP, helps convey the principles of PYP to both practitioners and peers. Additionally, an engagement guide includes practical tools and conversation starters for working with CYP, ensuring the principles are effectively applied in practice.

PYP has had an impact on youth justice practice, on national and international youth strategies, and, most importantly, on young people themselves. PYP has been central to the YJB's Case Management Guidance focusing on How to Support Children's Participation and Co-Creation. It won the Times Higher Award in 2019 for Knowledge Transfer Partnership of the year.

PYP training has now been delivered to around 300 youth justice professionals across Greater Manchester. It has been embedded in each of the nine region's Youth Justice teams as part of their business delivery plans and is the foundation of the Greater Manchester Combined Authority's Youth Justice Transformation Strategy.

“I find having conversations around the eight key areas of PYP really brings together what we do as a service. **I use the same principles with my staff, getting them to take ownership of their team and the service we deliver**, and having the confidence to say that we are a service that truly allows the kids to participate.”

– Head of Service at Manchester  
Youth Justice Services

12

## Revolving Doors

Revolving Doors is an organisation which champions long-term solutions for justice reform that tackle the root causes of repeat, low-level crime, and support people's journeys towards better lives. Through amplifying the voices of those who have experienced the criminal justice system, Revolving Doors works to prevent individuals from being criminalised due to unmet health and social needs, such as poverty, homelessness, mental ill health, problems with drugs and alcohol, or domestic abuse.

Revolving Doors' lived experience members have been at the forefront of innovative diversion schemes for young people around the UK, in the North of England and beyond.

New Generation Policing was a focused project that ran from 2019-22 aimed at policing approaches to better meet young adults' needs, which are often driven by experiences of poverty, trauma, and racism. As part of the project, Revolving Doors worked with the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner for North Yorkshire (now superseded by a Mayor). Revolving Doors' lived experience members supported the design of new support services including a lead practitioner, six criminal justice workers, and a peer support apprentice with lived experience. Operating without a traditional office, this service meets clients in homes or cafés, emphasising a client-centric approach. There is an adaptable approach to meeting individual needs, creating interventions to address issues such as gambling problems and eating disorders.

The scheme accepts referrals from North Yorkshire Police and self-referrals from individuals or other agencies. The scheme for CYP was so successful, it was re-developed to accept referrals for anyone over 18. The service works closely with the police, helping train and upskill officers, and have established data collection processes to understand their impact. The scheme has a 100% satisfaction rate and 83% of people using the diversion services report improvement in four or more problem areas.

Revolving Doors, in collaboration with Leaders Unlocked, helped the Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime (MOPAC) design their new £3 million young adult hub in Newham through co-facilitating discussions with young adults on probation to get their views and experiences of the service, and ideas for the hub. This informed MOPAC's thinking on the pilot, as well as the services they subsequently commissioned.

During the consultation phase, young adults told Revolving Doors they do not always understand the conditions of their licence - the rules set by courts or probation officers as part of criminal justice sentences. Breaking these rules can lead to consequences like revoking the licence or more severe penalties. This highlighted the need to expand a Speech and Language Therapy role and to develop a licence conditions "glossary of terms" to give to young adults. Young adults also wanted more positive activities to fill their time productively, so MOPAC responded by commissioning a service to provide "meaningful activities" aimed at building skills and confidence.

The hub is now home to a multidisciplinary team, comprising various services co-located with probation under one roof, including emotional wellbeing, speech and language therapy, mentoring, coaching, and restorative justice. The hub serves all 18-25-year-olds on probation and 17-year-olds transitioning from the youth justice service to adult probation, including both young men and women, regardless of offence type. The upper age limit is somewhat flexible, so the hub occasionally works with 26-year-olds, particularly when it aligns with the duration and timing of their orders. To ensure a safe and trauma-informed environment, young women receive hub support from the local women's centre.





# End word



**Lived Experience Team  
at Revolving Doors**

**We write as people in their 20s who have been involved in the criminal justice system in our youths and are now in a place where we can reflect upon the ways the system failed us as young people. We are part of the Lived Experience Team at Revolving Doors, a charity that seeks to end the revolving door of crisis and crime by advocating for long term solutions for those who commit offences because of unmet health and social needs.**

We've been interested to see the recommendations made in this report because we want to see a system where young people who are struggling are understood and aided to thrive, rather than being abandoned to systemic failure, exploitation, and ultimately trapped in the criminal justice system.

Our experiences have shown us the inadequacies of fragmented services for CYP. Often, these services operate in isolation, failing to provide the holistic, coordinated support that youth in crisis require. We believe that adopting a "whole-system" approach is crucial. CYP need integrated services that address not only their immediate challenges but also their broader health, social, and educational needs. This shift can help ensure that vulnerable young people, often lacking in family support, are not left to navigate a fragmented system that often exacerbates their struggles.

Furthermore, we welcome a recognition of the importance of prevention and upstream initiatives aimed at children, young people, their parents, and communities. Effective health and social programmes can play a transformative role in addressing the root causes of youth struggles before they escalate. Support that prioritises mental health, family stability, and educational engagement can foster resilience and help prevent young people from entering the criminal justice system in the first place. We also want to add that there needs to be an appreciation that when young people refuse help or do not recognise themselves

as vulnerable, they are probably more in need of support than ever and so it is vital that efforts are made to build up their trust in support.

One of our most urgent concerns is the need for diversion and community-based support to keep CYP out of the criminal justice system. Too often, we see youth written off or pushed into punitive systems rather than being offered the understanding and support they desperately need. The inconsistency in the application of diversion programmes, often compounded by racial disparities, highlights a critical failure in our current approach.

Our own stories reflect the long-term impacts of trauma and exploitation. Even as we move into more stable environments, the scars of our past remain. Finding work, pursuing education, and building healthy relationships are ongoing challenges shaped by our experiences. It's essential to recognise that the effects of trauma can persist for years, necessitating long-term support that evolves with the individual's needs.

In reflecting on our journeys, it's clear that many of us share similar starting points – difficult family situations, school exclusions, and entanglement with social services often lead to a pathway into the criminal justice system. The cycle of crisis becomes a way of life, where mental health needs remain unaddressed. We must advocate for a more comprehensive approach when young people enter care or come from troubled backgrounds. The system must prioritise understanding and addressing the underlying issues rather than merely reacting to behaviour.

Our educational experiences further highlight the failures of existing systems. School exclusions can perpetuate a downward spiral, isolating young people from the very support they need. Instead of being met with understanding and resources, many face stigmatisation and exclusion. We need

to shift our perspective – asking not just "What did they do wrong?" but rather, "What is happening in their lives that led to this behaviour?"

In conclusion, we appreciate the call for a holistic, integrated approach that prioritises prevention, provides compassionate support, and seeks to keep young people out of the criminal justice system. We envision a future where every young person is understood, supported, and empowered to thrive rather than being abandoned to systemic failure.

**"The system must prioritise understanding and addressing the underlying issues rather than merely reacting to behaviour"**

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