

CHILDHOOD VULNERABILITY, CRIME AND JUSTICE UPDATE:

STRENGTHENING PROTECTION, PARTNERSHIP, AND PREVENTION

Childhood vulnerability, crime and justice: Strengthening protection, partnership, and prevention

This update highlights:

- New analysis shows the **number of children in the youth justice system and the reoffending rates** have **increased simultaneously for the first time in a decade**.
- Data showing **Black children disproportionately represented** across the youth justice system.
- No clear improvement in safeguarding for exploited children despite County Lines Programme evaluation showing reductions in violence.
- Analysis shows **parental financial strain predicts youth offending**, underscoring the importance of lived financial hardship.
- **Permanent exclusion is associated with a two-fold increase in serious violent offending**.
- Evidence for different pathways between authorised and unauthorised absence, attainment, and NEET **highlighting the need for tailored support**.
- **Missing-from-care episodes are concentrated among a small, highly vulnerable group**, with risk highest early in placements and after previous episodes.
- **A call to action** – urgent change is needed to address underlying childhood vulnerabilities, to create Safer Streets, reduce crime and meet the government's Opportunity Mission for children and young people.

Youth justice trends

New data from the Youth Justice Board Annual Report 2024/25 show a mixed picture. First-time entrants to the youth justice systems have fallen to their lowest level on record. However, both the size of the youth justice cohort and the number of children reoffending have increased - the first time in a decade that these indicators have risen simultaneously [1].

In the year ending March 2024, **stop and search involving children fell by 4%** compared with the previous year. This overall reduction masks substantial regional variation: searches **fell by 23% in London but rose by 18% in both the North East and North West**.

The number of **proven offences committed by children rose by 4%** to around 35,600, marking the second consecutive annual increase.

Crucially, for the first time, the majority of first-time entrants (55%) received court sentences rather than youth cautions, signalling **a systemic shift away** from the diversionary approach recommended in the original report.

Racial disproportionality in violence

The Racial Disproportionality in Violence (2025) report highlights that **Black children remain significantly overrepresented** across all stages of the youth justice system [2].

Black children are more than **twice as likely (150%) to be stopped and searched** (relative to population proportions), **64% more likely to be arrested, 84% more likely to be convicted or cautioned, and 300% more likely to be in custody**. These figures demonstrate the scale and persistence of disproportionality.

The evidence suggests that one of the drivers of these disparities is **adultification**, where children are treated as more mature, responsible, and less vulnerable than their actual age requires.

The evidence indicates that Black children are disproportionately affected by this bias [3]. Compounding this issue, **only around one in ten stop and searches are intelligence-led**, raising concerns about fairness and effectiveness. Recommendations therefore call for more equitable, intelligence-led procedures to reduce disproportionality and rebuild trust.

Outcome 22 - used when diversionary activity leads the police to take 'No Further Action' - offers a **practical route to addressing disproportionality** by enabling children to access positive support without admitting guilt.

This is critical because the requirement to admit guilt can deter engagement with diversion, particularly amongst children from communities where mistrust of the police is entrenched due to historical experiences, perceived bias, or unequal treatment. **Removing this barrier has the potential to support fairer access to diversion and help reduce racial disproportionality**.

However, Outcome 22 is currently not classed as a positive outcome in HMICFRS assessments of police performance, creating a disincentive for its use. To address this, the Home Office and HMICFRS should **amend the crime outcomes framework** so that Outcome 22 is recognised as a positive outcome for children (and adults), consistent with the

“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

recommendations of the Leveson Report [4]. This would remove barriers to its use and support more consistent adoption of constructive diversionary practice.

County Lines Programme evaluation

An independent evaluation of the County Lines Programme provides quantitative evidence that supports the 2024 report's concern that **current responses continue to prioritise enforcement over welfare** [5]. The programme generated a 25.1% increase in law enforcement activity, mostly measured through an increase in drug possession arrests, yet **did not produce a statistically significant increase in safeguarding referrals** for exploited children, with data volatility limiting firm conclusions about its welfare impact.

The evaluation also reported mixed outcomes across the four funded taskforce areas. **Hospital admissions for drug misuse and for weapon-related injuries fell, mainly due to fewer stabbing-related hospitalisations.** Over the same period, police-recorded violent crime rose, likely reflecting improved reporting and greater police activity rather than a genuine rise in violence.

Taken together, these findings highlight the need for police-led interventions to include mandatory safeguarding targets, in line with the government's updated Crime and Policing Bill, **to ensure that exploited children are recognised as victims rather than offenders** [6]. To achieve lasting change, responses must adopt a more holistic approach that addresses the underlying social and economic drivers of exploitation and uses robust, connected data to monitor long-term impact.

Using linked public service data to identify vulnerabilities

Linked datasets are vital for understanding complex issues like crime, vulnerability, and public service use. Recent insights include:

Financial hardship and youth offending

A recent study of more than 2,000 children in the Growing Up in Scotland cohort found that **persistent exposure to parental financial strain was the only poverty-related measure that directly predicted self-reported youth offending by age 12** [7]. In contrast, more conventional indicators, such as low household income, parental unemployment, and material deprivation, showed no significant independent effects once other factors were taken into account.

This pattern suggests that the **lived experience of financial difficulty, and the stress it generates within individuals and families**, may be a more proximal driver of early behavioural problems than structural economic indicators alone.

Addressing childhood vulnerability, crime and justice

“ 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 findings underscore the importance of incorporating parents' reports of financial hardship into both research and policy design, as these subjective but meaningful experiences capture dimensions of poverty that traditional metrics can miss.

They also highlight the value of **multidimensional approaches to assessing children's environments**, recognising that different aspects of poverty may relate to offending in distinct ways. Interventions that specifically target aspects of poverty most strongly associated with offending are therefore essential for reducing youth crime and supporting positive developmental trajectories.

School absence and NEET risk

Evidence from the Connected Bradford Research Database shows that **school absence is a powerful early indicator of vulnerability, strongly linked to later risk of being NEET** (Not in Education, Employment or Training) [8]. Greater rates of absence and absences in later school years are more strongly associated with greater NEET likelihood [9].

Moreover, these relationships are stronger for unauthorised absences when compared to authorised absences. Related research suggests that **authorised and unauthorised absences may relate to NEET outcomes through different pathways** [8]. For authorised absences, most of its relationship with NEET outcomes is mediated by GCSE attainment, whereas GCSE attainment mediates less than half of the relationship for unauthorised absences.

These findings highlight the need for **differentiated interventions** - academic catch-up for authorised absence, and holistic, multi-agency support for unauthorised absence.

School exclusion and serious violence

Recent research using national linked administrative data from the Department for Education and the Ministry of Justice examined more than 20,000

matched pairs of excluded and non-excluded secondary school children (born 1994-2004) to assess the relationship between school exclusion and subsequent serious violence [10].

Controlling for a wide range of potential confounders, **permanent exclusion was associated with a doubling of risk for serious violence** (HR 2.05) and for homicide or near-miss homicide (HR 2.36) **in the 12 months following exclusion**. Pupils with prior suspensions were already ten times more likely to be excluded than the general population and were disproportionately affected by vulnerabilities such as special educational needs, poverty, care experience, and early justice involvement.

This study provides the strongest evidence to date of a direct link between exclusion and the perpetration of violence. It also shows that children who are permanently excluded are already at elevated risk of serious violence at the point of exclusion, underscoring the need to **prioritise early interventions that address the upstream common causes of both exclusion and violence**.

Missing from care episodes

The risks linked to absence and exclusion are also evident among looked-after children. When looked-after children go missing, these episodes often coincide with underlying vulnerabilities and can also be an indicator of criminal exploitation, such as through 'county lines'.

Research using the Connected Bradford Research Database [11] analysed over 5,800 missing episodes among 2,900 children in Bradford. Missing episodes were highly concentrated: not only do only a minority of looked-after children ever go missing (16.2%), but within this group **just 10% of missing children account for half of all missing episodes**.

The risk of going missing was strongly associated with several factors, with children placed in residential and semi-independent settings, older children, and those with higher school absence all having a greater likelihood of going missing. Analysis of the timing of missing episodes also revealed that **risk is elevated in the first three weeks of a placement** and is especially pronounced (approximately four times higher) **immediately after a child returns from a previous missing episode**.

These findings stress the need for upstream prevention, early intervention, and coordinated multi-agency support, with linked data guiding safeguarding strategies.

Policy implications

The recommendations we made in 2024 still require urgent implementation and we call upon government to take the following steps:

- Adopt a holistic and coordinated 'whole-system' approach to identify and address why children offend or become victims of crime so that evidence-based interventions can be deployed.
- Address children's underlying vulnerabilities and disadvantages, rather than interpret behaviour problems as 'misbehaviour'. This will improve long-term outcomes, prevent children becoming victims of crime, and reduce offending.
- Promote prevention and upstream health, social, and educational programmes for children, their families, and communities to keep young people out of the criminal justice system through diversion schemes.

Conclusion

This update reinforces the analyses presented in the 2024 report, showing that **'disproportionality', regional inequalities, and service gaps have** not only persisted but, in some cases, **worsened**.

New evidence demonstrates how the system continues to fail some children - particularly ethnic minority groupings and those at safeguarding risk - underscoring the need for **diversionary approaches** that do not depend on an admission of guilt.

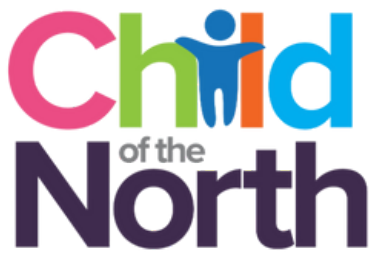
Linked data further reveals how vulnerabilities across education, care, and health intersect to drive risk, highlighting the importance of data linkage and the power of earlier and coordinated interventions.

In combination, these findings show the need for a renewed commitment to **place-based strategies, safeguarding targets, and integrated education and health provision** to ensure children are supported as **whole people** rather than adultified and treated as 'offenders'.

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

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This report is a collaborative programme of work between Child of the North and the Centre for Young Lives.

A note about language

Please note that this report often uses “schools” as shorthand for “schools, nurseries, and other educational settings such as pupil referral units and special schools.” One central message of this report is the need for a “whole system” approach that includes all relevant stakeholders, and this includes all parts of the education system.

About Child of the North

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. [@ChildoftheNort1](#) [@childofthenorth.bsky.social](#)

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](#) [@n8research.bsky.social](#)

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, Baroness 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 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](#)

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