

# **COMMISSION** **YOUNG LIVES**

## **Hidden in Plain Sight**

**A national plan of action to support vulnerable teenagers to succeed and to protect them from adversity, exploitation, and harm**

**Final report by the Commission on Young Lives**

**NOVEMBER 2022**

## THE COMMISSION ON YOUNG LIVES

The Commission on Young Lives launched in September 2021. Over the last year, the Commission has developed a new settlement to prevent marginalised children and young people from falling into violence, exploitation, and the criminal justice system, and to support them to thrive.

Our Commission is putting forward ambitious, practical, affordable proposals that government, councils, police, social services, and communities can put into place. Over the last 13 months, we have engaged with those in government and system leaders who have the power to create change, making the case for them to do so. We have taken a public health approach that is focused on prevention, inclusion, and building supportive relationships. Throughout, our work has been steered by our Commission panel of experts, panels of young people, and practitioners.

The Commission has been supported and hosted by the Oasis Charitable Trust, a national charity that has been pioneering models of sustainable and holistic community development for 35 years, and now works in over 40 neighbourhoods in England, delivering schools, housing, health, and a wide range of other projects with young people and their families.

The Commission has been funded by the Passion Project Foundation, a charitable social impact aggregator and investor, which brings scaled investment to tackle perennial social problems.

We would also like to thank the many individuals and organisations who have provided us with their time, advice, expertise, and with examples of existing practice and emerging projects. We would particularly like to thank the young people on our Young Lives Panel, who have agreed to speak to us candidly, and to share their experiences. As ever, where we have used case studies or shared personal experiences, names and some details have been changed to preserve anonymity.

This final report brings together our four thematic reports and sets out a policy framework and the scale of investment needed to support vulnerable children and their families. It is our case for change. It is ambitious, but we believe it is achievable with the right will and determination.

All our previous thematic reports, and details of our expert commissioners, are available on our website: <https://thecommissiononyounglives.co.uk>.

## FOREWORD BY ANNE LONGFIELD CBE, CHAIR OF THE COMMISSION ON YOUNG LIVES

Earlier this year, I visited a community project on a housing estate where residents told me they were being terrorised and intimidated by a gang. The nine gang members were known to the local community and the police, but they seemed to be untouchable. They were delivering a 'county line' to an area about 80 miles away and had been for a year, using scooters and cars stolen from takeaway delivery drivers. The project workers I spoke with told me that the boys in the gang were all around 14-years-old, and how they had stepped up into senior roles in an existing gang when the drugs market reopened after Covid. It was not clear who was supplying them, but they were a key part of a delivery chain.

These young boys, barely in their teens, wore balaclavas and were dishing out acts of violence and torching vehicles. All had been excluded from school, and all had been sent to a local Pupil Referral Unit with a very poor reputation, which none of them seemed to attend.

One parent on the estate explained how her teenage daughter no longer goes out. She and other residents are scared to confront the boys as they are seen to have no fear of legal reprisals. They carried knives and other weapons, which in turn was encouraging other young people in the area to carry knives for protection. Younger children were now starting to follow the group around and mimic their behaviour. I was told the police did not have a visible presence on the estate and that they seemed reluctant to intervene, and that all attempts by community workers to connect with the leader of the gang had so far been unsuccessful. His parents were unwilling to engage with anyone who offered help. This small community was living in fear, almost hoping for the worst to happen so that someone would finally provide the level of support that would improve their lives.

What is happening on this estate may sound like an extreme example, but it is far from unique. The manager of one Alternative Provision setting in London told me last month that the gang leaders and members he encounters are becoming younger and younger. They are now more likely to be in their early teens and far more likely to engage in serious violence. Speak to youth workers in our towns and cities and they will tell you their own horror stories: of young people being chased in broad daylight by other teenagers waving machetes, of homes where the young people involved in the drugs trade are the main breadwinner in the family, of communities where organised criminals seek out and groom very vulnerable children who have fallen through gaps in the care, health, or education systems, almost with impunity.

There are parts of our country where the state is completely failing in its duty to protect vulnerable children. This goes beyond failing individuals. It is a failure that affects whole communities, for generation after generation. So often these are already the most marginalised families. So often they are Black, Brown and Minority Ethnic. So often they are poor. Indeed, it is impossible to overestimate how important poverty is as a driver for so many of the social problems ruining and holding back lives.

Yet this epidemic of county lines, criminal exploitation and serious violence is not only limited to the most deprived parts of inner-city Britain. Over the last year, I have heard countless examples of children from suburban, middle-class England being groomed by criminals who have spotted a vulnerability and moved in with clinical ruthlessness while a family's pleas for help go unanswered.

When it all goes badly wrong, a new set of parents, friends, schools, and communities are left to come to terms with the senseless and avoidable death of child. As I write this introduction, I hear on the news that two teenage boys in Huddersfield have been charged with stabbing another teenage boy to death outside a school, and a 14-year-old and a 13-year-old from Gateshead have been taken into custody on suspicion of murdering a 14-year-old child.

This is a national problem, and it is hidden in plain sight, an open secret among those professionals who work with vulnerable children. The police, who spend so much of their time having to step in to cover for other struggling services, know it is happening. So do schools who are having to do more and more beyond simply teaching, and so do those working in A&E who treat countless young people for knife or gunshot wounds. The social workers and others working in children's social care know it is happening because they deal with the missing children and teenagers who are being dumped miles from home in dangerous unregulated accommodation. Charities know it is happening, and they are picking up the pieces, trying to build resilience, overwhelmed with requests for help. The public know it is happening too. They see and read the gruesome headlines, and some of them live with the consequences. The politicians know it is happening, even if it is easy for some to turn the other way or sweep it all under the carpet.

I believe these problems are a national threat to our country's prosperity and security, a threat which is ruining lives and scarring communities, in the same way that the widespread sexual exploitation of young girls damaged so many in the recent past. A decade ago, the then-Prime Minister David Cameron correctly put the sexual exploitation of children in the same bracket as terrorism. His successor then set up her own Serious Violence Taskforce to tackle child criminal exploitation through coordinated government action. I sat in meetings as Children's Commissioner where Cabinet Ministers were finally forced to set out how they would tackle these deep-rooted social and economic problems.

The Government's decision to tackle serious violence as a public health issue was a big step forward. We are now awaiting the statutory guidance around the Serious Violence Duty, which will require specified authorities, the police, councils, youth offending teams, CCGs, and probation services to work together to formulate an evidence-based analysis of serious violence in a local area and formulate and implement a strategy detailing how they will respond.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson promised to 'bite the head off the snake' of county lines, but they have outlived his premiership. The snake's head is still intact, and it is costing lives, life chances, and taxpayers' money.

We are spending billions applying sticking plasters, far more than we ever spend on helping vulnerable children avoid harm. This has not been helped by the carousel of five Prime Ministers and eight different Education Secretaries over the last six years. This churn has meant that in recent years these issues have not been given the attention and follow through they deserve.

Who could seriously look at the eye-wateringly expensive amount we spend on children's social care system and say we are protecting every young person at risk of harm or encouraging them to thrive?

Who could look at the care accommodation where teenagers at risk are placed - at high cost - and say that much of it isn't inadequate and putting some young people in harm's way?

Who could claim that our children's mental health services are coping with the rocketing number of referrals?

Who could propose that all our schools are well-funded and inclusive, that exclusions are always a last resort and that every child gets the help they need to succeed?

Who could be confident that families with very serious problems at home will receive the support they need to protect their children from crisis?

Who could say that we are already doing everything we can to divert vulnerable children away from the danger of gangs, county lines, and criminal exploitation?

Who could claim that our criminal justice system is putting child first or prioritising prevention and rehabilitation?

Who could argue that our systems of protection, education and justice are not disproportionately failing Black young people?

Added to this, we have had the enormous and ongoing negative impact of the Covid pandemic on vulnerable children, which is making all of these challenges even more complicated and intense.

The long-term effects of Covid and lockdowns on a generation of young people remain, in my view and the view of many others who work closely with children, greatly underestimated. We see an immediate future where there are even more problems like lack of readiness for school, speech and language development problems, mental health conditions, and increased poverty. The mixture of Covid, a cost of living crisis, a possible return to austerity, and the legacy of underfunded and overstretched service is so toxic and it can only increase the pressure on many vulnerable families and children. It is a gift to those whose aim is to exploit children.

This failure to provide many vulnerable young people and their families with the protection and early help they need is the reason why I launched the Commission on Young Lives in September 2021. We conclude our Commission with this final report. It is our call to action to tackle problems which are holding us back as a nation and which have been cascading down through some families and communities for generations. We have designed a system that we believe can offer a new, joined-up, national programme to protect and support teenagers at risk, as well as their families.

Two recent inquests into the deaths of 16-year-old Ben Nelson-Roux and 18-year-old Jade Hutchings highlight the problems with our current dysfunctional, underfunded, make-do-and-mend systems.

Ben and Jade never knew each other and lived at opposite ends of the country, but they died within a few weeks of each other during the first Covid lockdown. Jade took his own life in May 2020. He was described as 'bright' and 'doing well in school' but had been having problems with alcohol and drugs, and he was briefly suspended from school. In December 2019, Jade was kidnapped by two men and threatened at knife point, leading Sussex Police to consider that he may have been exploited by a county lines gang. Social services planned to meet with him every 20 days to assess his wellbeing, however, before turning 18 he was removed from their records.

In her statement, read at the inquest into his death, Jade's mother said, *"He was a quiet boy who wanted a good life. He and our family received judgement and inadequate care – as a Black family we were treated differently. I'm heartbroken by the many missed opportunities there were to help Jade. I've lost my trust in people and the way my son was failed by the system is beyond belief. I don't want any other family to be failed the way I was."*

When Ben Nelson-Roux died in April 2020, he was living in a hostel in Harrogate. Ben had been struggling with ADHD, severe mental health issues, and drug and alcohol problems for several years, and he had been asked to leave the family home three months before he died after becoming violent. In December 2019, he had been highlighted by police as being at 'high risk' of exploitation after he was arrested on suspicion of selling cocaine for a gang who had told him to bring drugs back from Scarborough to York. A child protection strategy meeting of social workers, mental health professionals and other safeguarding services had been due to take place on the day he died.

Both of these young people may still be here today if they had received practical help from people that they trusted, who stuck with them and supported them as they sought to escape from the gangs, threats and addictions that were bearing down on them. Ben, Jade, and their families did not receive that support that they needed from services who were supposed to be there to protect them. Many other families have been through - or are going through - similar experiences. As the four thematic reports the Commission has published over the last year have

set out, there are hundreds of thousands of young people in England who are growing up in very vulnerable situations; some due to highly challenging family or extra-familial situations, others because they have fallen through gaps in the different systems. Even before Covid, it was estimated there were 2.3m children at risk because of their family circumstances, of which only 0.7m were receiving identified support<sup>1</sup>.

In 2021/22, there were over 16,000 instances in England where child sexual exploitation was identified by local authorities as a factor at the end of an assessment by social workers. There were 11,600 instances where gangs were a factor and 10,140 instances where Child Criminal Exploitation was a factor.<sup>2</sup> These numbers are likely to be just the tip of the iceberg<sup>3</sup>. Those involved in gang activity and criminal exploitation are disproportionately young, vulnerable, and unknown to services. It has been estimated that there could be as many as 200,000 children in England aged 11 to 17 who are vulnerable to serious violence due to levels of crime and/or income deprivation in their community.<sup>4</sup>

We have asked ourselves repeatedly over the last year, why is it that so many of these young people need to commit criminal offences or become the victims of exploitation before their needs are noticed or begin to be met?

While some positive progress has been made over the last few years to develop strategies to tackle child criminal exploitation and serious violence – and we have set out many examples of excellent practice over the last year in our previous reports - some areas still aren't even sure of the number of children involved or at risk, and different systems are often too slow or incapable of coordinating together. The Serious Violence Duty should improve this but will not tackle many of the deep-rooted systemic problems around child protection.

Over recent months we have also asked ourselves how we have tolerated a system for so long that puts so much emphasis on box-ticking, and that is so reluctant to take a chance on doing things differently? How have we ended up with so many multi-agency meetings about a vulnerable child which last longer than the amount of time any of the professionals in the room will have ever spent with the child concerned? Why are we surrounding some vulnerable children with ten or more different professionals, none of them taking a lead or building a trusted relationship with the child? Why does the system do so much to stifle relationship-building and hold back innovation, and why is it so risk averse?

The contrast with those who exploit children could hardly be starker. They are nimble, on the cutting edge of technology, developing new business methods as their circumstances change. Even now the county lines model is adapting with the increased recruitment of vulnerable children local to their own areas, who do not need to move around the country, and who are contacted and sell through social media apps rather than a mobile phone 'line'.

We have also asked ourselves repeatedly over the last year why gangs and criminals are so much better than some services at identifying and scooping up vulnerable young people.

This is particularly frustrating given that we now know what to look out for. We know the problem stretches right across the country from our biggest cities to small rural villages. We know organised criminal networks have been exporting illegal drugs into different areas using dedicated mobile phone lines, social media, or other forms of 'deal line' for years. We know their success relies on finding and exploiting children and vulnerable adults to move and store drugs and money, and that they use coercion, intimidation, and violence.

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<sup>1</sup> [Childhood vulnerability in England 2019 | Children's Commissioner for England \(childrenscommissioner.gov.uk\)](#)

<sup>2</sup> Characteristics of Children in Need October 2022 [Explore education statistics](#)

<sup>3</sup> Factors identified at the end of assessment are additional factors that social workers record as being relevant in a case. Most children have more than one factor recorded for each episode of need. Not all episodes have factors recorded, and there can be differences in the recording practices between local authorities, so this data should be treated with some caution.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.crestadvisory.com/amp/report-violence-and-vulnerability>

We know too how this ruthless exploitation of children can happen - the promises of attention, loyalty, gifts, and even love and protection. Exploiters target those who are most vulnerable: teenagers in care (police identify those living in children's homes or 'unregulated accommodation' as being most at risk), young people who are missing from home, or struggling with mental health problems, children who are socially isolated or out of mainstream education, and young people who are looking for relationships that are not there for them at home or at school.

We also know that once groomed for involvement, many children are controlled and retained through a debt bond. Refusal to pay can result in threats of violence to them and their family. We have even heard of young people being forced to pressure their less suspicious looking grandmothers into becoming drug mules.

Yet what outsiders view as exploitation, some exploited children see as friendship and economic opportunity. There are even desperate parents who look the other way because they are reliant on their child for financial support. As one professional working with young offenders told me, *"What is the alternative to these families? A lot of our boys are saying what are you offering us that is better than the quick money we can make? It's a few thousand pounds a week. We're not offering them a better alternative."*

That is why, alongside looking at how to protect the thousands of children who are at risk of harm and exploitation, the Commission on Young Lives has a wider aim to make the case for changes that boost the life chances and educational prospects of vulnerable teenagers.

It should be a national disgrace that a fifth of our young people are leaving education without even the most basic qualifications and that the attainment gap between the most and least deprived students is growing again. We should be shocked that so many children are still being excluded from school, removed from the school roll, or 'manage-moved' around the system, then left to sink in poor quality and underfunded Alternative Provision.

The consequences can be disastrous. We heard from one practitioner about a child who was bullied at school. Rather than his school addressing the bullying behaviour, when he reacted to it in the classroom, he was sanctioned, and then excluded. He was groomed by a gang, where he felt respected, and was soon involved in criminal activity. There are countless Serious Case Reviews that pinpoint a child falling out of school as a terrible turning point in their life and most have now woken up to the dangers that exclusion can bring.

Our ambition during the term of this Commission has been to develop solutions to these problems. Throughout, we have been supported by our host Oasis who have provided the scaffolding to run our Commission and, just as importantly, have shared so many examples of the inspiring and life-changing work they are doing alongside some of the most deprived communities. Their wisdom, good advice, experience, and values can be found in the shaping of many of our recommendations, particularly our call to empower and support experienced third sector organisations. We have seen how they are delivering and growing positive interventions among marginalised communities and young people, often far more effectively than some statutory services.

In drawing up our recommendations, we have visited many schools and colleges, local authorities, children's centres, community, and youth projects. We have taken evidence from and spoken with youth workers, social workers, school leaders, the NHS, the police, Violence Reduction Units, Police and Crime Commissioners, Directors of Children's Services, charities, community groups; and many experts in the field of education, the care system, children's mental health, and family support. We have held regular discussions with politicians and Whitehall and local government officials. We have also been able to count on the real experiences and insightful views of our panel of expert Commissioners, and our Young Lives Panel of teenagers, as well as older people with lived experience of serious violence, gangs, exclusion, and the

criminal justice system. Our call to evidence produced many detailed and practical ideas and plenty of good practice. We are hugely grateful to all who have contributed and helped us.

What have we found? Firstly, many deeply committed people and organisations who are already making an enormous difference, turning around young people's lives, diverting them away from danger, helping them to realise their goals, and boosting their life chances. Some are literally saving lives. This is the army of experienced, resourceful, and dedicated professionals and volunteers who roll up their sleeves and do what they can with the resources given to them.

But we have also found systems and services that are not trusted, over-stretched, simply unable to meet the needs of many vulnerable children, and unable to stop them falling through the gaps and into danger.

While we have found plenty of optimism that change can happen, and no shortage of great organisations who are delivering excellent programmes, we have also encountered a lot of frustration, and sometimes anger – some of it arising from the historic mistake of implementing an austerity programme on early help programmes and youth services ten years ago. The idea that another austerity programme could be on the way is unthinkable and terrifying. It would demoralise an already over-worked and sometimes despondent workforce still further.

Our final recommendations argue for a much better-funded, therapeutic, nurturing, inclusive education offer for children that supports them from cradle to career. The days of judging the success of a school only on how its students perform in the final years of their 11 or 13 years of education are becoming increasingly outdated. I think of the Oasis Academy Hadley in Enfield where the pupils have named their school 'The School of Life'. At Hadley, their philosophy is that everyone is going to be successful and do well, get great jobs or go to university. They support and promote that belief every step of the way, sticking with children, working with their families, building strong relationships, and being a central part of their local community.

Identifying and then sticking with vulnerable children is crucial to success. The time and effort involved in building these long-term, trusted, culturally sensitive, sustainable, and impactful relationships with vulnerable children, their families and marginalised communities is not something that can be cobbled together overnight. Investing in long term relationships is one of the foundations of diverting young people away from the criminal justice system and keeping them safe from exploitation or violence.

This work happens every day in many communities, but too often those undertaking this work go unseen unappreciated and unsupported, with funding that is non-existent, meagre and unpredictable. Our recommendation to rename 'youth workers' as 'youth practitioners' is encouraged by our strong belief that the importance of youth work needs to be better respected and acknowledged, just as we don't hesitate to recognise health practice or legal practice. These are the people who can guide and support our young people to better life chances and we need an army of them on our streets right now.

Our recommendations set out a national and local plan for system reform to transform our ambitions for vulnerable young people.

The four thematic reports we have published over the last year made the case for change in our education system, our children's social care system, the family support we offer to parents and children, and in children's mental health services. We believe there is no point in setting out what is going wrong without offering workable solutions, and each report has included its own set of recommendations. This final report brings together those recommendations and makes the argument for a bold overhaul of the way we keep at risk teenagers safe, the way we provide the right help at the right time to those who need it, and the ways we can support all children to thrive.

Our recommendations include:

- **The Prime Minister recognises the national threat posed to our country’s prosperity and security by the scourge of serious violence, criminal exploitation, and harm and convenes regular COBRA meetings to tackle the root causes of these problems. The Children’s Minister of State should attend Cabinet.**
- **The Department of Education returns to its previous incarnation of Children, Schools, and Families, reflecting the central importance of thriving children and families as part of delivering a world class education system.**
- **The Government establishes a new Sure Start Plus Programme, a “Sure Start for Teenagers” network of intervention and support that reduces the risks vulnerable young people face and encourages them to thrive.**
- **The Government sets a target of 1,000 Sure Start Plus Hubs by 2027 to co-ordinate and deliver health and education support for vulnerable teenagers. Established in and around schools, the hubs will be run by charities, public bodies, business, and philanthropy organisations.**
- **A new drive across Government to reduce and eventually eliminate child poverty, including the re-establishment of a Child Poverty Unit in Whitehall.**
- **The Government leads a national mission to identify and remove racial bias in the systems that are currently failing many Black, Brown and Minority Ethnic children.**
- **The Government takes a new “Family First” approach that supports families with children at risk of becoming involved with gangs, serious violence, or criminal exploitation and which prevents crisis, financed through the implementation of Children’s Social Care reforms, and delivered by local authorities and family organisations.**
- **Reform of the children’s social care system to provide high quality care for all teenagers, taking an invest-to-save approach and delivered by a partnership of Government, local authorities and the third sector. Implementation of the Independent Review into Children’s Social Care recommendations delivered at pace.**
- **The recruitment of an army of Youth Practitioners to inspire, support and guide young people in their community, financed by funds from the proceeds of crime and administered by a collaboration of national charities.**
- **Opening all secondary school buildings before and after school, at weekends and during holidays, to provide safe and appealing places for teenagers, financed by funds from dormant bank accounts and National Lottery community funding.**
- **The Government to promote a new era of inclusive education, ending the culture of exclusion and helping all children to succeed in their education.**
- **A one-off £1bn children and young people’s mental health recovery programme, part-financed by a levy on social media companies and mobile phone providers.**
- **Reform the youth justice system to accelerate moves towards a fully welfare-based, trauma-informed Child First approach.**

The centrepiece of our recommendations is a new ‘Sure Start Plus’. We see this very much as a ‘Sure Start for Teenagers’, a universal offer that is placed initially in the areas of greatest need, a mechanism for bringing services together and providing bespoke services for families and

children who need it. We have chosen to incorporate the name Sure Start as it is a well-recognised and well-respected programme, which we believe was a mistake to dismantle.

Our proposals should come alongside a sea-change in how we view youth services and our expectations of what they offer to young people. We need to look way beyond rundown community spaces with a couple of ping pong tables, and raise our sights about what is possible, necessary, and enticing to marginalised groups of young people. There are many organisations already delivering much of this work, and we need to listen and learn from their successes and build upon it across the country.

Our vision is a network that endures and becomes part of the fabric of a local community, lasting for decades, adapting as society changes. It would be somewhere that offers not only help for young people and their families – be that through parenting classes or mental health support - but is knitted into the education system and is a place that also provides routes into training and developing new skills. It should be a local asset where young people trust those around them, where long-term relationships are built, that is inclusive, nurturing, culturally sensitive and representative, and relentlessly positive about encouraging success and high aspiration. We believe the role of the third sector is crucial to its success, and our vision would see charities and other organisations at the forefront of running their own centres, sharing their good practice and experience, and encouraging and helping statutory services to build greater trust in communities.

For this and our other recommendations to succeed we will need the engines of government fully behind it.

After a decade of running-down early help programmes and youth services, a return to investing in children and their families is desperately needed. We make no excuse for arguing for a significant increase in funding for vulnerable children, or for children and families to be placed at the heart of government policy making, whichever party is in power and whatever the economic circumstances. At a time when the public purse and family finances are under acute pressure, it makes sense to invest-to-save, but also to ask those who can contribute more to do their duty and join a national mission to turn around the lives of thousands of young people.

I am optimistic that these issues cut across political parties, and we have worked closely with those on all sides of the political spectrum. I am encouraged by the consensus among Parliamentarians we have talked with on the Left, Right and Centre that the current system is failing thousands of vulnerable children, and that those children need a package of support that is there throughout childhood. Translating that acceptance into action is the next step, and we urge politicians to take the recommendations we propose and to commit to delivering them.

During a decade of unprecedented change and turmoil in their lives, we have frequently taken our eye off the ball for young people, particularly the most vulnerable. It shows in the crises that so many are now facing, hidden in plain sight. It is time to make amends and create a new environment that keeps children safe from exploitation and harm and which boosts the life chances of every child.

These are our proposals for how to deliver that change.

**Anne Longfield CBE, Chair of the Commission on Young Lives**

## CASE STUDY: SHiFT

SHiFT exists to break the destructive cycle of children and young people caught up in, or at risk of, crime. The organisation seeks to transform policy and practice in how young people in these circumstances are seen and supported.

The SHiFT Programme is based on the Breaking Cycles model, devised by Sophie Humphreys OBE, one of SHiFT's four Co-Founders and a member of the Commission on Young Live's expert panel. Instead of defining people by issues such as addictions or criminality, Breaking Cycles understands that this behaviour often occurs following previous experiences of trauma, neglect, abuse, and poor attachment, and therefore focuses first on working with each child as an individual: getting to know them, understanding their hopes and fears, and helping them develop the strong foundations needed to achieve their aspirations.

Using the Breaking Cycles approach, SHiFT wants every child and young person caught up in, or at risk of, crime, to have one intensive, high-quality, trusting, and persistent professional relationship through which most of their needs are met: a flexible, tailored, and tenacious relationship through which professionals do whatever it takes to set children and young people up for the safe and bright futures they deserve.

The Royal Borough of Greenwich was one of the first Local Authorities to partner with SHiFT and host a SHiFT Practice. This story of Jake and Chris's work together is one example of the Greenwich SHiFT Practice in action.

Jake, aged 18, is a boy of White British heritage who lives in Southeast London. He lights up the room with his humour, makes a mean lasagne, and has a sharp eye for detail. Jake has also been known to Children's Services since the age of 12 and been in care since 14. He's been the victim of child sexual exploitation and has been physically assaulted by people he considered friends. Jake last attended school consistently when he was in year eight. When he was 12, he tried to set fire to a mattress in the family home. By the time his parents separated a few years later, Jake was frequently missing and had become involved in violence receiving 14 charges in two years, and convictions for robbery, criminal damage, and possession of drugs and knives.

When Chris, Jake's SHiFT Guide, first met Jake, he was remanded in custody – the fourth period Jake had spent in a Youth Offending Institution. Jake had been working with professionals in Youth Justice and Children's Social Care for six years but had experienced few consistent relationships, whether with family, friends, or professionals, in his life to date. Many of his placements had broken down contributing to Jake's feelings of worthlessness and pressure to become independent before he was ready. Desperate to find a place of belonging, Jake had become susceptible to negative peer influence, and was taking risks to be accepted. The gravity and frequency of Jake's offending was increasing, and Jake was increasingly vulnerable. Something needed to change.

With Jake's long history of professional involvement, it was especially important for Chris to really get to know the 'real' Jake. Through spending time with Jake while he was still in custody, a more complex story about why Jake got into trouble began to emerge than was being emphasised in some discussions about Jake between professionals. Chris started to understand Jake's background and interests and found similarities between them. He also started to see the significant links between Jake's behaviour and his family history, particularly the ending of his parents' relationship. Jake shared that sometimes he felt like other professionals around him expected him to fail and made decisions on this basis.

Chris got alongside Jake intensively in the Youth Offending Institution, working with him on day release, and then walking every step with him in the community and with his family. By doing things together Chris has been able to unlock aspects of life and possibility that Jake previously dismissed or felt were not for him. They've worked closely together on new ways of

understanding and managing emotions and behaviour. They have fun, and Chris encourages Jake to think about what happiness has looked like and what it might look like again, revisiting key moments and places of significance for Jake and supporting him in a myriad of practical ways to build and renew relationships. Supported by Chris, Jake has found a new passion for exercise. Chris has advocated for Jake in numerous settings, from education, to court, placement and alongside colleagues from Children's Social Care and Youth Justice. The strength of the relationship that has been forged between Chris and Jake, enables Chris to bring Jake's voice into the room when he is not present and when decisions are being made for and about him.

Now 18, a time when many other services would have stopped supporting him, Jake tells others that in contrast to the frustrations he used to feel about services not talking to each other and talking always about him without him; 'SHiFT just get it done'. In Chris, Jake has an adult who walks alongside him, believes in him, and supports and challenges him to be his best self in all aspects of his life. Jake is doing really well. He is no longer coming to police attention and his time at the gym – often with Chris – helps to keep him busy, well and focused. He recently finished a money management course, helping him to develop the skills he needs to live well independently. Jake has a much better relationship with his parents and is spending more time with them and allowing them into his life more.

SHiFT offers intensive, child-centred, systemic support to children and young people, promising to 'whatever it takes' to break cycles of offending. 'If you had to explain what Chris has brought into your life in one sentence, what would you say?', Jake is asked. 'Hope, he's brought hope [...] and doors, hope and doors, yeah. He's opened the doors for me to walk through.'

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## GROWING UP VULNERABLE IN ENGLAND: AN OVERVIEW

There are children growing up all over the country who are experiencing adverse childhood experiences, living very vulnerable lives, and who are susceptible to involvement in serious violence, gangs, and the criminal justice system. A recent report from Crest Advisory spoke to 13 boys who had all experienced childhood trauma and displayed a range of vulnerabilities before known involvement in county lines.<sup>5</sup> As their report makes clear, while children in need of additional help represent a small proportion of the overall population, they comprise most children involved in county lines. That is why the Commission's work is rooted in proposing solutions to reduce or eliminate the risks that vulnerable children face as they grow up.

We know that there are hundreds of thousands of children and young people in England growing up in households and situations that leave them particularly vulnerable to harm, exploitation, and lost life chances. Most of these children are neither in care nor receiving any help at all. Without support, their childhoods and early adulthood can be precarious. Every year, hundreds of vulnerable children are falling through the gaps in the education and social services systems, some into the hands of exploiters and abusers.

These are the young people this Commission is focused on predominately. They are disproportionately teenagers who are growing up in poverty, living in areas of deprivation, and disproportionately have Black, Brown, and Minority Ethnic backgrounds. However, as our evidence sessions throughout the Commission have reiterated, children from other backgrounds, including some children growing up in far from deprived parts of the country can also become the victims of exploitation and harm.

In 2019, the Office of the Children's Commissioner estimated that around 2.3 million children in England were living with risk due to vulnerable family backgrounds.<sup>6</sup> This included around 100,000 children where domestic abuse, parental drug and alcohol dependency, and severe mental health problems, were *all* present. Prior to the pandemic nearly 50,000 children were taken into care because of abuse or neglect at home, with 17% being over-16s.<sup>7</sup>

Before the Covid pandemic, over a third of the 2.3 million children estimated to be living in vulnerable households, 829,000 children, were 'invisible' to services (in other words not known to services or not receiving support from services). A further 761,000 were known to services but the level of support was unclear.<sup>8</sup> This suggests that in England 1.6 million children from a vulnerable family get no or only patchy support. This has come at a time when teenagers have become the fastest growing cohort in both child protection and care. They now represent the largest age group.<sup>9</sup> Many of these children are highly vulnerable and many suffer serious harm, or even die. Others become involved in criminal activity, serious violence, and the criminal justice system.



404,330

*The number of Children In Need in England in 2021/2022. This number is 4% higher than the previous year.<sup>10</sup>*

<sup>5</sup> Crest Advisory: Breaking the Cycle (2022).

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> ONS (January 2020). Child abuse extent and nature England and Wales: year ending March 2019.

<sup>8</sup> *Op cit.* OCC (4 July 2019).

<sup>9</sup> Department of Education (2020). Children in need and child protection. <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/statistics-children-in-need>

<sup>10</sup> Department of Education (October 2022). [Characteristics of children in need, Reporting Year 2022 – Explore education statistics](#)

16,330

*Instances between 1<sup>st</sup> April 2021 and 31<sup>st</sup> March 2022 in England where child sexual exploitation was recorded as a factor at the end of a children's social care assessment.<sup>11</sup>*

11,600

*Instances during the same period where gangs were recorded as a factor at the end of a children's social care assessment.<sup>12</sup>*

10,140

*Instances between 1<sup>st</sup> April 2021 and 31<sup>st</sup> March 2022 in England where child criminal exploitation was recorded as a factor at the end of a children's social care assessment.<sup>13</sup>*

The challenges facing these children, and the systems and services that are supposed to keep them safe, have existed for years. Yet sadly, the size of some of these problems have been an even bigger task following the Covid pandemic. Analysis published in July 2020 highlighted the heightened impact of lockdown on the 120,000 teenagers in England – one in 25 – already slipping out of sight before the pandemic.<sup>14</sup> The Commission on Young Lives has heard from many professionals working with children, parents, and young people themselves about how Covid made life harder for some vulnerable children, not only during the pandemic, but afterwards. This long-lasting impact has yet to produce the required scale of response from Whitehall or Government.

For most of these children, the risks in their lives do not appear overnight, and usually they and their families have been struggling for some time and have needed help earlier. The repeated failure to provide that help at the right time is linked to long-term trends compounded by a shrinking system of support over the last decade, in particularly the falls in early intervention services, family centres and youth workers.

In 2019, the Office of the Children's Commissioner estimated that around 100,000 teenagers had received one or more kind of high-cost statutory support during 2017/18.<sup>15</sup> This included being in care, being on a child protection plan, having an education, care, and health plan (EHCP) and being enrolled at pupil referral unit (PRU). The OCC also estimated those children with additional needs who risk falling through the gaps and becoming disengaged from the systems supposed to support them. These included:

- Having multiple 'children in need' referrals in the year but no 'children in need' plan.
- Having special education needs or a disability (SEND) and multiple exclusions from school during the year.
- Having a permanent exclusion but who do not enter a PRU during the year.
- Are in care and living in an unregulated placement and/or who have multiple placement changes during the year.
- Having a permanent exclusion.
- Having high levels of unauthorised absence.
- Dropping out of school in Year 11.

<sup>11</sup> Department of Education (October 2022). Characteristics of Children in Need, [Characteristics of children in need. Reporting Year 2022](#)

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid

<sup>14</sup> OCC (July 2020). Teenagers falling through the gaps 2017/18, <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/report/teenagers-falling-through-the-gaps/>

<sup>15</sup> OCC (4 July 2019). Childhood vulnerability report. <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/report/childhood-vulnerability-in-england-2019/>

- Missing at least an entire term of school in the previous two years; and
- Being in care but go missing from their placement multiple times in a year.

In 2017/18 around 81,000 teenagers aged 13 to 17 in England met at least one of the vulnerability criteria including 13,000 who met two or more of these criteria.<sup>16</sup> However, due to data limitations these figures do not include teenagers who may be falling through gaps; for example, those with untreated mental health needs or involved in gangs but not known to the police.<sup>17</sup>

A thematic review of 60 children in Croydon published in 2019 by the Croydon Safeguarding Board, found they had experienced multiple adversities.<sup>18</sup> Many had experienced parental absence, drug use, domestic abuse, and poor mental health in their families. At least 41 of the children had received fixed-term exclusions in secondary school. Tragically, five of these children had died by the time the report was completed.<sup>19</sup>

The key age of the children’s behaviour escalating, and the risks increasing, was 12 years old and at age 14 there was a peak of children in the cohort coming into care, suggesting that the children’s situations had deteriorated and interventions to that point had been unsuccessful.

The exact impact of Covid on vulnerable children may never be known. However, shortly after the first Covid lockdown, there were already signs that the pandemic was impacting negatively on many children. These included additional stresses on parents and a reduction in protective services, and an increase in children and young people’s vulnerability to abuse at home and online, and through sexual and criminal exploitation.<sup>20</sup>

There was a 31% drop in referrals (just under 36,000) made by schools in England to children’s social care services between pre-Covid 2019/20 and 2020/21, when there were two school lockdowns.<sup>21</sup> Some vulnerable children dropped out of the sight of teachers, often the first to spot the need for an assessment. While nearly 600,000 children and young people were referred to children’s social care services in the year to 31 March 2021, this was a fall of 7% compared to the previous 12 months.<sup>22</sup> In the same period, 388,490 children were deemed to be ‘in need’, the lowest number since 2013.<sup>23</sup>

While the onset of the pandemic saw sharp and rapid impacts, the trends around exploitation of young people had been rising for years. For the last 12 years, the Association of Directors of Children’s Services (ADCS) has collected data from 129 local authorities in England. Its report outlining the pressures faced by local authorities during 2019/20, focused on activity in the first six months of the pandemic. This showed increases in nearly all of the ‘extra-familial’ risks particularly facing teenagers. The ADCS will be updating this analysis at the end of 2022.

*Table 2: Exploitation factors identified at the end of an assessment, ADCS Safeguarding Pressures Report Phase 7.<sup>24</sup>*

	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
Alcohol misuse (child)	12,800	12,010	12,900
Sexual exploitation	20,000	18,720	18,700

<sup>16</sup> *Op cit.* OCC (4 July 2019).

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Croydon Safeguarding Children Board. *Vulnerable Adolescents Thematic Review* (February 2019).

<sup>19</sup> Croydon Safeguarding Children Board, (2019). *Vulnerable Adults Thematic Review*.

<sup>20</sup> NSPCC (2020). *Social isolation and the risk of child abuse during and after the coronavirus pandemic*.

<sup>21</sup> Department of Education (28 October 2021). *Children in Need and child protection. 2020-2021*.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *ADSC Safeguarding Pressures Report Phase 7. February 2021*

Drug misuse (child)	23,190	23,710	29,170
Gangs	8,650	10,960	14,700
Going/being missing	16,070	15,740	18,200
Trafficking	2,070	2,490	3,010

National Crime Agency (NCA) figures also showed that over 14% of referrals were flagged as county lines in 2020, compared to around 11% in 2019.<sup>25</sup> The problem is particularly acute in major cities and in poorer areas.

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*Increase in referrals at the beginning of the pandemic, with a total of 553 received from May 2019 to April 2020.*<sup>26</sup>
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*Of referrals were children in care, up from 20% from the previous year.*
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*Of referrals of school aged young people were not in education at the time.*

<sup>25</sup> More girls being recruited and horrifically abused by county lines drug gangs. LGA. 8 July 2021.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*

## THE YOUTH JUSTICE SYSTEM

Much of the evidence we have taken during the Commission has suggested that, at its worst, the youth justice system can be chaotic, disorientating, unsafe, under-resourced and lacking in anything like the care that children need. Different parts of the system are too often being driven by different ways of working with children and there are different measures of what success looks like. In this chapter, we have deliberately not set out to undertake an in-depth analysis and review of the whole youth justice system. Instead, we have provided a short overview of some areas for reform that we believe would reduce the risks of children and young people becoming involved in the criminal justice system or reoffending.

While we recognise there are pockets of good practice, particularly around embedding trauma-informed and restorative practice<sup>27</sup>, it is still the case that many children and young people who are already suffering from trauma before an arrest or conviction are being further traumatised by their experiences in the youth justice system. The courts system and prison system are still often failing to treat children as children or to adapt to the needs of the children in a trauma-informed way.

The youth justice system has also been too slow to diversify its workforce or judicial system to better reflect the cohort of children and young people going through the criminal justice system, and it has not put enough emphasis on improving prevention, diversion, resettlement, and rehabilitation through youth and community work. It is also clear, as the Youth Justice Board's research into of racial disparity and the Lammy Review have shown, that the system does not work well for Minority Ethnic children, and it is not working in a 'colour blind' way.<sup>28</sup>

We should be encouraged that there has been a reduction in the number of children engaged with youth justice in custody in the community, and that the Youth Justice Board has promoted a Child First approach to youth justice. This is an important development, but it is not yet understood or implemented consistently across the youth justice system. The key now is to ensure that the principle is carried out in practice and is achieved as quickly as possible through further embedding practice which understands trauma, Adverse Childhood Experiences, and restorative approaches, and through culturally competent engagement.

Some of this is already happening, and we should recognise that there have been developments over recent years that have led to – or have the potential to lead to - positive improvements. There is now much more focus on tackling the elements leading to involvement in the youth justice system, and a far greater emphasis on prevention.

The welcome and much-needed move towards a more therapeutic approach to youth justice includes the ground-breaking commitment for a new secure school, which is being established by this Commission's host, the Oasis Charitable Trust. This more progressive view of custody recognises the trauma that young people in custody will often have faced and provides a welfare approach to learning and development that was missing in the past. It is an ambitious move and one that we welcome wholeheartedly. In fact, we would like to see all YOIs replaced with secure schools and welfare-based children's homes.

We also welcome the signs of an increased focus on resettlement from custody. There has been some promising success in some areas, like London and the West Midlands, but much more needs to be done, as evidenced by the shockingly high 69% reoffending rate. Until all partners, including health, family services, education, and accommodation, play a full part the risks of reoffending after custody will remain high.

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<sup>27</sup> [Trauma-informed training and service redesign - Youth Endowment Fund](#)

<sup>28</sup> [Ethnic disproportionality in remand and sentencing in the youth justice system](#)

These positive developments are part of a wider understanding of the role that the system itself has had in driving further criminalisation and poorer outcomes, both in custody and on release back into the community. But they are still very much first steps and are only there for the small number of children facing custody. There also remains a lack of evaluation and assessment of youth justice intervention, meaning we still have something of a scattergun approach to reform. Too often the right hand doesn't know what the left hand is doing, so it is difficult to really know what works and what is effective. We are still trailing behind more forward-thinking approaches of other countries who have adopted ideas such as family-style youth courts that are making their systems more child-centred.

At the heart of the change that is so desperately needed is an explicit understanding of the role of trauma, adverse experiences and the disadvantage, and the intersections and compounding elements which when combined increase a child's likelihood of entering the youth justice system.

We need move quickly to a trauma-informed system across the entire criminal justice system, from police to courts, from YOTs to custody, rehabilitation, and resettlement. We need to acknowledge that custody should be a last resort and that children who are placed in custodial estates are generally those with the most complex and significant issues and traumas.

The number of children in custody is small – less than half the size of a secondary school. This should free up more resource for even more preventative support in schools, children's social care, mental health care, and family support, so that number becomes even smaller.

This trauma-informed approach is not about making excuses for criminal activities. The senseless acts of violence and tragic loss of young lives that we are witnessing are abhorrent, have a devastating effect on young people, their families, and their communities, and must result in consequences. However, we are also aware that young people in the youth justice system are often victims themselves and have experienced significant adverse childhood experiences. The evidence shows how experiencing four or more ACEs increases the likelihood of entering the youth justice system sevenfold in England.

The pernicious influences of grooming and intimidation are ever present, and some young people have had so little helpful intervention in their lives that - despite clear symptoms of vulnerability and distress - the first help they get is when they come into the criminal justice system. We have lost count of the times we have been told that a young teenager will be in prison or dead in three years' time. If it's so clear that everyone knows it will happen, how can we stand by and watch it play out? This danger has only been heightened by the pandemic, something that the Manchester Metropolitan University and the Alliance for Youth Justice have made clear in their work on the impact of Covid on the youth justice system. During Covid, young people were presented with a myriad of additional challenges, anxieties, and experiences, ranging from a lack of support services, increased safeguarding issues (such as abuse and neglect) and solitary confinement in the children's custodial estate<sup>29</sup>.

We need to be tough on the criminals who want to exploit young people and tough on the barriers that get in the way of more prevention. We are still making it too easy for those who harm children, and we need to fight back through a reformed criminal justice system.

### **Vulnerable children in the youth justice system**

Over the last decade, there has been a large fall in the number of children receiving both a caution or sentence or going into custody.<sup>30</sup> There are far fewer young people being locked up in

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<sup>29</sup> *ibid*

<sup>30</sup> It is important to be cautious when using the individual year youth justice statistics for 2020/21. We have focused on longer term trends, or in some cases have used pre-Covid statistics even though they are not the most recent. The 2020/21 period includes Covid lockdowns, and includes a time when there were court closures, court backlogs, a rise in home-schooling, significantly reduced social contact including periods of having to stay at home, and changes to custodial regimes.

the secure estate than a decade ago. In 2021/22, the population of under-18s in secure estate custody was 493 compared to 1,900 in 2011/12<sup>31</sup>.

In 2020/21 around 15,800 children received a caution or sentence, which was 17% lower than the previous year. While the 2020/21 annual youth justice statistics need to be looked at carefully within the context of lockdowns, court closures, and hugely reduced social interaction, there is no doubt that there has been an overall decade-long downward trend in numbers of young people entering the criminal justice system. However, it is important to note that the Ministry of Justice and Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service have said they expect the number of children in custody to more than double by September 2024.<sup>32</sup>

Every year there are still hundreds of children in England going through our criminal justice system and spending time in Young Offender Institutions. Despite the overall fall in the number of proven offences committed by children in recent years, there has been an upward trend of young people entering the criminal justice system because of serious violence.

- The proportion of children in youth custody for violence against the person offences has increased over the last decade, and now accounts for six in ten (61%) of the youth custody population.<sup>33</sup>
- The overall number of proven offences committed by children has fallen for all crime types over the last ten years, though violence against the person offences have seen the greatest increase in proportion, increasing from 21% in March 2011 to 32% in 2021.<sup>34</sup>
- In 2020/21, possession of weapon offences made up almost one in five (19%) of all offences committed by those young people entering the criminal justice system for the first time.<sup>35</sup>
- The proportion of First Time Entrants (FTEs) who have committed possession of weapon offences has increased by 16 percentage points over the last ten years. This is the only offence group to see a real term increase in that period.<sup>36</sup>

The ethnic background of young people involved in the criminal justice system is also changing, and we should be shocked by the over-representation of Black boys:

- While white boys aged 15-17 are by far the most likely group to have committed proven offences, the proportion of children cautioned or sentenced who are Black has been increasing over the last ten years and is five percentage points higher than it was in the year ending March 2011 (12% compared to 7%)<sup>37</sup>.
- Children from a Mixed ethnic background accounted for 10% of those receiving a caution or sentence in 2021/22, a number that has more than doubled since the year ending March 2011.<sup>38</sup>
- The proportion of children in youth custody who are White has been falling, from 68% to 47%, while the proportion of children from a Black ethnic background has increased the most, and now accounts for 29% of the youth custody population, compared with 18% ten years ago.<sup>39</sup>
- The proportion of children in custody from a Mixed ethnic background has increased from 6% to 14% over the last ten years and the proportion of children from an Asian or Other ethnic background has increased from 7% to 10% over the last ten years.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> [Youth custody data - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](http://www.gov.uk)

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<sup>33</sup> [Youth Justice Statistics 2020-21.pdf \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#)

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>37</sup> [Youth custody data - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](http://www.gov.uk)

<sup>38</sup> [Youth custody data - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](http://www.gov.uk)

<sup>39</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> *ibid*

- 87% of under-18s on remand in London between July and September 2021 were from a BAME background, while 61% were Black.<sup>41</sup>
- Black children were five times more likely to be subject to stop and search, four more times more likely to be arrested and over three times more likely to receive a caution or sentence than White children.<sup>42 43</sup>

It shouldn't be surprising that levels of need are higher among children in the criminal justice system than in the rest of the population. Familiar experiences and themes that have arisen throughout our Commission are clearly set out in the statistics looking at the background of young offenders.

- Of those people who go on to receive custodial sentences, 42% have been classed as a child in need (CIN).<sup>44</sup>
- In March 2020, 57% of children in custody had either been in care or were currently in care.<sup>45</sup>
- More than three-quarters (80%) of people who went on to receive a custodial sentence had been identified with Special Educational Needs at some point during their schooling. People who went on to receive custodial sentences were almost five times more likely to have had a SEN statement than people with no criminal convictions.<sup>46</sup>
- Almost 70% of young people receiving custodial sentences have received free school meals at some point.<sup>47</sup>
- Just over half of young people who went on to receive custodial sentences had been persistently absent from school.<sup>48</sup>
- School permanent exclusions are more common among those that went on to receive custodial sentences, with 13% having been expelled from school.<sup>49</sup>
- Seven out of ten children sentenced have identified mental health needs.<sup>50</sup>
- Seven out of ten children sentenced have speech, language, and communication needs.<sup>51</sup>

The list goes on, and as a recent study carried out by Manchester Metropolitan University looking at young people involved in serious violence in Manchester noted, *'All of the youth justice workers interviewed for this research noted the high prevalence of Adverse Childhood Experiences among the children they work with. They noted how rare it was for a child to have only one or two ACEs, with most children having many more.'*<sup>52</sup>

Between April and June 2021, Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation undertook a review of the experiences of Black and Mixed heritage boys in the justice system.<sup>53</sup> Practitioners reported that a large majority experienced multiple adverse childhood experiences and had high levels of unmet need before contact with justice services. The Inspectorate's review found that almost a third had been victims of child criminal exploitation and that the majority had one or no previous convictions.<sup>54</sup> Most of the boys grew up in the poorest areas and had often been exposed to the

<sup>41</sup> DfE Children looked after in England including adoption: 2020/21

<sup>42</sup> [Youth Justice Board Annual Report and Accounts 2021/22 \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk)

<sup>43</sup> See also [Ethnic disproportionality in remand and sentencing in the youth justice system](#)

<sup>44</sup> [The education and social care background of young people who interact with the criminal justice system - Office for National Statistics \(ons.gov.uk\)](#)

<sup>45</sup> [experimental-statistics-assessing-needs-sentenced-children-youth-justice-system-2019-20.pdf \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#)

<sup>46</sup> [The education and social care background of young people who interact with the criminal justice system - Office for National Statistics \(ons.gov.uk\)](#)

<sup>47</sup> Ibid

<sup>48</sup> Ibid

<sup>49</sup> [The education and social care background of young people who interact with the criminal justice system - Office for National Statistics \(ons.gov.uk\)](#)

<sup>50</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/assessing-the-needs-of-sentenced-children-in-the-youth-justice-system>

<sup>51</sup> [assessing-needs-of-sentenced-children-youth-justice-system.pdf \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#)

<sup>52</sup> [Serious-Youth-Violence-Report---MCYS.pdf \(mmu.ac.uk\)](#)

<sup>53</sup> The experiences of black and mixed heritage boys in the youth justice system: A thematic inspection by HM Inspectorate of Probation October 2021

<sup>54</sup> Ibid

violence and family breakdown. The boys, particularly those from London, spoke at length about being subject to police stop and search.

The Lammy Review in 2017<sup>55</sup> highlighted racial inequality in the youth justice system as its biggest concern and proposed a new requirement across the justice system to ‘explain or reform’ racial disparities. Despite some interventions, including the work of the JUSTICE working group on tackling racial injustice in the youth justice system, the issue of racial disparity remains a chronic problem with devastating consequences. Addressing racial disparity in the entire criminal justice system must be a core strategic priority and will only succeed as part of a wider drive to tackle racial disparities in other systems, including all those that intersect with the youth justice system.

For too many children, the point at which they enter the criminal justice system is a moment when interventions have come too late or have failed. These missed opportunities to offer the right support and intervention are often frequent. Many children in custody, or adults who have been in prison, talk about multiple times in their life when they needed help but didn’t receive any. Some describe being on a conveyor belt, unable to get off, knowing which direction they were heading but unable to be diverted away from an almost inevitable journey towards custody. Frequently, they feel that both universal and more targeted services or interventions did not intervene effectively to help them change the direction their life was taking.

These are mostly children with high levels of need whose needs were sometimes not being met. That could range from being excluded from school and ‘dumped’ into poor alternative provision where there are already vulnerable young people involved in criminal exploitation; it could mean not receiving the support or treatment for speech, language and communication challenges and/or mental health conditions, or neurodivergent needs, which were leading to problems at school or at home; or it could mean failing to receive the support they needed for their special educational needs and falling out of the school system. A failure to identify needs and provide consistent support early is a sadly familiar experience for many young people in the criminal justice system.

The response and focus from Local Safeguarding Partnerships to the needs of these children is also patchy. Research by the Office of the Children’s Commissioner in 2020 found that many Local Safeguarding Children’s Boards were not even able to provide information about the number of children at risk of criminal exploitation in their area. It is not surprising then that thousands of children at risk of exploitation are unknown to services that should be protecting them.<sup>56</sup> As the authors of a recent Crest Advisory report into county lines concluded: *“It is the view of the authors of this report, based on our research, that the Department for Education is guilty of a systematic failure to protect criminally exploited vulnerable children from physical and mental abuse, including torture and sexual abuse ... Despite the vast catalogue of recordable data categories the DfE demands councils report to them, the DfE has never asked children’s services at local councils to record or report the number of children who have been criminally exploited in county lines.”*

The Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act has introduced a new Serious Violence Duty that creates new statutory obligations for services to work together and share information to reduce violence. The Beating Crime Plan also provides a welcome extension of Project Adder and the establishment of Safe Taskforces in a number of crime hotspot areas to support children at risk of exclusion to stay in school. However, there have also been significant concerns raised by a number of organisations, including the Alliance for Youth Justice<sup>57</sup>, that the Act will have an adverse impact on Black, Brown and Minority Ethnic young people, something raised in the Government’s own Equalities Impact Assessment<sup>58</sup>.

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<sup>55</sup> Lammy review: final report - GOV.UK ([www.gov.uk](http://www.gov.uk))

<sup>56</sup> <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/CCO-Gangs.pdf>

<sup>57</sup> [AYJ Explains: Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill - Racial Disparity — AYJ, Alliance for Youth Justice](#)

<sup>58</sup> [Overarching equality statement: sentencing, release, probation and youth justice measures - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

Our thematic reports have looked at the important development of Violence Reduction Units and the work of Police and Crime Commissioners in diverting young people away from the criminal justice system.

### Girls at risk of or involved in exploitation

During our evidence sessions, we have heard how young women and girls who are affected by violence and gang-related activity often go unseen. These young women experience multiple vulnerabilities, trauma, and unmet need, and often face violence, intimidation, sexual abuse, and criminal and/or sexual exploitation.

Although data on the numbers involved is not widely available, recent findings suggest that up to around a third of young people involved with gang activity are girls.<sup>59</sup> They are often recruited as they are believed to be less likely to attract the attention of police and they can be made to fulfil several roles in the group, from administrator and organiser to girlfriend or sexual partner.

Like boys, they are controlled and punished, often through extreme sexual threat and violence. They can be discarded and ostracised, becoming targets for victimisation. Girls involved in criminal or sexual exploitation often go unrecognised, with not enough professional understanding of the issues relating to young women involved in gang activity or the impact this activity and exploitation can have on them personally. This has included labelling girls as victims of Child Sexual Exploitation, without recognising wider Child Criminal Exploitation they may also be experiencing. While new work is emerging, there are relatively few support services in place, and most children supported by youth justice services are boys. There are some systems of culturally appropriate and community-based support available in some places in England, like the excellent Comic Relief-funded Positive Steps project in Oldham, and Abianda which was set up specifically to support girls and young women who are exploited, but not as part of any national system or programme.

Over the last year, the Commission has taken evidence from charities and other organisations who have worked with girls and young women who have become criminally or sexually exploited by organised criminals and/or gangs, including members of Agenda, the alliance for women and girls at risk.

We have heard about the ongoing struggle to encourage girls to disclose what is happening to them when they are being abused or exploited, combined with a lack of understanding from some statutory services about how to spot problems that are occurring, or how to help young women. One organisation working with girls who have been exploited talked about how many victims have disclosed what is happening to social workers or the police, but they have not been taken seriously, and services had not followed up. There is sometimes a perception that exploitation is overlooked because a girl doesn't fit into society's idea of what a victim should be. Referrals are low compared to referrals for boys, which, in the experience of many of those we heard from, does not reflect how many young women are involved in county lines and other exploitation.

Others have told us how too often exploitation of care-experienced girls is being missed or overlooked. Some girls in care are subjected to damaging surveillance and unnecessary criminalisation, and some of their behaviour in a care setting triggers police action that would never take place if they weren't in care. Sometimes the perception of girls in care is negative by default and some of these young women can end up with a thick case load files and a 'difficult' "official history", which can reduce their opportunities in early adulthood.

Many Black, Brown and Minority Ethnic girls, both in and out of the care system, are seen as seen as harder to engage, more aggressive, and are subjected to racialised judgements, and

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<sup>59</sup> OCC (November 2019). *The characteristics of gang associated children and young people.*

over-sexualised. The adultification of Black Brown and Minority Ethnic girls across the justice system (as well as education and care systems) is a deep-rooted problem.

We have heard about how the culture in some local authorities is too closely grounded in dealing with exploitation as a crime and disorder issue, rather than a welfare, trauma-informed approach. If young women are dealing with services for the first time at a time of crisis involving the criminal justice system or police, then opportunities have usually already been missed for intervention.

We have been told how some vulnerable girls are not using services because there is no assertive outreach, particularly from people who look like them and who they trust. Where interventions are successful, youth workers and outreach workers are providing services that are not judgmental, that don't assume 'something is wrong with you', and that feel safe. We heard again the frustrations of those running successful interventions at the short-term funding they usually receive to provide what is long-term work.

As one organisation explained, it takes time to get to know vulnerable young people, many of whom have been let down by statutory services or other interventions in the past, or who feel that services are just not 'for them'. Quick fixes do not work. This organisation has detached workers who visit takeaways, bars, or other community venues, they look like the young women they work with, are from their communities, and they have lived experience. 93% of the young women they work with are from Black and ethnically diverse communities. We heard about the difference this is making, and how by building up levels of trust through shared experience and cultural backgrounds they can support and help to divert many vulnerable young women away from harm.

It is clear to us that this kind of work needs far more support from national and local government, and that more widely the issues facing girls and young women at risk of exploitation and gang-activity and that much more needs to be understood about their experiences and effective methods of supporting them.

### **Diverting young people from harm and crime**

The principle of diverting young people from crime is well established, and different programmes have been running over many years.

Some children engaged in low-level criminal behaviour will grow out of crime as they mature, and there is plenty of evidence showing how formal criminal justice interventions on low-level offending can have a negative impact. Labelling these young people criminals, giving them a criminal record, potentially disrupting their education through custody, and introducing them into situations where they may mix with others who are more entrenched in the criminal justice system can all be counterproductive to turning lives around.

Over the last decade, the police, Youth Offending Teams, children's services, and others have continued to run some diversionary activities to reduce the numbers of children being convicted and entering custody. However, finances have been limited, and there are variations in different parts of the country around the nature of diversion, the availability of projects and programmes, and success rates.

As part of our evidence gathering sessions, the Commission held a series of roundtables with criminal justice experts and practitioners to identify issues that are adversely affecting teenagers at risk of exploitation and harm, and to talk about better ways of diverting vulnerable children away from the criminal justice system.

There is clearly a high level of resilience and ambition among those working with young people, but the challenges they are facing to keep vulnerable teenagers safe are considerable, and they mirror the findings of our four thematic reports: the inadequacy of the care system and a shortage of suitable placements for older children; the use of unregulated accommodation and

out of area placements; a shortage of specialist foster care; the lack of support for children with speech and language development problems; inadequate help for traumatised children and those with mental health conditions; young people being excluded from school; and a failure to do more to keep vulnerable children safe within their families and local community. Those we talked to were particularly worried about teenagers in care, who are at particular risk of harm and becoming involved in offending.

One Youth Offending Team manager told us about the lack of alternatives to unregulated placements in his area for teenagers in care who are in danger of becoming involved in crime or serious violence: *“Children are going into hostels or hotels which is not a safe option for them. We are really struggling to find suitable placements for teenagers. We had a young person who was kicked out of a welfare secure placement because of his behaviour. But where else is there for him? It feels difficult and hopeless. Where can we keep them safe?”*

Another told us, *“Exclusion is always a factor in our serious cases, both with perpetrators and victims. Schools are ill-equipped to manage traumatised children’s behaviour and the children in the criminal justice system are often highly traumatised. We see trauma at home, exclusion from school and children gravitating towards people who are providing them with a sense of agency, belonging and money. It goes back to schools being ill-equipped.”*

There was broad agreement in our discussions with practitioners that youth justice services should be a key part of the process of preventing children entering the criminal justice system in the first place, and of diverting those who are involved away from further or escalating crises. Bringing youth justice work into the preventative space was seen to be made harder by flip-flopping from the centre between a ‘Child First’ approach to youth justice and a ‘punishment first’ approach, and the cutting of prevention funding from the core youth justice grant. One practitioner argued that assuming children have adult logic about deterrents is not working and is not a strategy for reducing crime, pointing out the problem of the ‘adulthoodification’ of some young people, which is punitive and crowding out the ‘Child First’ approach.

We did hear how some areas are merging youth justice and youth work approaches, with a greater emphasis on developing relationship-based work. All agreed that strong youth provision is essential to prevention and diversion, and that there should be more widespread use of youth justice expertise in these arenas. There was agreement that youth justice work should be flexible and should include working within the community, having a presence, reclaiming areas, and reaching out to young people who otherwise may not want to come to them. This can be helped by the fact that often youth justice practitioners have a unique relationship with children because they are not seen by families as antagonistic or as much of a ‘threat’ as a social worker, who may be viewed as wanting to take a child into care. As one practitioner commented, *“If you’ve got the right people, you will get good results.”*

However, there was also some frustration that programmes that had worked in the past and had been successful – including the Youth Inclusion Programme – did not receive the investment they needed to continue. One practitioner recalled how when his local YIP closed, within a couple of months there were large numbers of young people who had been doing well who then ended up becoming involved in youth offending.

There is broad agreement that long term, relationship and place-based work is needed to support and build the resilience of young people and their communities – providing positive alternatives and activities to those that wish to exploit them. Providing this on a spectrum of support from universal youth activities to targeting interventions for young people at risk is what we have been told is needed.

There are already many local councils, health agencies, the police, and charities involved in good joined-up initiatives. The work of Violence Reduction Units is also bringing welcome co-ordination

in some areas. For example, the VRU in Manchester is working alongside Manchester authorities through safeguarding boards, across schools and in place-based work with youth services.

The Ministry of Justice's recent Turnaround fund is providing £55m to YOTs across England and Wales over three years and puts an emphasis on earlier intervention and improving outcomes for children on the edge of the youth justice system. The aims of Turnaround are to build on already ongoing work, improving the socio-emotional, mental health and wellbeing of children and improving integration between YOTs and other statutory services. Turnaround is built on similar principles to the Supporting Families programme. It is deliberately not prescriptive about the interventions that should be used, recognising that YOTs can best understand the needs of children in their local area.

Nationally, there are many good initiatives that are intended to help but are small, one off, and short term.

As we have stated throughout our work, continued silos and a lack of strategic co-ordination continue to blight progress in providing preventative support for young people at risk. Whilst local and national support is always welcome, it is clear to us that only a national strategic priority to reduce the number of children at risk, backed up by the resources to do so, will be capable of delivering the scale of change and improvements needed. We believe that this should include reforms to integrate the work of Youth Offending Teams, safeguarding teams and youth practitioners. Similarly, this focus should be replicated by an integrated strategic focus from VRUs, Police and Crime Commissioners, the police, and the Youth Justice Board. We also agree with Josh MacAlister's recommendation in the Independent Review of Children's Social Care that responsibility for youth justice in Government should be moved to the Department for Education to enable joined up strategic work to take place. This should go alongside wider responsibility for young people in Government which should return to the Department for Education in an extended brief.

It is not uncommon for some teenagers who are accused of committing crimes to spend long periods of time waiting for their case to be determined whilst they are **Released Under Investigation (RUI)**. RUI is used by the police instead of bail, but unlike pre-charge bail it has no time limits or conditions. This can leave both alleged victims and accused in limbo, with no updates on their case for long periods of time. Police faced increased pressure because of the impact of the Coronavirus Act 2020. In an attempt to avoid further backlogs in the Youth Justice System (YJS), police cases of children Released under Investigation (RUI) increased, as did No Further Action (NFA) cases.<sup>60</sup>

YOT practitioners told us during our roundtables how this can go on for a year or longer, and how it has become even more of a problem during Covid. They talked about how being RUI with no support and then experiencing months where nothing happens can leave young people with the perception that they are untouchable, even if serious offences are committed. A YOT manager who gave evidence to the Commission, told us how these delays can encourage some young people towards more offending behaviour while they are 'left hanging' by the criminal justice system: *"That child will sometimes progress towards offending behaviour. It's almost a default position for police forces. Kids left hanging there with no services involved at all ... We should be insisting that a health assessment is completed as quickly as possible to identify their health needs – mental health, speech and language and physical health."* As Youth Justice Legal Centre, part of Just for Kids Law, has pointed out, severe delays in the justice system are also resulting in serious consequences for those who turn 18 while RUI, meaning they have their cases heard in adult courts, and lose access to many of the services afforded to vulnerable children and young people.

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<sup>60</sup> [https://www.mmu.ac.uk/media/mmuacuk/content/documents/mcys/COVID-19\\_and\\_Youth\\_Justice\\_Paper\\_3.pdf](https://www.mmu.ac.uk/media/mmuacuk/content/documents/mcys/COVID-19_and_Youth_Justice_Paper_3.pdf)

Despite some gains, the treatment of Child Criminal Exploitation in the youth justice system requires significant improvement, including the introduction of a statutory definition of Child Criminal Exploitation. Victims of Child Criminal Exploitation are not always identified and are treated as criminals rather than being given the protection and support they need. The **National Referral Mechanism** which was established to identify and provide support to potential victims of modern slavery, is beset by delays leading to inadequate information and uncertainty for courts. An improved service, along with guidance to the CPS and judiciary is required along with greater integration and collaboration with children's services support. Reducing these delays and ensuring that those that have been victims of grooming and criminal exploitation are treated as such must be a priority. A Ten-Minute Rule Bill recently introduced to Parliament by the MPs Lyn Brown and Stephen Timms calls for the introduction of a statutory definition of Child Criminal Exploitation within the Modern Slavery Bill to help focus attention on CCE throughout public services and provide a clear reference point for all the other reforms required.<sup>61</sup>

**Too many teenagers are being taken into custody on remand.** Despite guidance to the contrary, too many teenagers are spending their time on remand in custody. The number of young people in custodial remand is too high, despite the overall fall in the secure estate population over the last decade. Children on remand make up 40% of the children and young people in custody, even though most children on remand do not end up being sentenced to immediate custody. In 2020/21, 74% of children who were on remand at any point during proceedings were not ultimately convicted and sentenced to custody.<sup>62</sup> Moreover, as the Justice Committee highlighted in 2020, children from Black, Brown and Ethnic Minority backgrounds are being disproportionately remanded to custody.<sup>63</sup>

Section 157 of the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022 introduces new statutory duties to consider the best interests and welfare of the child in a remand decision and to record the reasons for a custodial remand. The provisions are designed to reduce the number of children and young people remanded into custody, which is welcome, and should lead to only the most serious offences ending in a custodial remand. It is hoped that these changes will ensure children and young people are only remanded into custody as a last resort.

However, these reforms will undoubtedly put even more pressure on under-resourced local authorities, who are already struggling to find placements for children in care. Since the introduction of the LASPO Act 2012, remand budgets have been delegated to local authorities to 'buy beds' for remanded children, often in the secure estate. This budget change was designed to encourage the development of specialist accommodation for children who are remanded, although in practice this has not happened on a sufficient scale. There are children in custodial remand because bail applications were refused when local authorities could not find them a safe place to live, and some young people on remand are living in unsuitable and inappropriate local authority accommodation. Investment in local authority community-based remand provision needs to happen if the changes to sentencing provisions are to work in practice.

As we set out in our thematic reports on children in care and support for families, we have found local authorities too often be risk-averse in their approach to family-based interventions and intense family support for teenagers on remand, and often unable to find alternatives due to the paucity of the residential care places available. Much more needs to be done to keep young people on remand out of custody, including the recruitment of remand foster care. The use of Release on Temporary License is also not utilised enough. The system should be outcomes-led and less risk-averse.

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<sup>61</sup> [Combatting-Child-Criminal-Exploitation.pdf \(lynbrown.org.uk\)](#)

<sup>62</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/youth-custody-data>

<sup>63</sup> [Children and Young People in Custody \(Part 1\): Entry into the youth justice system - Justice Committee - House of Commons \(parliament.uk\)](#)

**Reforming the Court System.** Those children who are not diverted away from the criminal justice system can be tried in either a youth court, adult magistrate court or the Crown Court, depending on the offence. Criticism of the youth courts is widespread, with many practitioners describing a system characterised by chaos and dysfunction. In 2016 the Taylor Review highlighted how often youth courts do not provide the best outcomes for children. Many others have questioned whether youth courts are able to support children to participate in proceedings and whether they can meet the needs of young people, even when needs are identified (around speech and language or mental health, for example).

A 2020 report from the Centre for Justice Innovation reported how young people don't always understand what is happening, are not always given a voice during proceedings, and feel the whole process has set them up to fail. Clearly, there are gaps in support for vulnerable children (including in pre-sentencing reports which often fail to properly identify young people's trauma or vulnerabilities), as well as problems with long delays in the system (made even worse by Covid and the programme of magistrate court closures). These delays can be particularly hard for those young people who have been working hard on their rehabilitation while waiting for their case to come to court.

We have also heard concerns about incentivised admission systems pulling young people into the justice system when they would not be convicted at trial (including when they are innocent). The majority of young people do plead guilty, some under considerable pressure, rather than going to trial. This means we are convicting some children, or giving them formal cautions, based on decisions that are being taken by vulnerable children under significant pressure. The University of Exeter's research on child cautions makes some important recommendations, including making legal representation mandatory for children, regulating, and recording language around cautions, ensuring cautions are justified based on evidence and that any caution does not have criminal record implications<sup>64</sup>. Its work on guilty pleas recommends giving lawyers working with children specialised training and giving them more time with children, making trials more accessible for children and changing the sliding scale of sentence reductions for guilty pleas.<sup>65</sup>

Not enough is being done to prevent children from going to court in the first place, and the system needs to be far more 'Child-First' focused. Addressing children's health, welfare, and education needs should be central to preventing young people who do enter the criminal justice system from becoming repeat offenders.

It is clear to us that a thorough review of the court system and sentencing is required to understand better current practice in the youth justice system and the impact of those approaches on outcomes to young people to inform future reforms. There is also a need to undertake detailed assessment of alternative welfare-based and trauma-informed approaches to youth justice.

Reforms to the court system to improve the court system for young people including virtual and remote hearings must continue and be extended. This should include specialist training for legal professionals in the court system – including lawyers, barristers, magistrates, and judges.

The transition to young adult status at 18 remains a consistent area of concern which must be addressed urgently.

**A new approach to custody.** Children and young people who commit very serious crimes should have to face appropriate consequences, including time in a secure setting. However, custody should be somewhere young people receive the support and help they need to rehabilitate and to leave with good opportunities for the future. Unfortunately, the current system is not set up to deal with the very high levels of need and vulnerabilities found in the secure youth

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<sup>64</sup> [https://evidencebasedjustice.exeter.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/ChildCautions\\_FullReport-1.pdf](https://evidencebasedjustice.exeter.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/ChildCautions_FullReport-1.pdf)

<sup>65</sup> [https://evidencebasedjustice.exeter.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/ChildGuiltyPleas\\_FullReport.pdf](https://evidencebasedjustice.exeter.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/ChildGuiltyPleas_FullReport.pdf)

estate. Most have multiple adverse childhood experiences, are traumatised, and have mental health or other needs which are not/have not been met. We are seeing a move towards a more therapeutic system – and the sponsor of this Commission, Oasis, is opening its first secure school in 2024 – though we would like to see much more urgency from government in expanding this model.

Meanwhile, Youth Offender Institutions remain establishments that exist largely to lock-up young people. Education is routinely poor, young people still spend too long locked inside cells, and there is insufficient focus on dealing with the causes of offending or preparing them for adulthood. The system is still plagued with violence, high levels of assault and self-harm, the use of restraint, separation, and solitary confinement to manage behaviour, and problems with staff retention. A smaller secure estate has also resulted in problems separating young people who may come into conflict due to gang rivalry, putting more pressures on staff and causing disruption to routines. It is little wonder that many young people tell prison inspectors they feel unsafe in their establishment.

The secure school system has the potential to be the first example of a new approach to youth custody in this country.

**Oasis Restore** is the product of a collaboration between the charity Oasis and the Ministry of Justice to reform youth justice and create a more effective therapeutic environment for children in the justice system. The former Secure Training Centre in Medway is being redesigned and repurposed to become the flagship and is due to open in the next two years. The project aims not to be a refashioning of a youth jail, but a replacement for it. Oasis Restore is placing emphasis on therapeutic care, mental health provision, and trusting interpersonal relationships with support staff. The secure school will house forty-nine young people between the ages of twelve and eighteen, and will contain facilities for academic and vocational learning, sports, and leisure facilities. There will be gardens, sensory rooms, youth zones, a music studio, allotments, and even a few animals. Instead of focusing on punitive justice and security, Oasis Restore will prioritise healing psychological trauma and preparing children for a life and career after their release, bringing the treatment of children in the justice system in line with the modern understanding of psychology and mental health.

The concept of secure schools was put forward as part of a review of youth justice services in 2016, and the 2019 Conservative manifesto committed to trialling secure schools across the country. Oasis Restore is the first time an independent charity has been put given responsibility for running a custodial estate.

Reform has been too slow to date, and the youth secure estate still falls well short of becoming fit for purpose.

**The different approaches to youth justice taken in Scandinavian countries** provide important models and evidence to inform priorities for development in this country. The Scandinavian approach places a much higher importance on integrating criminal justice and welfare provision than we do in England. In Sweden, their secure estate sites are sub-divided into specific homes that are able to support children with complex needs. Each home accommodates a maximum of eight young people, and there are shared education facilities. The most secure parts of the estate are closer to secure children's homes, and children can move between homes as they prepare to be released into the community. While this approach is in theory available in England's youth custody estate, there is less flexibility to meet children's needs.

Norway takes a similar approach to Sweden. Their system is flexible and centres on meeting children's needs, and provision is on a smaller scale and more locally based. Secure centres are small but have a large clinical team. There is a strong focus on rehabilitation back to the community which involves parents and family therapy. Norway has a tiny number of children

incarcerated at any one time, and those who are incarcerated tend to be held for welfare reasons.

A new welfare approach to secure provision in this country will be an essential part of the overall reforms necessary to improving outcomes for teenagers at risk. It is also necessary to review the age of criminal responsibility which remains very low in this country in comparison to other European countries.

**Leaving custody and not returning.** The rate of reoffending for young people in the first year after release in this country is 69%- a shocking rate of failure for a system with ambitions to turn around the lives of young people in trouble. Resettlement plans can be shambolic and often left too late, leaving vulnerable youngsters without the finances, accommodation or support they need.

Given that many children in the secure estate are care experienced, some have no families to return to and are left to local authorities to find them a placement. Those without official care leaver status will not be automatically entitled to post-custodial support from children's services, despite their obvious vulnerability. In the first three months of 2019, almost 14% of children did not know ten days before their release where they would be living. Most did not have education, training or employment arranged. While many agencies do work well together when a young person leaves custody, we have also heard how a lack of joined up work between some YOIs and children's services can result in young people leaving the secure estate and immediately returning to the dangerous environments and behaviour that led to their imprisonment in the first place.

In addition, these high reoffending rates amongst young offenders are hardly surprising given the paucity of opportunity for meaningful education and training and lack of intense therapeutic support. A child locked up at the age of 15, 16 or 17-years-old will miss a crucial period of their education.

**The relationship between social media and serious violence.** Social media can be one of the drivers of serious violence, and young people are being exposed to videos of violent acts and adverts for weapons which they would not legally be able to buy. Yet the tech companies who provide the apps that children and young people are spending an increasing amount of time using, are unaccountable and largely unregulated.

A recent report published by Crest Advisory<sup>66</sup> looked at the relationship between social media and serious violence, a relationship which has been under-valued in its importance until recently. The report sets out how the legal and regulatory environment for the use of social media by children is not fit for purpose and that social media platforms are not protecting children from exposure to violent content or to doing anything to tackle harmful patterns of use. Vulnerable young people are repeatedly participating in potentially harmful online spaces, and conditions are being created which can cause involvement in serious youth violence. It says that children with known vulnerabilities are more susceptible to accepting arguments for violence, yet their social media lives attract little scrutiny. Parents, carers, practitioners, and social media companies are not paying close enough attention to the use of social media by vulnerable children and are often failing to consider its impact.

The report proposes the roll out of 'online active bystander' training for children through PSHE lessons and the development of digital safer schools' teams led by police officers, to deter children from harmful uses of social media. It calls for a public information campaign offering advice on healthy and unhealthy patterns of social media use to help establish new social norms and updating the 'Working Together to Safeguard Children' guidance, with social media use

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<sup>66</sup> [Fixing Neverland \(crestadvisory.com\)](https://www.crestadvisory.com)

included as a risk factor. The report makes a powerful argument for expanding Serious Case Reviews into examining the social media accounts of victims of serious violence.

## Thematic Reports

The Commission on Young Lives has published four thematic reports<sup>67</sup> over the last 10 months. For each report, we took evidence from experts, practitioners, professionals working with children, families, and young people themselves. Our reports focused on the children's care system (published December 2021); support for families (published March 2022); the education system (published April 2022); and children's mental health services (published July 2022). There are of course many areas of public policy and practice that are negatively impacting on vulnerable children, and in some cases exposing them to greater risk, but we believe these are the areas where system failures are exposing too many vulnerable young people to harm and exploitation, and which are not providing the support many children need to thrive.

Each of our thematic reports have included our recommendations for reform. The following section of this final report provides condensed versions of our four reports, without including those recommendations. Our overall final recommendations follow on later in the report.

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<sup>67</sup> Note that the following shortened versions of our thematic reports include statistics which were the latest statistical release at the time of each thematic report's publication.

## Thematic Report 1

# Out of Harm's Way: A New Care System to Protect Vulnerable Children at Risk of Exploitation and Crime

While there are serious problems with the children's social care system, it is important to remember that most children who go into care are likely to have more positive outcomes than they would have had if they had not been removed from homes where they were unsafe. Many children growing up in care live in stable and loving environments, do well at school and have happy childhoods. It is those children who go into care, particularly those who enter the care system as teenagers, whose experiences are the opposite of that where much of our focus has been. Our first thematic report, published in December 2021, made the case for an ambitious response to the increasing number of vulnerable teenagers entering care or on the edge of care, setting out proposals to reduce the number at risk of exploitation, violence, and criminalisation.

The report set out how the current social children's social care system is not always serving vulnerable teenagers well. It is often not adequately identifying children and young people at risk and is confused and uncoordinated in its response to identified risk. When a teenager is taken into care the system is often ill-prepared and makes inappropriate decisions about the care they need. It is a terrible irony that a system that is supposed to be protecting children from harm, is in fact putting some vulnerable children in harm's way, increasing their risk of them becoming the victims of criminal or sexual exploitation. Some vulnerable and exploited teenagers are coming into care and then being placed in harm's way by using unregulated provision designed for supporting young people towards independence as a quick fix driven by a lack of suitable placements. Many are moved around the country, missing out on education, unable to form trusted relationships and not getting the therapeutic treatment they need to recover.

This dysfunctional system is making it easier for those who want to exploit young people to succeed.

With the average annual cost of each teenager in residential care now over £200,000 per year, not only are teenagers not getting the right support, but it is also costing the taxpayer vast amounts of money. This then reduces the amount of funds available to intervene early and prevent crisis. For too many – particularly BAME teenagers – the system is frequently failing to prevent teenagers in care becoming involved in the criminal justice system, which then further damages their future life chances and is again hugely costly. These teenagers deserve and need a better deal.

This report fed into the Independent Review of Children's Social Care as it moved towards its completion. With the publication of the Review earlier this year, it is now incumbent on Government to deliver on its recommendations and implement change. It cannot be kicked into the long grass without putting more children at risk, and the Government must not come back with the bare minimum.

## Children in the care system in England

In 2019, prior to the Covid pandemic, around 669,000 children were being helped through a formal national programme of support, some through the Supporting Families programme, the rest through various forms of children's social care. Around 128,000 children were receiving the most intensive forms of statutory support, such as being in care or through a child protection plan.<sup>68</sup> In England 151 local authorities provide children's services to about 400,000 children each year. The number of children entering the care system in the 12 months prior to 31 March

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<sup>68</sup> [Childhood vulnerability in England 2019 | Children's Commissioner for England \(childrenscommissioner.gov.uk\)](https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/childhood-vulnerability-in-england-2019/)

2021, was 28,440 (down 8% on the previous year).<sup>69</sup> However, the number ceasing to be in care reduced by 6% to just over 28,000, partly due to long-term delays in court proceedings made worse by Covid-19.<sup>70</sup> The result was that on 31 March 2021 there were 80,850 children in care in England, a 1% rise on the year before and the highest on record.<sup>71</sup>

7%

*Increase in referrals to children's social care services made between 2009/10 and 2019/20.*

4%

*Increase in the number of children deemed to be 'in need' between 2009/10 and 2019/20.*

129%

*Increase in Section 47 investigations (used to determine safeguarding action) between 2009/10 and 2019/20.*

32%

*Increase in child protection plans between 2009/10 and 2019/20.<sup>72</sup>*

The areas with the highest ratio (per 10,000 children under 18) entering care were Blackpool (210); NE Lincolnshire (179), Hartlepool, Middlesbrough, and Stoke on Trent (all 172).<sup>73</sup>

Perhaps the most significant shift in the care population is that it is getting older. Teenagers are now the largest and fastest growing age cohort of children in care. According to data analysis published by Nuffield Family Justice Observatory, the number of 10 to 17-year-olds subject to care proceedings rose by 95% between 2011/12 and 2019/20 (from 3,081 to 6,013 children). Increases in the oldest children coming into the system were particularly sharp, with the number of 15-year-olds growing by 150% and 16-year-olds by 285% during that time. A decade ago, adolescents constituted just 18% of all children in care proceedings in England but this had risen to 27% by 2019/20.<sup>74</sup>

In 2021, taking an overview, 56% entering care were male and 44% female.<sup>75</sup> In England there was an increase of 14% for looked after boys between 2015 and 2019, compared to an increase of 10% for girls. This difference is likely to have been driven in part at least by an increase in unaccompanied asylum-seeking children over this period.<sup>76</sup>

In 2020/21, there were 43,000 care leavers in England now aged 17-21, 62% of which were male.<sup>77</sup> Around 10,000 young people in England age out of the care system every year on their eighteenth birthday. However, in 2021, local authorities did not have information for one in four of care leavers aged 17, 4% of 18-year-olds and 7% of young people aged 18-21.<sup>78</sup> Increasing numbers of vulnerable young people 'drift' out the care system with no support or plans.

<sup>69</sup> Department of Education (18 November 2021). Children looked after in England including adoptions, Gov.UK.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Nuffield Family Justice Laboratory (October 2021). Older children and young people in care proceedings in England and Wales.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> NSPCC Statistical briefing: looked after children. March 2021.

<sup>77</sup> Op cit. DfE, 18 November 2021

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

## A care system that is not working for vulnerable teenagers

**Poor identification of children at risk of criminal exploitation and crime and an early response.** The role of the children's social care system is to protect children at risk of harm who would not develop otherwise. While it is performing this function for many children, consistent evidence shows that there are thousands of children with unmet needs coming to the attention of services late, while many remain invisible or do not get the help they need. Many teenagers at risk have unmet needs, and there are increasing numbers of late entrants at risk of sexual and criminal exploitation, and/or 'dropping out' of both family and care support systems, with a disproportionate number entering the criminal justice system. Local understanding of the numbers of young people at risk is poor and, according to the OCC, evidence suggested that only a quarter of safeguarding boards had an effective mechanism for identifying those children at risk in 2021. Good data and data sharing is needed and a clear mechanism to gather information on risk and need to inform a response.

**A confused and piecemeal response.** It is clear from our evidence gathering that agencies are often unclear about their roles in protecting teenagers at risk and their responsibilities to work together to do so resulting in poor decisions and major gaps in support when teenagers need help. In its annual review of 2021, the Child Safeguarding National Review Panel raises the urgency of addressing multi-agency working.<sup>79</sup> It highlighted weak information sharing, and communication and risk assessment which as it says, "has for decades impeded our ability to protect children and help families. In 2020 the panel's review of safeguarding children at risk of exploitation focused on 21 children from 17 areas who died or experienced serious harm.<sup>80</sup> It found:

- Of the 21 children, 15 were from a BAME background and all were male.
- Most of the children (and their families) were not known to children's social care before problems associated with exploitation surfaced.
- 17 of the children had been permanently excluded. The panel concluded: "if it is unavoidable then there needs to be immediate wrap-around support to compensate for the lack of structure, sense of belonging and rejection that exclusion from mainstream school can cause".
- There are critical moments in children's lives when a decisive response is necessary to make a difference to their long-term outcomes, including when they are excluded from school, when they are physically injured and when arrested.
- Moving children/whole families provides a breathing space and immediate safety but was not an effective medium- or longer-term strategy.
- At the local level, there was little information or working knowledge among safeguarding partnerships of what intervention strategies were being taken against the perpetrators of criminal exploitation. The panel said that this was in marked contrast with the dual approach taken to children who are sexually exploited.
- The National Referral Mechanism (NRM) is not well understood and is inconsistently used.
- An intensive risk management plan which includes control measures, within the context of a good relationship with the child and with parental support, can reduce risk.

**Inappropriate care solutions that often increase harm.** Relying primarily on family-based foster care designed for younger children, the system has failed to keep up with the needs of the growing profile of teenagers in care who are less likely to be able or want to live in normal family care. The reliance on a limited number of residential places where demand significantly outstrips supply has far ranging consequences that put many teenagers at increased risk, whilst also driving costs sky high. Many local authorities and charities have stopped running children's homes, often because of the costs and risks, although recently some councils have started to set

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<sup>79</sup> Child Safeguarding National Review Panel. Annual Review 2020.

<sup>80</sup> Child Safeguarding National Review Panel. (2020). It was Hard to Escape.

up their own local homes. However, there are around 2,400 children's homes in England and the number has grown over the last few years, particularly in the private sector, which now accounts for over 80% of the total.<sup>81</sup>

Despite this growth, there remains a chronic shortage of places for teenagers. Provision is also unevenly distributed around the country. These pressures combine to drive a range of dysfunctions in the so-called 'children's home market' including a shortage of places for children with the most complex needs and a static 'take it or leave it' placement offer from many providers. Whilst each local authority has a duty to take strategic action in relation to assessing and planning for the needs of children in care, it is apparent that this is not being adequately met in most areas. This includes a 'sufficiency duty' to assess the steps that secure, so far as reasonably practicable, sufficient accommodation within its area to meet the needs of children, and others who need accommodation within the local authority area.

The shortage of registered children's homes places has also driven a growing use of unregulated provision – establishments which provide accommodation and support but not full care and therefore do not meet the criteria of a children's home and are not required to register with Ofsted.

89%

*Increase in the number of children in care living in unregulated accommodation between the end of March 2010 and the end of March 2020, from 3,430 to 6,480.<sup>82</sup>*

6,050

*The number of children placed in unregulated placements in 2020/21 (down 7% on 2020 but up from 2018)*

There is widespread agreement that unregulated provision can be inappropriate, inadequate, and dangerous. An investigation by Sky News in February 2021 found that at least 86 local authorities were using unregulated accommodation and that some children were sent to live in tents or caravans, placed into hostels or even housed in barges on canals.<sup>83</sup> As well as being unfit and unsuitable accommodation, these placements can make already vulnerable young people more at risk of criminal and sexual exploitation. For example, in a report by BBC's Newsnight, Cambridgeshire and Hertfordshire Police voiced their concerns that some unregulated accommodation was well known to local criminals who targeted young people to exploit them.<sup>84</sup> Unsurprisingly, some of these children are scared for their own safety.

In addition to inadequate placements, teenagers are also disproportionately likely to be placed out of their local area and away from family, friends, and their local community, adding to risk. Under the Children Act 1989, accommodation provided by local authorities for children in care must be "within the local authority's area" unless this is "not reasonably practicable." There is no provision in legislation that prohibits a local authority from placing a child out of its area and these placements can be made to because of risks to the child in their home area. However, the Government has stated that they should be "a last resort, unless it is in the child's best

<sup>81</sup> Main findings: children's social care in England 2021 - GOV.UK ([www.gov.uk](http://www.gov.uk))

<sup>82</sup> David Foster, House of Commons Library, February 2021. Looked after children: out of area, unregulated and unregistered accommodation (England)

<sup>83</sup> <https://news.sky.com/story/10-000-children-in-care-were-sent-to-potentially-unsafe-places-to-live-including-caravans-tents-and-barges-1222322>

<sup>84</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-48300157>

interests".<sup>85</sup> When children are found to be involved in exploitation and at risk, families are sometimes moved around the country to get the child out of the gang area.

28%

*The percentage rise in children in care placed outside their home local authority between 2010 and 2020, rising from 37% of all placements to 41% over the period.<sup>86</sup>*

This raises concerns about:

- Problems with continuity of relationship with social workers and advocates.
- Being placed so far away from home can be traumatic for children and young people.
- The vulnerability of children living far away from home means that they are at greater risk of exploitation and going missing.
- Children can feel isolated and often cannot see loved ones enough.

The use of unregulated care and out of area placements links to that of children missing from care.

65,800

*Number of missing children in in 2019/20 in England and Wales according to the Missing Persons Unit (compared to 67,853 in 2018/19, a 3% decrease)<sup>87</sup>.*

12,430

*No of incidents of children being missing from care in 2020 (56% from secure units, children's homes and semi-independent living, 25% from foster care and 14% living independently.<sup>88</sup>*

Additional turmoil is often caused when young people who are placed out of area and have developed new support networks, only to then find they need to start again when they hit 18 and have to return to their home area.

The numbers of children aged 5-11 with multiple placement moves in 2018/19 were up 15% on 2016 levels compared to a population rise of 6.5%. Overall, amongst children aged 0-11, rates of multiple placement moves in a year were up 17% compared to a population rise of 10%.<sup>89</sup> This increase has been driven by rises amongst younger children looked after under full care orders where the rate of children with multiple placement moves is up 34% on 2016 levels, compared to a 17% rise in the numbers of these children in the care population. The sorts of moves they are experiencing are changing. For example, there has been a small but consistent increase in the numbers of children being moved across local authority boundaries as a placement move. The numbers of children whose initial placement was within their responsible authority who are moved out of area at least once during the year 2018/19 was up 15% on 2016 levels (up to 6,633 children) compared to a 9% rise in the population of children initially placed within area.<sup>90</sup> Multiple placements compound children's feelings of loss and instability. Being moved from one care setting to another reduces opportunities to develop bonds and exacerbates behavioural and

<sup>85</sup> <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2020-01-20/debates/FA9FE50A-3479-4E82-B09D-D1AF298FC671/Looked-AfterChildrenOut-Of-AreaPlacements%23debate-385404>

<sup>86</sup> *Op cit.* House of Commons Library (12 November 2021).

<sup>87</sup> UK Missing Persons Unit, Missing Persons Data Report 2019

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> OCC *Stability Report*. 2019.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

emotional difficulties.<sup>91</sup> This makes it more difficult for children to establish relationships with carers and contributes to further placement breakdown.<sup>92</sup>

Children who have many placements also fare worse than those who do not in terms of psychological, social and academic outcomes.<sup>93</sup> Some moves can be positive, particularly when a child is moving to a more stable situation and where they feel that their concerns have been listened to.<sup>94</sup> Additional problems can also occur when teenagers had been in care but returned home and where the relationships break down again. Each time this happens, the problems between teenagers and families and the risks facing young people can increase in severity.

**The criminalisation of children in care.** Several witnesses and evidence submissions highlighted how calls to police from care homes still risked both additional breakdown of trust and criminalisation. There are wider and more complex relationships between vulnerable teenagers going into care and/or being stair-cased through to the criminal justice system. Getting in trouble with the police is far more likely to be experienced by those who have been in care, are living in poverty, who have special educational needs, been excluded, suffered abuse, neglect and mental health problems, and these issues can be intergenerational.

6 x

*In 2016, children in care were six times more likely to be sanctioned for an offence than children in the general population.<sup>95</sup>*

15%

*In the year ending March 2014, 15% of children in children's homes received a caution or conviction. In the year ending March 2020, this proportion was reduced to 5%.*

Vulnerable Black children are disproportionately represented in the children's social care system, are spending longer periods in care, and are more likely than their peers to be subject to a trajectory where failures in prevention leads to exploitation, criminalization, and incarceration. The Lammy Review, published in 2017 provided extensive evidence of discrimination in the adult and youth justice systems and concluded that "...there is no single explanation for the disproportionate representation of BAME groups".<sup>96</sup>

<sup>91</sup> Schofield, G., & Beek, M. (2005). Risk and resilience in long-term foster-care. *British Journal of Social Work*, 35(8), 1283–1301

<sup>92</sup> Op cit Norgate et al.

<sup>93</sup> Ward H. (2009) *Patterns of Instability: moves within the English care system, their reasons, contexts and consequences*

<sup>94</sup> Sinclair I. et al. (2007). *The Pursuit of Permanence*.

<sup>95</sup> The Guardian (2016). Half of children in youth custody have been in care system, review finds

<sup>96</sup> The Lammy Review: An independent review into the treatment of, and outcomes for, Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic individuals in the Criminal Justice System 2017

## THEMATIC REPORT 2

### **A New Partnership with Families: Supporting families to keep teenagers safe from gangs, exploitation, and abuse**

Our second thematic report, published in March 2022, explored how a greater focus on strengthening families could help prevent children falling into crisis, and how many families can play a greater role in supporting children through crisis, from continued engagement to kinship care.

The report shows how there is much to be gained from supporting families, who are so often our greatest asset in protecting children and supporting them to thrive. Well-supported parents and families are more resilient to crisis and have more assets to draw on if things go wrong. Throughout our evidence-gathering we have heard why long-term support – sometimes intense – to strengthen families is vital, and that this is being delivered successfully in some areas. As Nigel Richardson, the former Director of Children’s Services for Leeds told us: *“The key ingredient towards making change like this happen is having a willingness to see ‘family’ as probably the most important but most forgotten, ignored, underfunded, unrecognised and underused utility of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century and then working to change that.”*

However, we have also heard how many families feel ignored by a system that is too obsessed with assessments and process. What was once envisaged as a system of identifying and responding to families’ needs is too often a system of judgements being ‘done to’ families with the majority of interventions being at the point of crisis. As one of our witnesses said, this is like having a health service with just ambulances and hospitals.

Where support does exist it is often uncoordinated, inconsistent, and highly variable between localities. The notable exceptions are the charity and community support networks and programmes which are trying to fill some of the gaps; working with families to avert disaster and ploughing support into helping young people and their families to flourish. Many do so outside the statutory system with little money and little capacity to scale up. However, they hold the key to how the system could change, and with it, the chances of so many young people.

Many of the parents and young people we have spoken with during our year-long evidence sessions have talked powerfully about the impact of lack of support in the early years. Others have identified the need for more targeted help when children started school, particularly when they had special educational needs and/or were at risk of dropping out of school or being excluded. The report demonstrates how some parents are struggling to get the help they need when things begin to get out of hand and/or when things reach crisis point.

Parents told us how shocked they were when they found a burner phone, or unexplained amounts of money, or knives in their children’s bedrooms. We heard how their children suddenly start behaving very differently, spending a lot of time with an unknown group of friends, or long and unpredictable periods of time away from home. Some go missing. The NSPCC reported that more children were being groomed online during lockdown.<sup>97</sup> While many parents remain unaware that their child is being targeted, some may notice changes in their mood, friendships, and device use, including spending more time online.

We were also shocked to hear how sometimes parents call the police and social services desperate for help, only to be told that this does not exist or to be given ineffective responses and/or contradictory advice. If children are excluded or out of school things can often get much worse, as they lose access to support from teachers and spend more time without structure and supervision. Some parents described having to become ‘instant experts’, trying to navigate

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<sup>97</sup> NSPCC (24 August 2021). “Record high number of recorded grooming crimes lead to calls for stronger online safety legislation.”

issues around grooming, exploitation and county lines and access services new to them. For families already struggling, this is more difficult; many have fewer resources and lower levels of confidence and trust in statutory services.

For most of the parents we spoke to it was evident that services are either not geared-up, or do not have the capacity to respond when problems develop. Sadly, the report found that for too many parents, the situation gets worse and that, while there are examples of good practice, there remains a dearth of effective, joined-up, family-focused support for teenagers at risk of extrafamilial harm. This can leave parents at a loss to know what to do, clutching for fragments of help where it exists, whilst often feeling powerless as bad situations become increasingly out of control. Where there is contact with services, this can be sporadic and functional, with each agency seeing the child through a different lens: involving the police if children are missing or where there are concerns about crime; the school if there are behaviour concerns; or social services if there is a referral. Most problems are interconnected, as are most effective solutions.

Many of these stresses are felt particularly acutely by Black, Brown and Minority Ethnic and vulnerable children. However, we recognise that these experiences can affect those from many different backgrounds, including middle-class families who have experienced the same fears and the same lack of meaningful early intervention or support when their child has become involved in county lines or serious violence. We were struck by how many middle class families told us that they had struggled with their child being involved in gangs or serious violence; whilst children with wider vulnerabilities are much more likely to be targeted by those that want to exploit children, many others can become involved.

## Vulnerable Families

Evidence submitted to the Commission by Camden Youth Taskforce, included a study of the 43 young people in Camden who received a caution or conviction between October 2015 and September 2016, and who reoffended in the subsequent 12 months. It found that 77% had experienced signs of deprivation, a significant proportion had experienced sustained family dysfunction, and over half had experienced parental or care-giver neglect.<sup>98</sup>

In 2019, 2.3m children were growing up in families where a parent had addiction, severe mental health conditions or there was domestic violence.<sup>99</sup> This included around 100,000 children where domestic abuse, parental drug and alcohol dependency, and severe mental health problems, were all present. Prior to the pandemic nearly 50,000 children (17% were over 16) were taken into care because of abuse or neglect at home and across a typical class of 30, six children are growing up at risk due to family circumstances. Whilst four children will have an identified special educational need, only one of them will have a special educational need statement or Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP).<sup>100</sup> Similarly, four children will have a mental health issue but only one of them will be accessing mental health services.

It is important to note that of the thousands of children in England growing up in contexts that leave them particularly vulnerable, most are not in care, do not receive adequate support or are not being helped at all.<sup>101</sup> In 2021 the House of Lords Public Services Committee also concluded that the number of vulnerable children “invisible” to services was likely to have increased during the pandemic.

**Poverty, Unstable Employment, and Racism.** There are around 4 million children living in poverty in the UK. The evidence is clear that growing up in poverty can have negative

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<sup>98</sup> Camden Council Youth Offending Service, Risk of Reoffending Cohort Strategic Analysis (April 2017).

<sup>99</sup> Office of the Children’s Commissioner (July 2019). *Childhood vulnerability in England 2019*.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>101</sup> OCC (4 July 2019). *Childhood vulnerability in England*. <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/report/childhood-vulnerability-in-england-2019/>

consequences for children’s wellbeing and future life prospects.<sup>102</sup> The Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) has estimated that almost half of these children (49%) were children living in lone parent families.



*Percentage of children living in Black, Brown and Minority Ethnic families are living in poverty.<sup>103</sup>*



*Percentage of children growing up in poverty living in a household where at least one person works.<sup>104</sup>*



*Percentage of children living in families with three or more children living in poverty.<sup>105</sup>*

Child poverty has a disproportionate impact on certain ethnic communities in the UK.<sup>106</sup> One reason for this is the consistent denial about the existence of structural racism and the impacts it has from cradle to grave. A study published in the first week of 2022 found that more than half of Black children in the UK are now growing up in poverty; rising from 42% in 2010/11 to 53% in 2019/20.<sup>107</sup> While this pre-pandemic data is the most recently available, analyses of the economic effects of lockdown suggest that this will have become worse since March 2020. During the pandemic, there was a decrease in the employment rate, and increases in economic inactivity and unemployment, particularly affecting those on zero-hours contracts, in insecure employment, and sectors such as retail. Our discussions with families in Oldham showed how these changes have had a severe impact on many families’ ability to find work. For example, the number of people claiming Universal Credit in the UK more than doubled since the beginning of the pandemic with around 620,000 families with children having started claiming the benefit since the start of the pandemic, marking a 51% increase. Two-thirds of the families now receiving Universal Credit are single-parent families.<sup>108</sup>

Falling behind financially increases strain on the whole family and replacing lost income during the pandemic has been a constant struggle as families try to cope with increased costs. Practitioners reported seeing growing concerns around the cost of living. One told us: *“The ‘heat or eat’ question has never been as prominent as it is now. About half of the families we see are working, including those using the foodbank.”*

**Poor Housing.** There were 96,600 households in temporary accommodation at the end of June 2021, around 63% of these included dependent children.<sup>109</sup> There were 1,400 families with dependent children placed in B&B-style accommodation at the end of June 2021.<sup>110</sup> The link between poor housing and the adverse impacts on children and family life is well established and was powerfully highlighted by the evidence we heard. For example, one family with four children we talked to had spent the whole of lockdown in a one-bedroom flat – the children sleeping in the

<sup>102</sup> HM Government (June 2014) Child Poverty Strategy 2014-17

<sup>103</sup> CPAG (updated March 2021) Child Poverty Facts and Figures.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>106</sup> ONS (February 2020). *Child poverty and education outcomes by ethnicity.*

<sup>107</sup> “More than half of UK’s black children live in poverty analysis shows”. *The Guardian*. 2 January 2022.

<sup>108</sup> “[Number of universal credit claimants doubles since start of pandemic to 6 million, figures show](#)” (23 February 2021).

*Independent*

<sup>109</sup> Department of Levelling Up and Communities (October 2021). Statutory Homelessness Statistics April to June 2021: England.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid*

bed and the parents in the living room, taking it in turns to work and sleep. Children on one particularly poor housing estate in south London had been scared to go out since a neighbour had been found threatening passers-by with a knife. A man on the same estate had ended his life by jumping from the roof of the flats, landing in the children's play area.

**Pressures on Mental Health.** One in six children are now likely to have a mental health condition, with consistent evidence showing that mental health has deteriorated during the pandemic.<sup>111</sup> Previous research has shown that children from disadvantaged backgrounds are two to three times more likely to develop mental health problems than their peers who are more socioeconomically advantaged.<sup>112</sup>

An under-reported impact of the pandemic is the bereavement experienced by children and their loss(es) of primary care givers. Between March 2020 and April 2021 more than 12,000 children in the UK were orphaned or lost their primary care giver.<sup>113</sup> Over 50,000 children also had a parent, guardian or carer die from other causes over the last 20 months.<sup>114</sup> ONS analysis shows that rate of death involving Covid-19 was highest for the Black African group (3.7 times greater than for the White British group for males, and 2.6 greater for females), followed by Bangladeshi (3.0 for males, 1.9 for females), Black Caribbean (2.7 for males, 1.8 for females) and Pakistani (2.2 for males, 2.0 for females) ethnic groups.<sup>115</sup>

**Family Structures.** All the evidence shows that a key foundation for life is a secure attachment to at least one stable relationship with an adult, and that children benefit from the active engagement and involvement of both their parents. There are around 1.8m single parents, making up a quarter of families with dependent children, and there has been a long and raging debate about the impact on children of single parenthood, and more particularly, the benefits of having active, involved fathers during childhood and adolescence. Although the absence of fathers is not an isolated risk factor – for example, single parents are more likely to face poverty – there is evidence that positive relationships with their birth fathers brings benefits to children. It is worth emphasising that having an absent father or indeed mother does not in itself lead to increased vulnerability. A father's involvement in a child's care can help reduce a number of negative outcomes for children in terms of emotional and behavioural problems and can also help improve children's cognitive development. The father's involvement in care has also been linked to positive emotional and well-being outcomes in children.

One debate that emanates from 'absent fatherhood' is the role of Black fathers. In its review of research, the Fatherhood Institute found that Black and Black British fathers were twice as likely as white British fathers to live apart from their children.<sup>116</sup> It found substantial social class differences, and that the main reasons for non-resident fatherhood in Black and Mixed Heritage families are the same as those found in white families, including low socio-economic status, unemployment, and low education. The research showed that living apart from children did not mean fathers were 'absent' and that many mothers were in a close relationship with their babies' fathers. Indeed, a range of research points to the 'myth' of absent Black fatherhood,<sup>117</sup> again showing that factors surrounding socioeconomic status, unemployment and low education have a more important role to play than either absent fathers or absent Black fathers. This evidence is important given many of the inaccurate and racial stereotypes that are attached to this group.

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<sup>111</sup> NHS Digital (September 2020). *Mental Health of Children and Young People in England 2021*.

<sup>112</sup> Reiss, F., Meyrose, A. K., Otto, C., Lampert, T., Klasen, F., & Ravens-Sieberer, U. (2019). Socioeconomic status, stressful life situations and mental health problems in children and adolescents: Results of the German BELLA cohort-study. *PLoS one*, 14(3), e0213700. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0213700>

<sup>113</sup> (Pembrokeshire bereavement charity supports Child Grief Awareness Week | *Western Telegraph*).

<sup>114</sup> (Charities call for a renewed focus on children who have lost a parent during Covid-19 | *Nursery World*).

<sup>115</sup> ONS Updating ethnic contrasts in deaths involving the coronavirus (COVID-19), England: 24 January 2020 to 31 March 2021

<sup>116</sup> The Fatherhood Institute (2010). <http://www.fatherhoodinstitute.org/2010/fatherhood-institute-research-summary-african-caribbean-fathers/>

<sup>117</sup> Coles, R (2009). The myth of the missing Black father.

## What Families Told Us

The conversations we have had with families where there have been problems with children becoming involved with serious violence or the victims of exploitation, suggest that many parents feel ignored and abandoned at a time of crisis, and find a paucity of support until problems become more acute. The experience of parents told a consistent tale of missed opportunities, unmet need, and a confused tangle of services. When there is contact with services, families say that they are too-often met with a conveyor belt of assessments, churn of professionals and early closure of cases. Large gaps in service provision compound the fact that some groups are particularly poorly served, including children at risk of grooming, exploitation, and criminalisation.

Similarly, high thresholds for support, fuelled by a lack of adequate funding and a lack of knowledge of what services are available, compound the problem. The result is that the patchwork of services that do exist are over-subscribed and lack coherence. Families repeatedly described meeting a brick wall when they asked for help. When help was forthcoming, however welcome, this often took the form of a short-term intervention that did not tackle underlying problems.

Being passed from pillar to post with the hope of a short-term fix offered little hope to the families we talked to who are facing deep-seated challenges. In fact, for some, this only deepened their existing distrust of statutory services. There is a strong sense in many communities that statutory services and government programmes are neither available nor relevant to them. In fact, many did not know of any statutory or local authority help in their area. For so many families struggling to get by, the intervention of the state seemed to only symbolise more problems rather than less. This includes a sense of being judged as inadequate, being investigated, assessed and ultimately, having the prospect of having their children taken away. Where positive family-focused programmes are in place, we found these factors are significantly reduced. When families did talk about getting 'real' and lasting help it was very often from local community or specialist charities.

What emerged is the vital importance of building lasting relationships capable of understanding families and their situations, providing long-term support rather than closing cases, and of approaches that worked in partnership *with* families to find solutions rather than 'doing to' them. As Sharon Lines of the Oasis Hub in Grimsby, who sits on our practitioner panel, said: *"Families come to the Hub for a range of issues and we deal with whatever problem arises, whether this is domestic abuse, substance misuse, behaviour or just the stresses of life. Families who are struggling told us it is long-term relationship-based support that makes a difference."*

Our witness from SPACE argued that whereas 10 years ago county lines almost entirely involved children who were in care or whose parents were vulnerable, it now involves children from a range of backgrounds.

Listening to parents' experiences, we had a sense of the powerlessness they often feel. They described long periods of 'waiting to hear' (good or bad news or their teenager returning home) interspersed with frenetic activity as they rapidly try to work out what can be done, trying to communicate with their child, the police, and other services, while experiencing disrupted sleep, high levels of anxiety and negative impacts on relationships. Some had people they can talk to but, for others, their sense of shame and guilt, sometimes exacerbated by professional assumptions about their adequacy as a parent, meant they did not reach out to others for fear of further judgement.

However, some have more internal resources (for example, self-confidence) and external resources (for example, money) than others. We spoke to one mother who – when the county lines operation that her son was involved in found out where he lived – could afford to pay off his 'debts'. 'A' from Action Isleworth Mothers said that some of the mothers she works with – particularly victims of domestic abuse – suffered from low self-esteem making it harder to feel

they had agency in protecting their children. Income and asset poverty as well as parental vulnerabilities can drive risk and add pressures on families.

## Supporting Families Throughout Childhood

**The Early Years.** There is a strong body of research to show that young children who are speaking and communicating well, who are curious and exploring the world, and who can make sense of numbers do better later in life. We also know that the educational attainment gaps between richer and poorer teenagers are already present at a very young age, with low-income children on average over a year behind their peers at school entry.<sup>118</sup> Only 57% of children from deprived backgrounds achieve all their learning goals at five compared to 74% of other children.<sup>119</sup> Research has shown that children with poor vocabulary skills are twice as likely to be unemployed when they grow up,<sup>120</sup> and over 60% of children in Young Offender Institutions have communication difficulties.

Children with poorer socio-emotional skills at age 10 are more likely to experience unemployment and to have a criminal conviction by the time they are adults.<sup>121</sup> Long-term health outcomes have also been connected to these early skills, with children's socio-emotional skills at five years of age often predictive of a likelihood of smoking and obesity in adolescence.<sup>122</sup>

Although much of the research focuses on the 'skills' of managing emotions, deferring gratification, and showing an ability to concentrate, there is also evidence that more broadly, early childhood wellbeing is closely related to later outcomes with significant effects on income, wages, employment, social mobility, and relationship choices. 13% of children beginning school have failed to meet half of their expected development indicators on the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile.<sup>123</sup> On average, 40% of the overall development gap between disadvantaged 16-year-olds and their peers has already emerged by age five.<sup>124</sup>

More than one in five of all children in our most deprived communities start school so far behind that they will struggle to ever catch up. Children who are this far behind in the early years are also more likely to be excluded from school or involved with social services by age 11.<sup>125</sup>

**Children with SEND.** Children with special education needs are more likely to be excluded from school. In 2018/19 they accounted for 44% of permanent exclusions overall, as well as 82% of permanent exclusions from primary schools.<sup>126</sup> This is twice the rate for children with an EHCP. Children with special education needs have markedly worse educational attainment than their peers across all headline measures; those with additional vulnerabilities struggle even more.



*Percentage of children receiving special education needs support and who have a social worker.*<sup>127</sup>

**Support Through Transition and Towards Adulthood.** Young people and parents often say how the move from primary to secondary school was the time when problems escalated. Moving from the small, intimate primary school, where there are strong links to families and the

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>119</sup> UK Parliament (2021). Giving Every Baby the Best Start in Life - Hansard

<sup>120</sup> I Can – Help Children Communicate (2021). *Understanding Developmental Language Disorder.*

<sup>121</sup> Early Intervention Foundation 920150. *Social And Emotional Skills In Childhood and their Long- Term Effects On Adult Life: A review for the Early Intervention Foundation.*

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>123</sup> Education Policy Institute (July 2019). *Education in England: Annual Report 2019.*

<sup>124</sup> Education Policy Institute (2016). *Divergent Pathway: the disadvantage gap, accountability and the pupil premium.*

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>126</sup> DfE (30 July 2020) <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/permanent-and-fixed-period-exclusions-in-england-2018-to-2019>

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*

community, to a larger secondary and growing independence can be overwhelming. The size and scale of the new school can increase pressure as children struggle to find their own identity, develop social skills, and make friends. Children talk of the pressure to be popular and fit in. This is often amplified by social media and its own sense of success. Some children, especially those with special education needs, struggle with the growing requirement for independence and the busy school timetable.

The transition to secondary school can often escalate difficulties and be a trigger to greater risks. Many parents told us how they worked tirelessly to find ways of keeping their children safe and in school.

Parents of children with special education needs talked about becoming experts in assessment criteria, processes, and entitlements to secure support. Some struggled to get that support for their children and found that a combination of daily concerned phone calls from the school, and their child's growing level of distress, means that taking their children out of school to be educated at home was the only option.

Navigating the system of support for children can be overwhelming for any family and for those already struggling, it can feel almost impossible. Supporting families with the formal and informal support they need to help their children stay safe and build their own resilience, is as vital as children approach adolescence as it is when they are first born.

## **Delivering Support for Young People and Their Families**

Some children are falling into crisis who would not do so if their families had received help. Justice Keehan, a High Court judge in the Family Division, was asked by the president of the family court to review the family justice system for those in care proceedings. He estimated that about a third of cases that come to court should have been dealt with through properly resourced social work, rather than a legal case. This is nearly 27,000 children in the care system who, with the right support, may not have needed to be there.<sup>128</sup> Behind all of this lies the reality of a decade of reduction in funding for early intervention.

However, there are signs of an emerging renewed interest in family support nationally. Whilst still very much in their infancy, the development of Family Hubs is encouraging. The extension of funding for the Supporting Families Programme is also a positive step. Yet this is a low bar. There is no getting away from the reduction in funding for early intervention over the last decade and, with local authorities strapped for cash, many are the first to say that Supporting Families is now their main and sometimes only way of offering early support.

**Family Hubs and children's centres.** Family Hubs and children's centres are the system-wide model of providing whole-family, joined up, family support services. When delivered as a full service they deliver these family support services from pregnancy, through the child's early years and later childhood, and into early adulthood until they reach the age of 19 (or up to 25 for young people with special educational needs and disabilities). They aim to make a positive difference to parents, carers and their children, through providing a mix of physical and virtual spaces, as well as home visits for families to easily access non-judgemental support for the challenges they may be facing. They should be there to provide a universal 'front door' to families, offering a one-stop shop of services to meet their social care, education, mental health and physical health needs. New investment in Family Hubs offers an opportunity to both provide specialist services and support for vulnerable teenagers and their families, and co-ordinate the work of local partners and agencies for this group of children. The 0–19 model has been delivered by some charities and local authorities from the outset of children's centres, but it is only now that it is being incentivised as core business. This is a new development for most centres.

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<sup>128</sup> Polly Curtis: *Behind Closed Doors*. (Little Brown Group 2022).

For many local areas, the move towards Family Hubs is one that is built on their experience in delivering children's centres. Local authorities, such as Doncaster, moved to a Family Hub model over recent years. More recently, local authorities have been invited to bid for one-off transformation funds to establish a Family Hub approach across their locality. 12 local authorities will share this £34m fund with a further £82 million committed in the last spending review to establish Family Hubs in 75 local authorities over the next three years. This is a far cry from the £1.8bn per year investment in Sure Start children's centres at their peak, though these commitments present a welcome opportunity and have the potential to play an important role in developing and delivering better joined up support for older children.

However, unlike the Family Hub start for life offer, there is no set requirement for a teenage and family package in Family Hubs. This is something that our evidence suggests needs to change.

**Supporting Families Programme.** Now in its second decade, the Supporting Families Programme remains the largest national intervention to support families with multiple disadvantages through a whole-family, keyworker approach. The Youth Endowment Fund is working with the Supporting Families team to gain insight into how interventions are delivered by local areas and their partners. This should provide helpful insights to the work of the Supporting Families Programme and local authorities and their partners more generally.

It takes a whole-family approach and is delivered through a trusted key worker, allowing locally available services and specialist support to be drawn together for the family in a coordinated way. It works with families with multiple disadvantages. The most recent 2015-2020 evaluation of its work showed the programme was successful in reducing the proportion of children in care, with 2.5% of the comparison group having children in care compared to 1.5% of the programme group; a 32% difference for this cohort at 19-24 months after joining the programme.<sup>129</sup> Additionally, adults receiving custodial sentences fell from 1.6% to 1.2% (25% decrease); young people receiving custodial sentences fell from 0.8% to 0.5% (38% decrease) and adults claiming Jobseeker's Allowance fell by 11%. Over 80% said their key worker was helpful, with this increasing to 91% for those who saw their key worker every week. A cost benefit analysis showed the programme provides £2.28 of savings for every pound invested.<sup>130</sup>

The **Family Safeguarding** work pioneered in Hertfordshire and extended across a number of local authorities has resulted in statistically significant reductions in looked after children and/or Child Protection Plans following its introduction.<sup>131</sup> The **Leeds Family Valued** programme has similarly been taken up by several authorities, supported by DfE funding with widely recognised positive results. This family focused approach, utilising the potential support from extended families through family group conferences has seen positive results from the number of children going into care to youth justice. Other family-focused programmes funded through the DfE Innovation Programme over recent years have also shown promise. The 'Bradford B Positive Pathways Project' has incorporated the well-respected North Yorkshire 'No Wrong Door' approach with the Mockingbird model of fostering support to make support available to children in care or on the edge of care, and to foster families. The aim is to, where possible, return children safely back home and to prevent entry into care in the first place.

**Contextual Safeguarding, Hackney.** The project aims to redesign the safeguarding system to address risk or harm experienced by adolescents outside the family home, including child sexual and criminal exploitation, peer-on-peer abuse, serious youth violence, and gang affiliation. Drawing on Contextual Safeguarding Theory, it has worked to create systems that can effectively address these risks, recognising that to do so effectively requires overcoming more siloed traditions of working in different agencies, as well as 'significant cultural shifts towards a more

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<sup>129</sup> Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, 2019

<sup>130</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/supporting-families-programme-funding-allocations-by-local-authority-area-2022-2023>

<sup>131</sup> Marmot M. et al (2020) *Health Equity in England: The Marmot Review 10 years on*. The Health Foundation.

welfare-oriented response to young people, some of whom commit offences, across interagency systems', including criminal justice, the police, health and education. The project also works to build partnerships with community stakeholders including transport providers, retailers, residents' associations, recreation services and youth workers. Agencies can now make single referrals for peer groups, as well as schools or neighbourhood locations where it is believed that they facilitate extra-familial risk. A multi-agency panel and 'Context Safeguarding Conferences' can now also agree to take action in relation to these groups and places, as well as individual young people.

**Support through transition.** STARS (School Transition and Reach Service) is a structured intensive family and community-based intervention. The project was developed to support those children and their families who are likely to struggle with transitions, and where there has been early identification of risk. Programmes focus on risk factors that could increase the potential of child exploitation including sexual, criminal, gang affiliation and radicalisation, and the impact and risks of domestic abuse. The aim is to increase protective factors that support children and young people and make them resilient, such as positive engagement in community and education, high self-esteem, ability to manage emotions, supportive family, and peer relationships.

**ShiftUK in Greenwich** is working closely with 20 young people at risk of becoming involved in the criminal justice system, and their families. Shift 'Guides' are selected because of their ability – rather than their professional title – to work empathetically with young people. The team includes social workers, residential care home workers, youth workers and those with lived experience. The Guide works closely with the young person and their family for around 18 months, helping to build relationships and skills, to navigate local services and support teenagers to build confidence, attend and progress in school and develop relationships. The emphasis is on hope and aspiration; doing whatever it takes to help families progress and support themselves. Relationship-building is at the core of their model. This means 'going with the flow' with the family, being flexible and informal. As a result, families are more relaxed and accepting of support. A case study highlighting ShiftUK's work appears at the beginning of this report.

**Oasis Community Hubs** work alongside the Oasis schools to build a strong, safe, and resilient community. They work holistically with schools, partners, and residents. Programmes enable young people and families to develop the skills and character to be more independent and actively involve community members in designing, delivering and leading activities. Activities include youth clubs, NEET interventions, mentoring and vulnerable family support, as well as holiday activities, community kitchen, farm and growing projects and a financial inclusion project.

## Priorities for Reform

Our evidence sessions suggest the key priority areas for delivering family support for young people at risk of violence, exploitation and becoming involved in the criminal justice system are:

- **Changing the culture of support.** We have learned through Supporting Families that it is essential to not address a young person's issue (for example, persistent low attendance) in isolation. A whole-family approach is needed to ensure the family is worked with and supported as a unit, given issues impact a family as a collective. The whole-family approach ensures that practitioners can understand the root cause of behaviour and find out what family factors could be driving it. This promotes a culture of not treating the symptoms of an issue but addressing the underlying cause to stop the issue re-emerging. Adopting a whole-family approach to support in local areas will help practitioners dig deeper into the drivers that lead children to be vulnerable to gangs, crime and exploitation. In addition, young people often need an independent relationship with a skilled and trusted professional focused on their needs within the context of a whole family, systemic approach. This is essential to maintain sight of issues affecting both child and parent(s).

- **Strengthening youth support.** The role of the community is integral in ensuring young people are deterred from crime. Considering the role of contextual safeguarding and creating safe spaces for children outside of school is essential to tackling routes into crime. There needs to be a major expansion of youth provision and added coherency and join up between these community-based services if they are to work effectively. We should consider how to best-utilise existing services to strengthen the coordination and cohesion of youth support on the ground.
- **Trauma-informed working.** Schools and services working with young people would benefit from an increased awareness of trauma-informed working and how this can be embedded in practice to better support young people and their families. Trauma-informed working recognises families where they may be vulnerable as both victims or preparators of crime and ensures that support is given with an enhanced awareness and understanding of the impacts of trauma on behaviour, communication, and mental health. Access to evidence-based trauma recovery and family therapeutic services is essential for families whose issues are entrenched and complex. While tight budgets may be a barrier to local areas investing in trauma-informed training for practitioners, we should aim to promote an awareness of the benefits of moving towards this bespoke style of support, particularly in cases of youth crime/violence. This should be part of an overall practice framework in a local area, bringing together the tools and strategies practitioners across the multi-agency workforce use to support young people and families.
- **Multi-agency working.** Services that work around families in need – particularly education, social care, crime/police, housing, and welfare – all need to be working more closely together to recognise and support children at risk. The more public services can share data on families in need, the more we can prevent children falling through the gaps. This will be particularly important for the role of schools in monitoring attendance, as lowered attendance rates and exclusion are often warning signs of deeper issues, such as a child being involved in crime. We need to go further to ensure relevant services can spot red flags early, before issues escalate.
- **Learning from Sure Start Children’s Centres.** Early evidence from the Sure Start children’s centre programme showed a positive improvement in parent and child relationships and an improvement in children’s early self-regulation, two aspects that are central to the positive outcomes for teenagers and their families. An evaluation by the Institute of Fiscal Studies showed a significant reduction in hospitalisations of children attending persisting into the teenage years with an 8% reduction in hospitalisation of 11 to 15-year-olds each year. The model combining universal services with an area-based focus on disadvantaged neighbourhoods was seen by the IFS as providing important lessons for existing services (such as Family Hubs) and should inform the government’s approach to the recommendations in the recent Leadsom Report on the first 1,001 days of life.
- **Kinship Care.** Stability and support from their family and community are the most important ingredients in young people making a successful transition to adulthood.<sup>132</sup> Sometimes this is not possible but is more likely to happen if children are placed in kinship care arrangements, which in themselves can offer some of the protective factors that reduce risk to children. In 2017, the Family Rights Group and Nuffield led Care Crisis Review concluded that family and friends were a significant untapped resource for some children in, and on the edge of care.<sup>133</sup> The Family Rights Group supports local authorities to implement a Lifelong Links programme, bringing a network of family and friends together in a family group conference to make a plan with and for the child, which the local authority supports to ensure these relationships continue to grow. By offering Lifelong Links soon after a young person enters care, the aim is to ensure those social networks can be available for them in care, providing

<sup>132</sup> Nuffield Foundation (2013) *Making not Breaking: Building Relationships with Our Most Vulnerable Children*.

<sup>133</sup> Ryan M. and Tunnard J. *Care Crisis Review: Options for Change*, on behalf of the Family Rights Group review team (June 2018). <https://frg.org.uk/product/the-care-crisis-review-options-for-change/>

stability during their childhood and support as they become adults. The charity is now developing the model in prison.

In New Zealand kinship care is the norm. Family group conferences, increasingly used in the UK, originated in New Zealand as a response to the high levels of children from indigenous communities being taken into (white) institutional care. The process draws on families' networks that bring wider knowledge about the familial and community context of the child, identifying potential friends or family carers and putting contingency plans in place. This process also allowed for more shared care arrangements.

## THEMATIC REPORT 3

# All Together Now - Inclusion not exclusion: supporting all young people to succeed in school

The Commission on Young Lives' third thematic report looked at the education system. It sets out proposals for how schools, as an integrated part of their local community, can better divert teenagers away from crime and exploitation and enable them to thrive. It also highlights how some of the failures in the current system are putting thousands of children at greater risk not only of low attainment but also serious violence, grooming and harm.

It starts with a very simple belief: every child has the right to a good education and argues that positive outcomes for every child must be at the heart of any successful education system. It also speaks to the kind of inclusive society we should aspire to be, where everyone has a chance to succeed and is supported to do so. A good school gives options and opportunities for children to flourish. It can be a place of security and safety and should be one of the cornerstones of a strong local community.

It also argues that we should judge our education system by what it provides to those children who need extra help or who are vulnerable: the children with Special Educational Needs, the children who are already struggling with communication or behavioural issues when they start school, the children whose families perhaps always don't see the value of education, the children who feel they don't fit in, the children with mental health problems, the children growing up in poverty, children from certain Black and minority ethnic backgrounds, or those children who are faced with serious difficulties at home.

In many schools, these children are cherished and valued, they are supported and looked after. But in others, they are sometimes viewed as a problem that can be pushed on to someone else to deal with, or a group that can be largely ignored by placing them outside the mainstream. The report looks at some of the tactics some schools have employed when doing this: managed moves, encouragement into 'home education', off-rolling or exclusion, and proposes a new approach to enable our young people to succeed.

## Out of School: Falling Through the Gaps

Every year, tens of thousands of children in England are either not in school, or not receiving the support they need to thrive in school. While too many of these children will leave the education system without good qualifications, most will not become involved in serious violence or crime. However, there will be some who fall through gaps in the education system putting them at greater risk of coming into harms' way. At the same time, as the 2019 inquiry by ASCL revealed, there is also a 'forgotten third'<sup>134</sup> of children; around 30% of sixteen-year-olds, who fail to secure a standard pass (Grade 4) in each of English and maths, severely limiting their future life chances.

**Exclusions.** There is a persistent problem with children who are persistently or permanently excluded from school becoming at greater risk of harm, exploitation or leaving education without basic qualifications.

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<sup>134</sup> [The-Forgotten-Third-A-rapid-review-of-the-evidence.pdf \(ascl.org.uk\)](https://www.ascl.org.uk/the-forgotten-third-a-rapid-review-of-the-evidence.pdf)

55%

*The rise in the number of permanent exclusions of children between 2010/11 and 2017/18 (reaching 7,894).<sup>135</sup>*

20%

*The rise of permanent exclusions of children in primary schools in the autumn term of 2019.<sup>136</sup>*

Data prior to Covid suggested that exclusions in England rose by 5% in the autumn of 2019 compared to the same period the previous year. They also increased by 20% in primary schools and by 3% in secondary schools, while they remained stable in special schools. Suspensions also increased by 14% in the autumn of 2019 with the largest increase at primary level (21%) and a further 12% at secondary level<sup>137</sup>. Within these figures we find that children with SEND, certain ethnic minority groups, those from poorer backgrounds and those in care are disproportionately excluded.

#### **Excluded children are:**

- x 2 more likely to be in the care of the state
- x 4 more likely to be excluded if you are Black Caribbean boy than a white boy
- x 4 more likely to have grown up in poverty
- x 7 more likely to have a special educational need
- x 10 more likely to suffer recognised mental health problems<sup>138</sup>
- 86% of young men in YOIs have been excluded from school at some point<sup>139</sup>
- 63% had been temporarily excluded while at school
- 42% had been permanently excluded
- 60% of boys subject to court orders have been excluded from education

However, evidence suggests that it is not only the characteristic of the child that is a factor. It is also the schools themselves. Around 88% of exclusions take place in around 10% of schools.<sup>140</sup>

Boys also have more than three times the number of permanent exclusions, with 3,900 exclusions, at a rate of 0.09, compared to 1,200 for girls (0.02). The permanent exclusion rate for pupils eligible for Free School Meals is 0.16, compared to 0.04 for those not eligible and the suspension rate is also higher at 9.34 for pupils eligible for FSM, compared to 2.58 for those not eligible. The highest rates are amongst those with a primary type of need recorded as social, emotional, and mental health, at 0.61 for exclusions and 33.04 for suspensions.<sup>141</sup>

For temporary exclusion rates the figures are similar. The highest temporary exclusion rates were for White Gypsy and Roma pupils (21.26%, or 2,126 exclusions per 10,000 pupils) and

<sup>135</sup> Partridge L. et al. (March 2020). [Pinball Kids: Preventing School Exclusions](#). RSA.

<sup>136</sup> Department of Education (29 July 2021). [Permanent Exclusions and Suspensions in England](#).

<sup>137</sup> [Permanent exclusions up 5% before Covid school closures | Tes Magazine](#)

<sup>138</sup> (Institute for Public Policy Research (October 2017). [MAKING THE DIFFERENCE BREAKING THE LINK BETWEEN SCHOOL EXCLUSION AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION](#). Kiran Gill, with Harry Quilter-Pinner and Danny Swift)

<sup>139</sup> [Transforming Youth Custody \(justice.gov.uk\)](#)

<sup>140</sup> [Excluded teens are often the most vulnerable - and they're falling through the gap | Children's Commissioner for England \(childrenscommissioner.gov.uk\)](#).

<sup>141</sup> *ibid*

Traveller of Irish Heritage pupils (14.63%, or 1,463 per 10,000 pupils); the temporary exclusion rate for White British pupils was 6.01%, or 601 per 10,000 pupils. In years covered by the data, pupils from Black and Mixed backgrounds consistently had the highest rates out of all aggregated ethnic groups. Whilst in secondary schools, White Gypsy and Roma pupils had the highest temporary exclusion rates with 58.79% (equivalent to 5,879 exclusions per 10,000 pupils). This compared with 17.5% for Black Caribbean students, 21.51% for mixed White/Black Caribbean and 11.58% for white students.<sup>142</sup>

**Persistent Absence.** Over recent years, there has been a particularly worrying increase in pupil absence, compounded by the Covid pandemic. Statistics published in March 2022 show that the percentage of persistent absentees (10% or more missed) stood at 12.1%, up from 10.8% in 2018/19, whilst persistent absence of more than 50% has more than doubled since 2015/16. In relation to Covid, this means that some 270 million in-person school days were missed. In the Autumn term of 2020, pupils were recorded as not attending 7% of possible school sessions due to circumstances relating to coronavirus, the equivalent of over 33 million days. The numbers increased in Spring term of 2021 when 57.5% of sessions were recorded as not attending due to circumstances relating to coronavirus. This is the equivalent of almost 219 million days. The statistics reinforce that those most at risk of vulnerability prior to Covid were often hit hardest by the realities of Covid. Lost learning was felt most keenly by those at the sharp end of the pandemic, and the last 2 years have put increased strain on many of the children and families who are least likely to be able to cope with it.

This level of lost learning is unprecedented in modern times and is likely to have hit the most vulnerable and disadvantaged the hardest. 4.6% of sessions in the 2020/21 academic year were missed due to absence, which represents over 58 million days on top of 270 million days where pupils were not attending in circumstances related to coronavirus. For those with SEN support, the overall rate for 2020/21 was 6.5%. This compares to 3.9% over the full year for pupils with no SEN. The overall absence rate for pupils eligible for FSM was 7.8% across the full year, more than double the rate for pupils who were not eligible for FSM at 3.7%.<sup>143</sup>

The Centre for Social Justice estimated in January 2022 that over 100,000 children in England are absent from the classroom and that in about half of local authorities at least 500 children are regularly missing class.<sup>144</sup>

Analysis in 2016 found that 90% of young offenders sentenced to custody had a previous record of being persistently absent, with 59% reporting they had regularly truanted. Persistent absence inevitably also impacts on a child's chances of achieving key attainment outcomes at the end of KS2 and KS4.

**SEND.** In 2019, just 26.7% of children with SEN passed English and Maths GCSEs compared to 71% of children without SEN.<sup>145</sup> Furthermore, 4 in 5 children (81%) in Alternative Provision (AP) have identified SEND – usually social, emotional and mental health needs<sup>146</sup> and only 4 in 10 (41%) teachers agree that there is appropriate training in place for all teachers in supporting pupils with SEN. Children with SEN generally have poorer outcomes, including those with less severe needs. This is especially true of those who are also vulnerable in other ways (those who have a social worker and/or are receiving free school meals). The Government's recent Green Paper on SEN and alternative provision states that: '*As young people with SEN move into*

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<sup>142</sup> *ibid*

<sup>143</sup> [Pupil absence in schools in England, Academic Year 2020/21 – Explore education statistics – GOV.UK \(explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/explore-education-statistics/service/gov-uk)

<sup>144</sup> [Lost but not forgotten: the reality of severe absence in schools post-lockdown \(centreforsocialjustice.org.uk\)](https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk)

<sup>145</sup> [cco-five-things-you-need-to-know-about-sen-in-schools.pdf \(childrenscommissioner.gov.uk\)](https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk)

<sup>146</sup> *ibid*

*adulthood, they find it more difficult to secure employment; at age 27 young people with SEN are 25% less likely to be in sustained employment than their peers with no identified SEN*.<sup>147</sup>

**Off-Rolling and Home Education.** Ofsted describes off-rolling as: “A pupil being taken off the school roll in order to try and manipulate reported exam results/league tables.” It has been acknowledged for some time that off-rolling has been manipulated by a small number of schools to game league tables. Given that schools do not record the reason why a pupil has been removed from a school roll (this is only a requirement in the case of a formal exclusion), it is difficult to quantify the extent of ‘off-rolling’ that occurs in the system. However, a range of witnesses told us that some schools have found that permanent exclusion is one way of removing a child from their school-roll.<sup>148</sup>

Added to this, research by the EPI suggests that cohorts of pupils can become more ‘socially selective’ as they make their way through school. This reinforces the idea that certain pupils of certain ethnic and social backgrounds and pupils with SEND and additional needs are more likely than others to be off-rolled or exit the school for unofficial reasons (as well as being more likely to be excluded) because they are seen as disruptive or unlikely to achieve high grades. This can lead to a system that is more likely to exclude (both formally and informally) the very children that are already the most in need.

In March 2019, pre-Covid, the number of children local authorities reported as being electively home educated was 60,544 compared to 52,770 as of 29 March 2018. This is an increase of 7,774 or 14.7 per cent.<sup>149</sup> This number has increased again since Covid, with the Association of Directors of Children’s Services estimating in November 2021 that around 115,000 children had been in EHE across the previous year<sup>150</sup>. While there are parents who make a philosophical choice to teach their children at home, there is evidence to suggest some children are being pushed into home education because some schools cannot cope with a child’s behaviour - or even under achievement - or they have special educational needs which have been not properly addressed or supported.

**Racial Disparities and the Adultification of Black Children.** Black children, particularly teenage boys, are less likely to be seen as victims, and more likely to be viewed as ‘offenders’ and subject to ‘adultification’, where they are excluded from the perception of being vulnerable and experience punitive responses.<sup>151</sup> The process of adultification is one which disproportionately harms Black children, presenting them as older than they really are and thus not treating them with the care and protection that should be afforded to minors. The recent abhorrent treatment of Child Q, a teenage girl who was left traumatised after being strip-searched at school by Met police officers while on her period, is a recent shocking example of how adultification can happen in educational settings. This case, and others like it, can only have a damaging impact on Black young people’s confidence in both schools and the police. Research has found that Black children can be viewed as both older and less innocent than their white peers, and also falsely perceived as angry in the classroom.<sup>152</sup> This is an issue for Black girls too, with Black girls being perceived as ‘less innocent’<sup>153</sup>.

**Alternative Provision.** As of January 2021, around 22,000 pupils were taught in 348 state place-funded AP schools (197 LA-run Pupil Referral Units and 151 AP academies and free schools. There were also 32,000 pupils attending LA funded placements in non-state-place-

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<sup>147</sup> [SEND Review - right support, right place, right time \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/822122/SEND_Review_-_right_support,_right_place,_right_time.pdf)

<sup>148</sup> [EPI-Pupil-Inclusion-Methodology-Paper.pdf](https://www.evidencebasedpractice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/EPI-Pupil-Inclusion-Methodology-Paper.pdf)

<sup>149</sup> [Department for Education \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1011122/DCSF_EHE_Survey_2021_Report_FINAL.pdf)

<sup>150</sup> [ADCS EHE Survey 2021 Report FINAL.pdf](https://www.adcs.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/ADCS-EHE-Survey-2021-Report-FINAL.pdf)

<sup>151</sup> [Davies J. and Marsh N. \(2020\) Boys to men: the cost of ‘adultification’ in safeguarding responses to Black boys, Critical and Radical Social Work, Volume 8, Number 2, August 2020, pp. 255- 259\(5\) Policy Press](https://www.policyinnovations.org/insights/working-papers/summaries/2020/08/25/boys-to-men-the-cost-of-adultification-in-safeguarding-responses-to-black-boys)

<sup>152</sup> [Black boys viewed as older, less innocent than Whites, research finds \(apa.org\)](https://www.apa.org/press-releases/2020/08/black-boys-viewed-as-older-less-innocent-than-whites) & [APA research: Black children falsely perceived as angry in classroom \(openaccessgovernment.org\)](https://www.openaccessgovernment.org/black-children-falsely-perceived-as-angry-in-classroom/1011122/)

<sup>153</sup> [Black girls ‘perceived as less innocent by US adults’ - BBC News](https://www.bbc.com/news/health-56888888)

funded settings.<sup>154</sup> As the Government's recent SEND Green Paper states, children in AP 'are also often vulnerable, including to criminal exploitation'. Of the pupil cohort which had ever been registered at a state or non-state place-funded alternative provision setting, 41% had ever been cautioned or sentenced for an offence (this rises to 45% for those that were registered at state place-funded alternative provision). These challenges often coincide with SEN, with around 80% of children and young people in state place-funded alternative provision having some need, primarily Social Emotional Mental Health (SEMH) needs. Just 55% of pupils from state place-funded alternative provision sustained an education, training, or employment destination after key stage 4 in 2019/20, compared with 89% and 94% from state-funded special and mainstream schools respectively.<sup>155</sup>

In 2020, the Centre for Social Justice found that in 13 LAs not a single child in AP has passed their English and maths GCSE in the past three years. In three, not a single teacher in AP is qualified. And there is no area in the country where the rate of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) after leaving AP 'equals even the very worst-performing area for children from mainstream'. The report also found that pupils on free school meals are over-represented, at 43% in state-maintained AP compared to 15% in mainstream. There is a strong correlation between areas of high deprivation and areas where a high proportion of the school population is educated full-time in AP. Pupils in AP are nearly six times as likely to have SEND than children in 'mainstream' schools with '81 per cent on the SEND register compared to 14 per cent in mainstream'. Certain ethnic groups are also over-represented in state-maintained AP,<sup>156</sup>

The average academic results are also worse for pupils who sit their maths and English GCSEs in AP compared to their peers in mainstream. In recent years, only '4 per cent of pupils educated in state-maintained AP have achieved a grade 9–4 in maths and English. This compares with 64 per cent of pupils across all state-funded schools (special and AP included)'.<sup>157</sup>

There is a consensus that, in the past, alternative provision has been of too low a quality and that PRUs and AP have been seen as a 'dumping ground'. Criticism of the quality of alternative provision has been a common feature of our discussions with children, parents and professionals alike. We recognise too that some alternative provision is good and that some children are able to thrive in an environment with a broader content base, higher levels of pastoral care and support and a skilled staff team who are able to help young people learn and gain qualifications. Our criticisms of alternative provision should not be seen as a judgement on the professionals who work in them. As one witness told the Commission, working in AP can be among the most professionally rewarding experience, when a child does thrive in the environment. We know that there are good people doing their utmost to run good alternative provision in challenging circumstances. But these are still too few and far between.

Many of those in the criminal justice system have talked about their experience of links between Pupil Referral Units and crime. Martin Hewitt, Chair of the Police Chiefs and Commission member has called some PRUs "job centres for criminals", serving vulnerable young people up in one place for those that wish to wait around to exploit them. During our Commission visits we have also visited PRUs that felt like prisons. Kendra Houseman, one of our Commission expert panellists attended PRUs in the 1990s – she describes herself as a once being 'a PRU kid', a badge of honour at the time. Now she works with young people who attend or have recently attended PRUs, and she feels little has changed over the last 20 years. She also describes some PRUs as feeling like a prison. Too often they are institutions that are unstructured, understaffed, under-qualified to deal with children there who are affected by trauma, and unaccountable.

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<sup>154</sup> [Schools, pupils and their characteristics, Department for Education, 2021](#)

<sup>155</sup> [SEND review: right support, right place, right time - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

<sup>156</sup> [CSJJ8057-Cold-Spots-Report-200507-v1-WEB.pdf \(centreforsocialjustice.org.uk\)](#)

<sup>157</sup> Ibid

**Covid.** Two years on from the first lockdown, there are already numerous publications setting out the worrying impact Covid has had on many children in England. There is no doubt that the pandemic has added another pressure on to vulnerable children and families. In one of our young panel sessions, we were told by children of the deep, negative impact that Covid had had on their experiences of school, including, their ability to learn, their desire to be at school, the likelihood of returning to school, and a severe decline in their mental health because of the lockdowns. Indeed, 76% of families who had previously been receiving support from social services before lockdown (such as respite care and summer play schemes) saw it stop during the crisis and nearly half of parents (45%) said their child's physical health had declined. Added to this, a considerable number of parents have struggled to teach their children from home and for parents of children with SEND this was particularly challenging. This has increased the disadvantage gap, caused burnout for parents and sped up lost learning time. In total, some 79% of parents, in one study, stated that their own mental health had declined over the course of lockdown.<sup>158</sup>

## Links between exclusion and involvement in the criminal justice system

There is much debate around the correlation between school exclusion and suspension and involvement in serious violence or criminal exploitation. However, there is no doubt that those in the criminal justice system are more likely than not to have been excluded from school at some point, and that there are clear links between poor educational engagement and exclusion from school and involvement in crime, exploitation, violence, and gangs.

Recent research released by the DfE and the MoJ looked at the education and children's social care background of children who had been cautioned or sentenced for an offence. This is very welcome ongoing work which should prove an important resource for better understanding the links between exclusion, poverty and other factors, and children becoming involved in serious violence.

22%

*Percentage of children that had ever been permanently excluded who were also cautioned or sentenced for a serious violence offence<sup>159</sup>*

59%

*Percentage of children that had ever been permanently excluded and had also been cautioned or sentenced for an offence<sup>160</sup>*

76%

*Percentage of children who had been cautioned or sentenced for a serious violence offence who have been eligible for free school meals<sup>161</sup>*

<sup>158</sup> [Supporting children with special educational needs and disabilities to return to school | Children's Commissioner for England \(childrenscommissioner.gov.uk\)](https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/supporting-children-with-special-educational-needs-and-disabilities-to-return-to-school/)

<sup>159</sup> [Education, children's social care and offending \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://www.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/90442/education_childrens_social_care_and_offending.pdf)

<sup>160</sup> *ibid*

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid*

The study looked at approximately 77,000 children who had been cautioned or sentenced for an offence, which is equivalent to 5% of the total pupil cohort. It found that 76% of children who had been cautioned or sentenced for a serious violence offence were known to have ever been eligible for free school meals. This reinforces the links between poverty and being cautioned or sentenced, and the importance of tackling poverty as part of any strategy for tackling serious violence and criminal exploitation.

The report also found that 71% of all children who had been cautioned or sentenced for an offence had ever received a suspension and that 44% of first permanent exclusions and 42% of closest permanent exclusions were received over a year before the first serious violence offence. This suggests there is evidence between exclusions being a precursor to offending for some children.

***“When someone gets kicked out of school [they are] pushed right into the groomers' hands. There's people out there looking to make a fast buck off someone's child. If you're not in school, what else are you doing? You're going to be on the street with other people...that was my situation. When you push a child outside of school straight away someone's going to find him. The groomer is going to buy them new trainers and other [gifts]. But it all comes at a price. They buy you things, then you owe them.” (Stefan, excluded from school)<sup>162</sup>***

74% of children cautioned or sentenced for a serious violence offence received their first suspension over a year before their first serious violence offence, whilst 19% of those cautioned or sentenced for 4-6 offences had been permanently excluded. For exclusions themselves, 59% of children that had ever been permanently excluded had also been cautioned or sentenced for an offence, while 22% of children that had ever been permanently excluded were also cautioned or sentenced for a serious violence offence.

The data also shows evidence of some link between SEN and offending, reinforcing the many anecdotal stories we have heard from a range of experts and those with lived experience, who talk about a failure in SEN provision, or undiagnosed SEN being a factor that exposed them to exclusion and the criminal justice system. The report found that 80% of those who had been cautioned or sentenced for an offence, and 87% of those cautioned or sentenced for a serious violence offence had been recorded as ever having SEN. A further 95% of those whose offending had been prolific had been recorded as ever having SEN.

The data suggests that 9% of those that had ever been persistently absent were cautioned or sentenced for an offence, demonstrating the need to keep children in some form of education wherever possible.

60% of those whose offending had been prolific had been a Child In Need. For children who had been cautioned or sentenced for an offence, 47% of children were aged 14-16 years when they were cautioned or sentenced for their first offence and 55% of those cautioned or sentenced for a serious violence offence had received between 2-10 suspensions.

## **Inclusion**

Our youth justice system is full of young people who have been excluded, suspended, or have fallen out of the education system, many with no regular schooling since their primary years. It is difficult to believe how this can happen so often with such regular patterns and consequence. Our witnesses have told us how being excluded or moved out of school will often trigger a

<sup>162</sup> [Coalition of children's charities demand better protection against child criminal exploitation | Just For Kids Law](#)

downward spiral for the child; stuck in a twilight world of slow referral processes, occasional home tutoring, two hour a week timetables and isolation from friends.

Many of these children have special educational needs, mental health conditions and learning disabilities. Without the routine, the relationships, or the protective factors of school, they are out on a limb, and often, sadly, highly visible and vulnerable to those who wish to exploit them. The challenge is to make these children highly visible to the education system again. We have been encouraged by the school leaders, teachers and organisations who have told us how they have built a positive and inclusive school environment that is supporting vulnerable young people to succeed. We believe that a school or college rooted firmly in its local community, that has built up trust with families and children over many years, and which works hand in glove with other local services and organisations, is a model for a more inclusive, nurturing and ultimately successful education.

We have looked at programmes and interventions that have been established to enable some vulnerable children to have a more positive learning experience and have based our interim recommendations on what we have seen and heard.

**A More Inclusive Curriculum.** For some young people, school is neither enjoyable nor fulfilling and is sometimes inadequate in preparing them for the next stages of their lives. This has created an environment for some children which makes them more likely to switch off in class and has made them less willing to return to school post lockdown. These are the children who feel school is 'not for them'. In the Commission's sessions with young people, we have been told on multiple occasions that the curriculum no longer interests them and is leading to disengagement and a waning desire for some to be at school. One young person told us: *'The curriculum is not great, you don't learn what you don't want to learn, why would you bother learning it. People skip the lessons because it is not things that they want to learn about, if you aren't going to use it when you are older, why would you learn about it? Just listening to someone mumble on it is not fun, kids don't pay attention because it isn't interesting to you'*.

The Education Select Committee's 2018 review of exclusions<sup>163</sup> also suggested that the narrow nature of the curriculum may be contributing to the high number of school exclusions, and research by the RSA<sup>164</sup> has also shown that de-prioritising the wider curriculum can have an impact on pupil engagement, with some studies showing that young people 'report greater engagement with school as a result of arts participation'.

As the recent Inclusive Britain report has acknowledged there is a particular deficit in the current curriculum for black and ethnic minority children with regards to 'belonging'<sup>165</sup>. The school curriculum as it is currently made up feels out-dated and partial for many children. This is not solely confined to history; the English literature curriculum is seriously lacking in ethnic diversity, and the main characters in children's books are almost eight times more likely to be animals than people of colour<sup>166</sup>. A 2020 study by Teach First noted that 'the biggest exam board, accounting for almost 80% of GCSE English literature entries, does not feature a single book by a Black author, and just two books by ethnic minority authors'<sup>167</sup>.

**Designing Schools for all Children.** Almost one in five children leave school with no GCSEs, and poor children are twice as likely to do so. In recent years, the gap between disadvantaged children and their peers did narrow, but has now widened again, and many of the vital services needed to make the difference for these families have dwindled.

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<sup>163</sup> [Forgotten children: alternative provision and the scandal of ever-increasing exclusions \(parliament.uk\)](#)

<sup>164</sup> [the-rsa-pinball-kids-preventing-school-exclusions.pdf \(thersa.org\)](#)

<sup>165</sup> [Inclusive Britain: government response to the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

<sup>166</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/nov/11/childrens-books-eight-times-as-likely-to-feature-animal-main-characters-than-bame-people>

<sup>167</sup> <https://www.teachfirst.org.uk/sites/default/files/2020-09/Missing%20Pages%20Report.pdf>

Our witnesses have described a system that has too often moved children who are deemed to be an inconvenience - troublesome in the classroom or unlikely to achieve academically - out of the way, be it through a move to 'home education', off-rolling, suspension, or exclusion. Yet we have also heard from schools who are bucking these trends and providing inclusive supportive schools that are supporting vulnerable children to succeed. It has not been difficult to find school leaders who are delivering a very different experience for our group of young people with very different outcomes for young people at risk of harm. Each one of those, like Maureen McKenna, the former Education Director who led the transformation of school inclusion as a core part of the violence reduction programme in Glasgow, to the leaders of academies committed to social justice such as Oasis, Passmore Academy, Big Education, and Reach.

Leaders of these schools have told us how their pursuit of support to help all children succeed has not only improved educational achievement but has also reduced exclusions to single figures. Maureen McKenna's drive to change the culture and practice in schools in Glasgow saw the introduction of programmes that kept children engaged in school and strong support for headteachers saw exclusions reduce by 81% and violence fall by 48% over the past decade. Schools were, she said, excluding pupils out of habit. *"Some children were on a revolving door – in school, an incident happens and out they go again. How were we ever going to improve outcomes and change lives if they aren't in school?"* It was her job to push back against the status quo and help find a different approach.

**Reach Academy's Cradle to Career Model.** Reach Academy opened in 2012 to improve choice and opportunity for children and young people in Feltham. Compared to children in other parts of the borough, children growing up in Feltham are disproportionately affected by risk factors including: parental stress, poor housing, multiple ACEs, exclusion, poverty, poor mental health, poor diet, being academically behind more advantaged peers, lack of progress to a top university, living in an area lacking Early Years support, and fewer opportunities to enter the job market. Reach has set out to address these disadvantages by opening a school that puts inclusivity, a rigorous curriculum, excellent teaching, and strong relationships at its heart. This is designed to ensure that all children be safe and well supported, be healthy, achieve well academically, build strong relationships and social networks. Over the last ten years, Reach has achieved a 70% progress to higher education, 0% NEET, excellent GCSE results, a 20% uplift in EYFS results and is set to open a second school.

**Supporting Children to Go to School.** We have heard much evidence about how many children with SEND, autism, learning disabilities and additional needs can struggle in the classroom with some falling out of school as a result. This report has highlighted how children with SEN generally have poor outcomes, including those with less severe needs. This is especially true of those who are also vulnerable in other ways (those who have a social worker and/or are receiving free school meals). A key theme from the views of one group of parents we met is the disconnect they felt between the support their children needed and that received: additional needs had gone unidentified or misdiagnosed, labelled as 'misbehaviour' and 'disruptive', which had led to suspension or exclusion.

As with our previous themes, parents often said that they feel unheard by schools and other statutory services when it comes to the support they need for their child and family. Parents were also acutely aware that exclusions have repercussions not only for the child who is missing out on education but also on the parent, whose work and daily routines are disrupted due to regular calls from the school asking them to collect their child. Ultimately, some parents have to give up work if their children are not attending school, something that can have serious financial and other consequences for the whole family.

Many parents told us how their children had additional needs, some of which had been assessed and diagnosed, but there were other instances where this hadn't happened. In these instances, parents felt that their children's schools were unable to provide adequate support to their children, which meant situations around behaviour escalated and often resulted in suspension or

exclusion. For example, some parents told us that schools labelled their children as 'unmanageable' or 'disruptive', when in reality the child had an additional need such as ADHD or Autism and they needed additional support, which schools were not meeting.

**Tackling the Exclusions Culture.** Throughout our evidence gathering, children have told us of the feeling of rejection and marginalisation that exclusion can bring. Excluding a child from their school, their peer group, trusted adults and their daily routine and structures is a tough sanction. Children have told us how they feel cast aside, unimportant and forgotten with little hope for their future education or their life chances. Parents too have given us powerful testimonials of their increasing concern and despair as their children slip further and further away from the mainstream school system.

Earlier this year, the Commission met with a group of parents and primary school children in north London in which all of the children had been excluded. We wanted to understand what had led to the exclusions so early in their education journey, what the impact on those children and parents had been, and what help could have been given to support children at risk of exclusion. Of the children in the group, 7 children had experienced either a fixed-term or permanent exclusion in the past; 6 had a diagnosed SEN; 4 were known to have an EHCP in place and six were known to be in receipt of Free School Meals.

References to frustrating and difficult relationships with the schools ran through these conversations, with many parents saying they felt blamed as children struggled with their behaviour in school without support. Their experiences were littered with what they considered to be a litany of under- and misdiagnosis with unclear processes and an over-eagerness to exclude. Some parents put this down to a lack of understanding about the individual child. Some children were described as very smart completing work quickly. But *“then they then become bored and distracted, which the school views as misbehaving”*. Some families were referred to social care as part of the process, something that most of the parents involved felt had been largely inappropriate and unhelpful. One parent told us how their child had been suspended 17 times between easter and Christmas. Staggeringly, the child was just 5 years old at the time.

The children that had been excluded from school in their first years of primary school we met were now being supported through one-to-one support in a mentoring scheme and were flourishing. They were setting their sights high with ambitions to become doctors, teachers, social workers and an engineer. These children have real talent and a bright future ahead of them but the schools they were excluded from didn't seem able to see it or harness it. With access to better support and a more inclusive, nurturing approach across the school they may have been able to.

**Tackling Racial Disparities.** Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation has suggested that the DfE should make sure that schools monitor disproportionality in rates of fixed and permanent exclusions and consider the impact of adverse childhood experiences, racism, and personal circumstances in their response to Black and mixed heritage boys. He went on to say that work should begin with Ofsted to capture this in its inspection framework, something that was echoed by evidence to our Commission, suggesting a deeper and wider conversation around the role of Ofsted is needed.<sup>168</sup>

A report by Power The Fight, a charity tackling violence that affects young people, published in 2020, makes a strong argument that effective therapeutic interventions to end youth violence are reliant on applied cultural competency. It argues that marginalised groups are often deeply distrustful of organisations and institutions due to their own negative experiences in the health care, education, and the criminal justice system. For many Black people, trusting relationships

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<sup>168</sup> [The experiences of black and mixed heritage boys in the youth justice system \(justiceinspectorates.gov.uk\)](https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk)

with professionals rely on representation and cultural competency, with young people and families much more likely to engage with those who share or understand their ethnic background and culture.<sup>169</sup>

**Raising Standards in AP.** Criticism of alternative provision, including PRUs, has been a common feature of our discussions with children, parents and professionals alike. We do recognise that some alternative provision is good and that some children are able to thrive in an environment with a broader content base, high levels of pastoral care and support and a skilled staff team who are able to help young people learn and gain qualifications. The recent Government SEND review is proposing to 'make alternative provision an integral part of local SEND systems', 'give alternative provision schools the funding stability to deliver a service focused on early intervention' and 'deliver greater oversight and transparency of pupil movements'. It says this proposed new national framework for alternative provision will be delivered by an integrated SEND and alternative provision system with clear national standards.

These proposals would establish a new delivery model based on 'a three-tier system of support'. These are (1) 'targeted support in mainstream schools for children and young people whose needs lead to behaviour that disrupts theirs or others' learning, but for whom a strong school behaviour culture is alone not sufficient'; (2) 'time-limited placements in alternative provision for those who need more intensive support to address behaviour or anxiety and re-engage in learning'; and, (3) 'transitional placements for those children and young people who will not return to their previous school but will be supported to make the transition to a different school when they are ready, or to a suitable post-16 destination'

However, AP is highly inconsistent, it is not organised or funded adequately to set children up to succeed and its outcomes for children are so often very poor. 35% of excluded students who finish education in alternative provision go on to become NEET, compared with only 5% of students leaving mainstream schools. We know that those that are delivering high quality provision are having a positive impact on young people's lives and that their experience and expertise will be invaluable in leading and supporting schools to become more inclusive and in providing internal support for children when they need it.

**The Oasis Model.** The fatal stabbing of 15-year-old Zaian Aimable-Lina, a student at Oasis Academy Shirley Park in Croydon in December 2021 has been a catalyst for the charity Oasis to develop a living, life transforming, legacy in Zaian's memory, to tackle the borough's reputation as 'London's knife crime capital', and to create a model of that can be applied across the UK. The charity will establish a new 'Zaian Centre' in the park where Zaian was murdered and establish a new Croydon-wide collaborative integrated education and youth service to support children to succeed in education and life. The ambition is for the Zaian Centre to create a revolutionary preventative approach to stem Croydon's epidemic of youth violence by working to keep young people in – and engaged with – mainstream education.

## Nurture

It is clear from the data and from our evidence sessions that exclusions are dependent not only of the characteristic of the child but also that of the school. Our witnesses believe that these are likely to be schools with lower levels of support for children with special educational needs and those with stricter behaviour policies. We do not have the data that allows us to interrogate whether this is true or to know how these schools are rated by Ofsted. However, we have found a broad landscape of interventions that can help prevent children from falling out of school and into harm. Some are run by small community organisation or individuals who have felt the effect

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<sup>169</sup> [tip-report.pdf \(powerthefight.org.uk\)](https://www.powerthefight.org.uk/tip-report.pdf)

of violence themselves. Some are supported by Violence Reduction Units, local authorities, or schools themselves.

**Violence Reduction Units** are rightly putting a strong emphasis on keeping young people in school to prevent harm. The Manchester VRU is supporting School Engagement Officers to provide training and safety advice, make better use of diversion schemes to lead young people away from criminality and onto positive pathways to help prevent them from entering the criminal justice system, and develop activities that help build positive relationships between police and young people. They are also supporting the **Football Without Borders** scheme in schools which uses football coaching and teamwork as a way to building positive behaviour and engagement with school as well as mentoring and group work. There was also a range of training delivered to help better equip teachers and parents with the skills needed to address violence and its causes. In the West Midlands, the Unit is supporting training to help teachers better identify and help them keep pupils caught up in gangs and violence safe, including understanding the risks faced by vulnerable girls. They are also supporting online safety workshops which enable primary and secondary schools, teachers, and parents to work together to keep young people safe online.

**The Thames Valley VRU** has told us how they seek to knit together local community sector partners around a group of schools. With local agencies in a room, they can discuss cases and problems that are emerging contextually, with partners able to offer support or try and help with wider offer of support. They try, they say, to help schools understand the wider support available, and how they can help children stay in school and access help rather than excluding them. Most recently, the government has also taken steps to introduce pilot taskforces in some areas of high violence to bring agencies together, and work with young people in schools in SAFE taskforces which start this year. In London, this will work alongside the new VRU inclusive Schools programme which is also running in the capital.

**SAFE Taskforces.** A programme of Government funded SAFE taskforces is being rolled out in 10 serious violence hotspots areas this year. This 3-year initiative will be led by local schools to protect young people at risk of absenteeism and from being permanently excluded. The SAFE programme will deliver targeted interventions to reduce truancy, improve behaviours, and reduce the risk of individuals failing to enter education, employment, or training. This builds on work over the last year in 21 areas through Alternative Provision Taskforces which were established to run over 2 years, working directly with young people in alternative provision settings to offer intensive support from experts, including mental health professionals, family workers, and speech and language therapists.

**Mentors in Violence Prevention** is Scotland's largest anti-violence schools programme operating in 25 local authority areas from Shetland to the Scottish borders. MVP aims to empower students to safely speak out against all forms of violence from rape and sexual harassment to bullying and abusive behaviour. The programme was first developed in America where it has become one of the country's longest running and most influential violence prevention initiatives operating in high schools, colleges and within the military. Seeing the potential of the scheme the SVRU decided to adapt the programme and bring it to Scotland in 2011. Working in partnership with Education Scotland, it is now operating in 130 secondary schools.

**A Whole-School Approach to Mental Health.** The children's mental health charity Place2Be has three decades experience of working with pupils, families, and staff in schools. Its model takes a Whole School Approach by supporting not only pupils, but their families and school staff. They provide therapeutic mental health support in schools through one-to-one and group work and offer expert training and professional qualifications in child counselling.

**Oasis Nurture.** Linking education to therapeutic support from an early age can be transformative for vulnerable children and should be widespread within the education system. The Oasis

Nurture programme, run by the Commission's host, is already dealing with some very anxious, very young children who are receiving therapeutic help. Its Nurture Child & Family Mental Health Programme is a recently introduced school intervention for vulnerable children and families. The project is based at the Oasis Johanna primary school in London and consists of a multidisciplinary hub made up of clinical psychology, social work, psychotherapy, learning support, and the provision of practical resources for deprived children and families. Clinical psychologists deal with a range of mental health, developmental and relational problems presenting in childhood and adolescence. The clinician also supports families and the school to ensure that children's needs are being appropriately met through social services and other statutory child mental health provisions. Although the project has not been running for long, there are already positive signs of its benefit to vulnerable children.

**Colleges.** With over 60% of 16-19-year-olds attending a local college, the importance and potential of a college focus and lead on interventions and support for teenagers is self-evident. This is even more so given the disproportionate number of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds attending, including children in care. We are struck by how many young people who have been outside school and regular mainstream education during the secondary school years see going to college as a positive choice at 16. Many talked of going to college as a new phase of their life; one that was more accessible, more about them as individuals, more about supporting their aspirations and more about learning that will help them succeed in life. The potential for colleges to provide a springboard to success in adult life for the young people who have struggled in school is enormous.

The individual colleges we have spoken to are doing much to realise these ambitions and are working hard to identify young people in need and to provide support. There is a definite change in tone, what Eddie Playfair from the Association of Colleges calls 'inclusion by default'. Colleges are more likely to have a wellbeing team, be very aware of contextual safeguarding and will often be providing proactive education and information about staying safe. Some colleges told us of their trauma informed approach, backed up by staff training; others of their anti-racism work – a key part of their inclusion policies.

However, it is also clear from our conversations that the college sector feels that is often an afterthought in national policy discussion, and that opportunities to support their students through national initiatives are not at the forefront. Major initiatives such as mental health teams in schools have scant presence in the college sector. We were impressed by the strategic information that was being gathered in some colleges to map students in terms of conduct, those at risk, non-attendance and how they see their link into exploitation. Not all colleges will be achieving these levels of inclusion and intervention, but the potential for more college focused work to protect and support young people at risk to achieve is clear.

**Keeping Schools Open: Wrap Around Activities.** Whilst afterschool and extra-curricular activities will take place in most schools, the move to extend the school day has largely stalled since the demise of the extended school programme over a decade ago. Over the last year, Holiday and Food Programmes have run in school holidays for school age children in receipt of free school meals from reception to Year 11. Whilst welcome, these are limited in range and use. Research has demonstrated that children from disadvantaged families benefit most from extracurricular activities but are much less likely to have access to sport, arts, or cultural pursuits, yet Sport England estimate that 39% of sports facilities in England sit behind school gates<sup>170</sup>. Alongside, a shortage of creative spaces for dance, arts and music for young people, and the decrease in funding for youth activities, the argument to do much more with school facilities beyond the traditional school day is compelling.<sup>171</sup>

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<sup>170</sup> [Sport England](#)

<sup>171</sup> [Opening up school sports facilities would give every child a healthy summer | Tanni Grey-Thompson and Lawrence Dallaglio](#)

We have heard from expert witnesses how levels of violence peak after schools close, causing a surge in demand on police time. Opening schools throughout weekdays and weekends to provide safe and stimulating places for children and young people to spend their time out of school offers protection, builds social networks and relationships with trusted adults and gives them fun, stretching and enjoyable things to do and take part in. Passmore Academy in Essex has an access centre which opens at 6.30am and closes at 6pm, with adult supervision. It is a safe space for vulnerable children who don't enjoy the hullabaloo of school, somewhere they can feel comfortable. Passmore's Headteacher Vic Goddard told us that any young person who doesn't get a family start to the day, receives one at school. They have washing machines, microwave, fridge freezer, they teach children how to wash their own clothes. The key, he told us, is not to make children feel labelled as different or vulnerable.

**Building Local Partnerships.** The Oasis Academy Hadley in Enfield has spent many years building relationships and trust with the local community, so that there is a close bond between the school, with its bustling reception area open to parents to come in and chat or ask for advice, and the wider local community. Hadley's youth centre, with its incredible after-school facilities including sport, music, and discussion groups, sits geographically and emotionally connected to the school. Across the road is the Oasis family/community support centre, which provides help and advice to local families, including food, help with paying bills, advice and support with services, and community activities from early years onwards. This joined up, integrated offer to children and local families is a model for others to follow. Oasis Academy Hadley is providing a good education to children, not only through high academic and vocational ambitions and standards in the classroom, but by extending outwards beyond the classroom to become a key link between local partners, groups and services. We believe that all schools should have this outward-looking focus, with a long-term vision, not just for academic achievement, but also for the inclusive role the school can play in its local area. This means building relationships and trust over a long period of time, looking ahead a decade or more to where the school will sit in its community, how it will provide learning and support from the early years onwards, and how it can bring together different agencies and expertise to meet the needs of every child from birth to 18.

## THEMATIC REPORT 4

# Heads Up: Rethinking mental health services for vulnerable young people

The Commission's fourth thematic report was co-written alongside members of the Centre for Mental Health team. It examines the very profound crisis in children and young people's mental health in England. The report assesses the extent of mental health problems among England's children, looks at the provision available to them and the gaps, highlights excellent grassroots projects already working successfully with children and their families, and puts forward workable proposals to improve the provision of children's mental health support for all children in every community, particularly the most marginalised.

The teenagers at risk of violence and harm our Commission is focusing on have high levels of mental health need, often undiagnosed and often exacerbated by the trauma they experience at home or in their community. These factors increase the vulnerability of a group of young people already under severe pressure and increase the risks they face. Children who end up in custody are three times more likely to have mental health problems than those who do not.<sup>172</sup> If we are to prevent young people from falling into violence and crime, we must tackle the poor mental health of this highly vulnerable group.

## Children and young people's wellbeing and mental health

- One in six children aged 6 to 16 were identified as having a probable mental health problem in July 2021, a huge increase from one in nine in 2017.
- Boys aged 6 to 10 are more likely to have a probable mental disorder than girls, but in 17 to 19-year-olds this pattern reverses, with rates higher in young women than young men.<sup>173</sup>
- By the age of eight, 7 in 10 children report at least one adverse childhood experience (ACE).<sup>174</sup> Three in four adolescents exposed to ACEs develop mental health problems by the age of 18, including major depression, conduct disorder, alcohol dependence, self-harm, suicide attempts, and posttraumatic stress disorders (PTSD).
- In 2018, the suicide rate in women aged under 25 years had significantly increased since 2012 to its highest ever recorded level of 3.3 per 100,000.<sup>175</sup>
- Nearly half of 17–19-year-olds with a diagnosable mental health disorder have self-harmed or attempted suicide at some point, rising to 53% for young women<sup>176</sup>.
- In 2018-19, 24% of 17-year-olds reported having self-harmed in the previous year, and seven percent reported having self-harmed with suicidal intent at some point in their lives. 16% reported high levels of psychological distress<sup>177</sup>.

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<sup>172</sup> Centre for Mental Health (2021) *Youth Justice*. Available at: <https://www.centreformentalhealth.org.uk/youth-justice>

<sup>173</sup> Local Government Association (2022) *Children and young people's emotional wellbeing and mental health – facts and figures*. Available at:

[Children and young people's emotional wellbeing and mental health – facts and figures | Local Government Association](#)

<sup>174</sup> NHS Highland (2018). *Adverse Childhood Experiences, Resilience and Trauma Informed Care: A Public Health Approach to Understanding and Responding to Adversity*. Available from:

[https://www.nhshighland.scot.nhs.uk/Publications/Documents/DPH-Annual-Report-2018\\_\(web-version\).pdf](https://www.nhshighland.scot.nhs.uk/Publications/Documents/DPH-Annual-Report-2018_(web-version).pdf)

<sup>175</sup> ONS (2018) *Suicides in the UK: 2018 Registrations*. Available at: [Suicides in the UK - Office for National Statistics \(ons.gov.uk\)](#)

<sup>176</sup> NHS Digital (2018) *One in eight of five to 19 year olds had a mental disorder in 2017 major new survey finds*. Available at: [One in eight of five to 19 year olds had a mental disorder in 2017 major new survey finds - NHS Digital](#)

<sup>177</sup> Young Minds (2021) *Mental Health Statistics*. Available at: [Mental Health Statistics UK | Young People | YoungMinds](#)

- There was a 47% increase in the number of new emergency referrals to crisis care teams in under-18-year-olds between December 2019 and April 2021<sup>178,179</sup>.

## Mental health service provision

- At the end of April 2022, 388,887 people were in contact with children and young people's mental health services, 352,866 new referrals were received, and 1.8 million care contacts were attended. During April and 21,429 people were subject to the Mental Health Act, including 16,463 people detained in hospital, at the end of April<sup>180</sup>
- In 2020/2021, just 23% of children referred to services started treatment within the 4-week waiting target.<sup>181</sup> Spending on mental health provision is also very uneven: spend per child ranges from £14- £191 per person. On average, local Clinical Commissioning Group areas spend less than one per cent of their overall budget on children's mental health, and public health funding, which funds school nurses and public mental health services, has seen a £700 million real terms reduction in funding between 2014/15 and 2020/21 – a fall of almost a quarter (23.5 per cent) per person<sup>182</sup>.
- As Centre for Mental Health noted, the social, and economic costs of poor mental health are huge, totalling £119 billion a year as measured in health spending, output losses and human capital.<sup>183</sup>
- The number of young people completing an urgent pathway for eating disorders has increased by 141% between quarter four in 2019/20 and quarter one in 2021/22<sup>184</sup>.

## Covid

The mental health crisis in children and young people has no doubt been exacerbated by the pandemic and its associated events such as national lockdowns, school closures, and limited access to friendships and support groups. YoungMinds recently reported that from over 2,000 young people interviewed, 83% of those with mental health needs agreed that the coronavirus pandemic had made their mental health worse<sup>185</sup>. Sixty-seven per cent of young people believed that the pandemic would have a long-term negative effect on their mental health<sup>186</sup>. In a submission to our call of evidence, the group 'Girlguiding' highlighted that in their 2021 Girls' Attitudes Survey, 63% of young women aged 7-21 said that they were happy most of time compared to 81% in 2018. 67% aged 7-21 felt more sad, anxious or worried than before the pandemic and 62% aged 7-21 said they are lonelier now than before the pandemic.

There is no doubt that this increase in poor mental health and demand for help is placing a massive additional strain on already stretched children and young people's mental health services. Specifically:

<sup>178</sup> NHS Confederation (2019) Reaching the tipping point: Children and young people's mental health

<sup>179</sup> Health and Social Care Committee (2021) *The Health and Social Care Committee's Expert Panel: Evaluation of the Government's progress against its policy commitments in the area of mental health services in England*. Available at: [The Health and Social Care Committee's Expert Panel: Evaluation of the Government's progress against its policy commitments in the area of mental health services in England - Health and Social Care Committee \(parliament.uk\)](#)

<sup>180</sup> NHS Digital (2022) Mental Health Services Monthly Statistics. Available at: [Mental Health Services Monthly Statistics - NHS Digital](#)

<sup>181</sup> <https://digital.nhs.uk/supplementary-information/2021/waiting-times-for-children-and-young-peoples-mental-health-services-2020-2021>

<sup>182</sup> [Children and young people's emotional wellbeing and mental health – facts and figures | Local Government Association](#)

<sup>183</sup> Centre for Mental Health (2020) *A spending review for wellbeing*. Available at: [CentreforMentalHealth\\_SpendingReviewForWellbeing.pdf](#)

<sup>184</sup> Based on data from NHS England, Children and Young People with an Eating Disorder Waiting Times. <https://www.england.nhs.uk/statistics/statistical-work-areas/cyped-waiting-times>

<sup>185</sup> Young Minds (2020) *Coronavirus: Impact on young people with mental health needs*. Available at: [youngminds-coronavirus-report-summer-2020.pdf](#)

<sup>186</sup> Young Minds (2021) Coronavirus report. Available at: [youngminds-coronavirus-report-jan-2021.pdf](#)

- The Centre for Mental Health has estimated that 1.5 million children and young people in England will need either new or additional mental health support as a result of the pandemic<sup>187</sup>.
- The 2022 NHS England figures suggest that over 400,000 children and young people are being treated for mental health problems every month. The figures show the direct impact of COVID-19; the total has risen by 147,853 since February 2020, a 54% increase, and by 80,096 over the last year alone, a jump of 24%. January's tally of 411,132 cases was the first time the figure had topped 400,000<sup>188</sup>.
- The gap between the availability and demand of children and young people's mental health services has continued to widen during the pandemic. In 2020/21, 497,502 children were referred to mental health services, a decrease from 539,000 the previous year, though this could be due to disruption caused by the pandemic. The percentage of children being referred nationally has also decreased. Referral rates have dropped from 4.5% to 4% of the under-18 population.
- The NHS Confederation detailed in April 2022 that COVID-19 related disruptions may have 'exacerbated triggers for poor mental health' with more children experiencing mental health problems than before the pandemic. A further concern was that 78% of trust leaders in an NHS providers survey in May 2021 said that they were 'concerned about their trust/local system(s) ability to meet the level of anticipated demand within the next 12-18 months for mental health care among children and young people'.<sup>189</sup>

## Children at risk of experiencing mental health problems

The lived experiences of **Black, Brown and minority ethnic children** at risk – and the rest of this cross section of society – tells us of the unequal experiences that many will face in both experiencing mental health problems and accessing the necessary support in a timely and equal manner. Research over the past 50 years has consistently shown that in the UK, individuals from racialised communities have been and continue to be disproportionately impacted by adverse experiences and negative outcomes within mental health care when compared to other ethnic groups<sup>190</sup>.

**Children and young people with SEND** and their families are at greater risk of experiencing poor mental health. Those with SEND are disproportionately likely to be living in vulnerable and precarious situations and less likely to be able to access the support needed. The coronavirus pandemic has further worsened the situation for a large proportion of children with SEND and their families. Given that 16% of children and young people in England have a special educational need and disability (SEND), this number translates into a significant demand of mental health support for this group of young people<sup>191</sup>. This in turn results in a significant knock-on effect on NHS CYPMHS, available mental health support and the overall stretch placed on mental health and wellbeing services in England.

Half of all **children in care** meet the criteria for a possible mental health disorder, which compares to 1 in 10 children outside of the care system<sup>192</sup>. Children in care are often likely to have experienced trauma and negative childhood experiences, which all have detrimental

<sup>187</sup> Centre for Mental Health (2021) *Covid-19 and the nation's mental health: May 2021*. Available at: [Covid-19 and the nation's mental health: May 2021 | Centre for Mental Health](#)

<sup>188</sup> NHS Digital *Mental Health Services Monthly Statistics*

<sup>189</sup> NHS Confederation (2022) *Hidden waits: the lasting impact of the pandemic on children's services in the community*.

Available at: [Hidden waits: the lasting impact of the pandemic on children's services in the community | NHS Confederation](#)

<sup>190</sup> Race Equality Foundation (2019) *Racial disparities in mental health: Literature and evidence review*. Available at:

<https://raceequalityfoundation.org.uk/health-and-care/racial-disparities-in-mental-health-event-25th-march-2019/>

<sup>191</sup> Gov.uk (2022) *Special educational needs in England*. Available at: [Special educational needs in England. Academic Year 2021/22 – Explore education statistics – GOV.UK \(explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk\)](#)

<sup>192</sup> Gov.uk (2018) *Improved mental health support for children in care*. Available at: [Improved mental health support for children in care - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

impacts on a child's mental health. These children and young people are also more likely to have been exposed to adversity in childhood, to have been exploited, and in need of more acute care.

As the Commission has been told by children, young people, and families themselves, **children in poverty** are more likely to be facing adverse life conditions and feel as though no one and/or no service cares about them, that there is nowhere and no one for them to turn to, and are less likely to have access to activities, spaces and help that would make their lives better.

**Children in the youth custody and youth justice systems** often enter prison with histories of trauma, abuse, substance misuse, poor mental and physical health and this is true for young people. Children who do end up in custody are three times more likely to have mental health disorders than those who do not<sup>193</sup>. These children are also more likely to have more than one mental health problem, to have a learning difficulty, be dependent on drugs and alcohol and to have experienced other challenges.

**Children and their parents and families who have experienced school exclusion** have told the Commission of the damaging impact that exclusions have on them, often being out of school for extended periods, feeling isolated and away from peers and once again feeling uncared for. Children can be punished for behaviour that is linked to their mental health, and responses to their behaviours, which can often include the use of isolation rooms and exclusion, rather than therapeutic interventions, which can further harm young people's mental health. The use of 'zero-tolerance' policies, have been shown to be particularly counterproductive to bettering young people's mental health; these include but are not limited to: exclusion, suspension, isolation rooms and detention.

**College** leaders we have spoken with have highlighted the significant impact on resilience of Covid, the lack of support from home and other agencies for their students and the impact of the reduction in face-to-face appointments. They report that many students are now more socially anxious and need one-to-one interventions, peer mentoring and support rooms, impacting how many students can be supported at any one time. One college told us that there has been a 200% increase in safeguarding concerns this academic year, and that peer-on-peer abuse has spiralled too.

## **Is the system meeting the needs of children and young people?**

A successful mental health system is one that integrates the use of education-based support, community-based support, and specialist NHS support for those with the greatest needs. Urgent action is still required to ensure there is an effective and functioning system that meets the needs of all young people, and the progress made to date needs to be expanded. Both the Green Paper and the NHS Long Term Plan should result in some increased access to support across schools and colleges and NHS specialist settings. Positively, the NHS have committed to improving care for young people with complex needs by placing trauma-informed and integrated services at the heart of their plans, yet further detail on what this will look like is needed.

However significant gaps in support remain, there have been long-standing concerns about the scale and speed of the roll-out of Green Paper proposals to all children and young people, which will leave most children without school-based help when the funding runs out next year. For too long, NHS CYPMHS has been under-funded and under-prioritised by successive governments, resulting in a service that is struggling to cope with demand and children and young people being left without the support they need. NHS CYPMHS continues to face enduring issues with access, waiting times and workforce. The current system is not set up to deal with complexity.

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<sup>193</sup> Centre for Mental Health (2020) *Youth Justice*. Available at: [Healthcare standards for children and young people in secure settings | RCPCH](#)

The creation of Integrated Care Services presents an opportunity to drive these changes, bringing together key institutions in a local area, to work even more closely to support and improve the mental health of the populations they serve.

## Children and Young People failed by lack of NHS Mental Health Services

**Rejected Referrals.** The Care Quality Commission (2018) reported that ‘too often’ rejected referrals were due to inappropriately high eligibility thresholds which in turn can prevent children and young people accessing the right support before they reach ‘the point of crisis’. YoungMinds told us of two particularly harrowing examples of young people who had attempted suicide but had still not been able to access NHS CYPMHS. We heard about one teenage boy who was discharged from hospital after trying to take his own life, but after ten days nobody from mental health services had been in touch. A young woman admitted to A&E by ambulance following a suicide attempt but was discharged 12 hours later. Her family contacted mental health services every day for over a week but did not receive any follow up appointment or phone call. When the family was finally contacted two weeks later, there was no explanation or empathy.

**Waiting Times.** For the children and young people who get accepted into NHS children and young people’s mental health services, long waiting lists remain common. Latest statistics on waiting times obtained by the Children’s Commissioner’s Office<sup>194</sup> at the end of March 2021 showed that the average waiting time for those accepted into CYPMHS was 32 days, down from 43 days the year before. However, this average masks significant regional variation in waiting times, ranging between 6 and 81 days. Of the 497,502 children referred to CYPMHS in 2020/21, only two-fifths received two contacts (NHS England’s proxy for entering treatment) within the year.<sup>195</sup> These delays in accessing support often mean that problems escalate.

**Transition between child and adult mental health services.** Another long-standing barrier for accessing mental health services among young people is the availability of support during the period of transition from child to adult mental health services for those between 18 and 25. A great deal of individuals, groups and organisations, working or living in this area have told the Commission that once a young person reaches the age of 18, they are often cut off from any help or support and expected to ‘fend for themselves’. In 2018, it was estimated that more than 25,000 young people transition from NHS CYPMHS each year, however, only 4% of them received an “ideal” transition<sup>196</sup>.

**Shortage of workforce.** A shortage of staffing to meet demand has been identified as one of the most common reasons for delayed access to children and young people’s mental health services<sup>197</sup>. Growing a skilled workforce is a key requisite of any expansion of support for young people.

**Lack of early prevention and intervention programmes.** There is an overwhelming amount of evidence showing the effectiveness of early prevention and intervention programmes in improving mental health among children and young people<sup>198</sup>. Still today, too many children and young people are reaching the point of crisis before they can access any mental health support.

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<sup>194</sup> <https://childrenscommissioner.github.io/mhbriefing2021/waiting-times/pages/waiting-times.html>

<sup>195</sup> NHS England (2021) NHS fast tracks mental health support for millions of pupils. Available from: <https://www.england.nhs.uk/2022/05/nhs-fast-tracks-mental-health-support-for-millions-of-pupils/>

<sup>196</sup> Healthcare Safety Investigation Branch (2018) *Investigation into the transition from child and adolescent mental health services to adult mental health services*. Available at: [hsib\\_summary\\_report\\_transition\\_from\\_NHS\\_CYPMHS\\_to\\_amhs.pdf](https://www.hsi.org.uk/summary-report-transition-from-nhs-cypmhs-to-amhs.pdf) ([hsib-kqcco125-media.s3.amazonaws.com](https://www.hsi.org.uk/summary-report-transition-from-nhs-cypmhs-to-amhs.pdf))

<sup>197</sup> Care Quality Commission (2018) *Care quality commission annual report*. Available at: [Care Quality Commission annual report and accounts: 2017 to 2018 - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/748423/cqc-annual-report-2017-to-2018.pdf)

<sup>198</sup> Early Intervention Foundation (2021) *Adolescent mental health: A systematic review on the effectiveness of school-based interventions*. Available at: [Adolescent mental health: A systematic review on the effectiveness of school-based interventions | Early Intervention Foundation \(eif.org.uk\)](https://www.eif.org.uk/research/adolescent-mental-health-a-systematic-review-on-the-effectiveness-of-school-based-interventions)

Upstream interventions are shown to be more cost-effective and reduce unnecessary pressure across the entire healthcare system, from GP appointments to A&E presentations and NHS inpatient services<sup>199</sup>, and should be the priority of research, funding, and implementations.

**Mental health stigma.** A recent UCL review showed that stigma remains the number one barrier for young people aged between 10 and 19 in getting professional help for their mental health, despite the increasing public mental health awareness and knowledge.<sup>200</sup> Similar results have previously been observed in young adults between the age of 18 and 25<sup>201</sup>, reinforcing mental health stigma as a significant obstacle to help-seeking for both children and young people.

**An unresponsive and siloed system.** Throughout our evidence gathering, we heard concerns about how the current mental health system is not set-up to support children and young people with complex needs. Peter Fonagy of the Anna Freud Centre told the Commission the way in which the model for mental wellbeing is currently set up, i.e. through a clinical lens, is exacerbated by the fact that this group of young people have multiple needs and ‘when issues are across a broad range of areas but are not serious enough in any one area, they don’t meet a clinical need threshold which means they don’t get treated for their general vulnerability’. These children then ‘ricochet around services and do not get a good service as they are too complex’. We were also told how the commissioning landscape for mental health is fragmented.

**Negative perception of mental health support and bad experiences with health services.** Young people from marginalised groups often hold negative perception of mental health services, and at times have bad experience themselves, which make them less likely to engage with those services. Research has shown that young people from racialised communities, especially young Black men, are less likely to seek formal mental health support through doctors, counsellors, or psychologists. This distrust of mental health services stems from having been failed by mental health services over a long period of time.

**Limited access and involuntary pathways to mental health services.** The question of detention rather than prevention is one which more severely discriminates against Black, Brown, and minority ethnic groups in mental health. Data shows that despite children from racialised groups being less likely than their White peers to access mental health services, they are more likely to access NHS CYPMHS through compulsory rather than voluntary care pathways.<sup>202</sup> National studies have revealed that Black children were ten times more likely to be referred to NHS CYPMHS via social services (rather than through the GP) compared to White British children.<sup>203</sup>

**Lack of services responsive to specific and cultural needs and the role of racism.** One of the biggest barriers to mental health support for ‘high-risk’ populations is the lack of services that are tailored and responsive to their specific and cultural needs and are actively dealing with the role of racism in accessing support. We know that providing youth mental health services at easily accessible locations such as schools, local primary care clinics, community walk-in clinics, or via self-referral, has shown an increased uptake of services for children and families from

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<sup>199</sup> Health and Social Care Committee (2021) *Reports, Special reports and government responses*. Available at: [Health and Social Care Committee - Reports, special reports and government responses - Committees - UK Parliament](#)

<sup>200</sup> Aguirre Velasco, A., Cruz, I.S.S., Billings, J., Jimenez, M. and Rowe, S., 2020. What are the barriers, facilitators and interventions targeting help-seeking behaviours for common mental health problems in adolescents? A systematic review. *BMC psychiatry*, 20(1), pp.1-22.

<sup>201</sup> Salaheddin, K. and Mason, B., 2016. Identifying barriers to mental health help-seeking among young adults in the UK: a cross-sectional survey. *British Journal of General Practice*, 66(651), pp.e686-e692.

<sup>202</sup> Edbrooke-Childs, J. and Patalay, P., 2019. Ethnic differences in referral routes to youth mental health services. *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, 58(3), pp.368-375.

<sup>203</sup> Kapadia, D., Zhang, J., Salway, S., Nazroo, J., Booth, A., Villarroel-Williams, N., Becares, L. and Esmail, A. (2022) Ethnic Inequalities in healthcare: A Rapid Evidence Review. NHS Race & Health Observatory. Available from: [https://www.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/RHO-Rapid-Review-Final-Report\\_v.7.pdf](https://www.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/RHO-Rapid-Review-Final-Report_v.7.pdf)

racialised communities<sup>204</sup>. In addition, mental health programmes that are tailored to specific racialised groups have also yielded more positive outcomes<sup>205</sup>. However, such services have not been widely implemented across the UK. Part of the issue is that many Black, Brown and minority ethnic people and communities do not trust traditional institutions, including mental health institutions, as a result of past experiences with services, and are less likely to approach them or to be treated equally.

## What Needs to Change?

**An open, non-judgemental, and safe place to discuss mental health.** Young people told us they want to have open and non-judgemental conversations about mental health, and for that to be incorporated in everyday activities. When asked about counselling, they said that their immediate thought was ‘fear of people finding out that people know I need more support. It is scary and serious when people say that you need counselling and to see the doctor. But if it is just clubs and stuff, people go to clubs every day, so it is less scary.’ If you go somewhere, you know and trust, and it is with someone you know, it is ‘more relaxed.’ Whilst ‘going somewhere for the day with friends and people from the youth club, changing the scenery of the mind can really help.’

**Places to go and things to do to improve wellbeing.** Furthermore, young people told us they found that ‘mental health activity’ can help to destigmatise mental health support, especially in popular settings for young people such as at school. Examples of such activities include ‘making posters about wellbeing’, ‘there being a box where young people can put their thoughts and feelings in anonymously’, ‘active mentoring taking place’ and ‘the message being constantly out here, and demystifying shame about it’.

**Wellbeing and mental health training and support for all professionals working with children and young people.** Identifying and understanding the mental health needs of children is vital, including at key points like exclusion from school or contact with the criminal justice system, if they are to be offered the help they need. This is particularly important for those young people we are focusing on who are not likely to self-diagnose or self-refer.

**Improving early intervention support in the community.** It has been recognised that services delivered in the community provide cost-effective support while reaching underserved communities due to their universal, non-stigmatising and culturally responsive approach. Additionally, these services can reduce referrals to more costly specialist support, thereby freeing up much-needed capacity in the system.

**Drop-in mental health hubs.** In recent years, there has been growing consensus from the children’s mental health sector about drop-in mental health hubs as an important mechanism for improving young people’s access to early help in the community. Drop-in mental health hubs offer easy-to-access, drop-in support on a self-referral basis for young people with sub-clinical mental health difficulties or with emerging mental health needs, up to the age of 25. They are community-based and are often delivered in partnership between the NHS, local authorities or the voluntary sector depending on local need and existing infrastructure.

**The role of social prescribing.** Social prescribing involves helping patients to improve their health and wellbeing by connecting them to community services, either provided by the local authority, or by the voluntary and community sector through a dedicated link work based within primary care networks. Schemes delivering social prescribing can involve a range of activities including arts and a range of sports and physical activities. The NHS Long Term Plan is committed to expanding access to social prescribing and states that through social prescribing,

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<sup>204</sup> Anderson, J.K., Howarth, E., Vainre, M., Jones, P. and Humphrey, A., 2017. A scoping literature review of service-level barriers for access and engagement with mental health services for children and young people.

<sup>205</sup> Centre for Mental Health (2022) *Shifting the dial*. Available at: [Shifting the Dial | Centre for Mental Health](#)

the range of support available to people will widen, diversify, and become more accessible across the country. The plan also suggests that over 2.5 million people will benefit from social prescribing within five years.

**Digital support.** The Covid-19 pandemic saw a rise in the use of digital methods to provide support to young people during lockdowns and school closures, and there has since been growing consensus that digital support should become an integral part of the mental health offer for children. Digital support has been identified as having many benefits, including enabling young people to have greater choice in accessing the support that best suits their needs, and the anonymity that it can provide<sup>206</sup>. Digital support should not be a replacement for face-to-face support, but instead should be part of a blended offer enabling young people to access support that best suits their needs.

**Improving support in education: whole school and college approaches.** Our call for evidence highlighted the need for whole education approaches to be developed and implemented across all education settings. In evidence provided to the Commission, The Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition highlighted that 'whole education approaches are crucial to promote and support the mental health and wellbeing of all pupils and students.'

**Building trusted relationships.** The importance of a trusted adult has consistently come up as a key factor in supporting the mental health of vulnerable groups of children and young people. Research from YoungMinds and UK Youth defines a trusted adult as someone who is chosen by the young person as a safe figure that listens without judgement, agenda, or expectation, with the sole purpose of supporting and encouraging positivity within a young person's life<sup>207</sup>. It has been noted that overall, having a trusted adult leads to positive mental health outcomes in children and young people, with one study reporting that children reported fewer mental health challenges when they had a support network of high-quality relationships with peers and trusted adults outside of their immediate family.

**Support for those at risk of offending.** Youth Justice Services (YJS) work with children aged 10 to 18 who have been sentenced by a court, or who have come to the attention of the police because of their offending behaviour. They are statutory partnerships and are multi-disciplinary to support the needs of the whole child. Typically, YJS have a co-located or seconded NHS CYPMHS specialist working with the team. Some teams have other health specialists such as speech and language therapists and psychologists. This enables an assessment of underlying (and sometimes unmet) health and neuro-developmental needs as an offending risk factor. Where possible, YJSs try to divert children and young people away from the court and the criminal justice system so their health needs (and offending as a symptom of health need) can be addressed without unnecessarily criminalising the child.

**Responsive support for marginalised/excluded groups.** Organisations are harnessing the use of community-based approaches to support the mental health needs of marginalised and excluded groups of young people. Central to these services is providing support where young people are. As Jay Perkins, CEO of Partisan told us in an evidence submission, 'Young people are often labelled 'hard to reach,' but the reality is mental health and wellbeing services are hard to reach.' Community-based services can play a key role in improving access to support, especially for those who find it hard to access support through 'traditional' routes. A 2018 study<sup>208</sup> found that, compared to CYPMHS and school-based counselling services, voluntary

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<sup>206</sup> Health and Social Care Committee (2021) *The Health and Social Care Committee's Expert Panel: Evaluation of the Government's progress against its policy commitments in the area of mental health services in England*. Available at: [The Health and Social Care Committee's Expert Panel: Evaluation of the Government's progress against its policy commitments in the area of mental health services in England - Health and Social Care Committee \(parliament.uk\)](https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/health-and-social-care-committee/committees-reports-and-publications/committees-reports-and-publications/health-and-social-care-committee-expert-panel-evaluation-of-the-government-s-progress-against-its-policy-commitments-in-the-area-of-mental-health-services-in-england/)

<sup>207</sup> Young Minds (n.d) Available at: [Defining a Trusted Adult | Reports and Impact | YoungMinds](https://www.youngminds.org.uk/our-work/our-reports/defining-a-trusted-adult/)

<sup>208</sup> <https://bpspsychub.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/papt.12206>

sector organisations working in the community were serving a greater proportion of 'older' young people, as well as higher proportions of LGBTQI+ young people, young people from racialised communities, and young people in contact with the youth justice system. Going to the barber shop, for example, is a much safer place for them than any statutory service that may re-traumatise them.

## OUR FINAL RECOMMENDATIONS

The Commission's recommendations propose a new deal for vulnerable teenagers to protect them from harm, to prevent them becoming involved in the criminal justice system and to provide the springboard and support they need to succeed in life.

We have a generation of youngsters who are facing challenges not seen for decades. Knocked so hard by the pandemic, they are now experiencing the most profound crisis in mental health and self-belief ever recorded. They have been at the forefront of a ten-year digital revolution that has taken over large parts of their lives and the way they live, while the youth provision and workers and trusted adults that they might once have relied on in their community have dwindled. Many are struggling with an outdated and intolerant education system that they say doesn't work for them.

These are the challenges facing most teenagers today. For those that are vulnerable, especially those with complex and multiple problems, life is even tougher. This report, and our previous thematic reports, exposes a crisis for vulnerable teenagers that is happening before our eyes - if we care to look. It is a crisis that is putting hundreds of thousands of children at risk of violence, harm, crime, and diminished life chances. It is a crisis that can deliver the most unspeakable violence and that has seen the killing of scores of young people over the last year alone. The magnitude of this emergency has not been recognised by those in power, and our national response has been inadequate.

We believe this crisis for vulnerable teenagers is a threat to a generation of young people living vulnerable lives, their families, their communities, and to our country's prosperity and security. It is a national emergency that demands action.

Our recommendations set out a platform of reforms and interventions to deliver the urgent change that is necessary.

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### **RECOMMENDATION 1: Government commitment and leadership at the highest level.**

The crisis of teenage harm and violence should be recognised as a national threat and made a national priority by the Prime Minister. A national strategy to reduce risk should be drawn up and delivered, and monthly COBRA-style meetings held to drive and monitor progress.

### **RECOMMENDATION 2: Responsibility for all young people policy goes to a renamed Department for Children, Schools and Families with leadership at Cabinet level**

National Government is muddled and uncoordinated in its policies for young people, with several departments doing something but no single Department taking responsibility for the safety and wellbeing of all vulnerable children. There is little strategic direction and the schemes that are in place remain are not of the scale required and often rely only on short term funding. Opportunities to combine government investment and joint endeavour are being missed, meaning there is little noticeable change for most vulnerable young people. Children and young people are not represented at the Cabinet table and so easier to overlook.

Therefore, we recommend that the Government establish clear leadership and accountability for all its work on young people by bringing activities into one department – the Department for Education. The Department should revert to its previous name: the Department for Children, Schools and Families, reflecting the central importance of children's welfare and family support to educational success. The Department should be responsible for safeguarding, exploitation, youth

work, youth justice, family support, social care, education, and skills. The Children's Minister role should be upgraded to Minister of State level, attending Cabinet, with vulnerable children a key ministerial responsibility.

### **RECOMMENDATION 3: Tackle the drivers of family vulnerability – addiction, domestic violence, and poor mental health**

Thousands of children in England are growing up in contexts that leave them particularly vulnerable. We know that growing up in a household where parents have addictions or suffer severe mental health conditions, or where there is domestic violence (or combinations of these factors), can be very damaging and expose children to additional risks, including extrafamilial abuse and criminalisation. A large majority of children in the youth justice system have experienced multiple adverse childhood experiences and many have high levels of unmet need before contact with justice services.

These problems do not appear overnight and there will often have been a series of contributing factors over time from the first months of life.

Therefore, we recommend that Government puts in place a comprehensive programme of family support in the early years, building on and extending the Best Start for Life programme in the first months of life to offer to offer practical help and support for families to overcome addictions, domestic violence, and poor mental health. This would also extend the work of children's centres and family hubs to provide joined up health and education to ensure vulnerable children are ready to start school. Many of these proposals already sit within the Independent Children's Social Care Review recommendations and should be implemented.

### **RECOMENDATION 4: Help young people and their families out of poverty**

Throughout the Commission we have heard how growing up poor and in poor communities increases the risk of being targeted and exploited by criminals and drives and deepens the marginalisation that many very vulnerable young people feel. Most of the children in the criminal justice system grow up in the poorest areas and have often been exposed to violence and family breakdown. The number of young people growing up in poverty is shockingly high for a wealthy country, limiting life chances and increasing risk of adversity. For some young people with nothing, the lure of easy financial rewards can be irresistible – only exacerbated by poor job prospects and the pressures of the cost of living crisis bearing down on their family.

We want to see government recognise poverty as a driver of vulnerability to crime and exploitation. In the short term this would mean updating family benefits in line with inflation, ending the two-child benefit cap and an end to no-warning debt deductions to Universal Credit that makes it impossible for families to plan their budgets. It would also mean the extension of free school meals to all families receiving Universal Credit. In the medium term, Government should re-establish its Child Poverty Unit tasked with reducing and then ending child poverty to level up opportunities and life chances to all communities.

### **RECOMMENDATION 5: Government establishes a new *Sure Start Plus* Programme - a "Sure Start for Teenagers" network of intervention and support that reduces the risks vulnerable young people face and encourage them to thrive**

For many young people, problems escalate and compound in their teenage years, making them more vulnerable to a chain of events that can result in them being taken into care and/or becoming at risk of sexual and criminal exploitation, and criminalisation. These risks can be

reduced but funding for early intervention has decreased by 70% over the last decade leading to a crisis-driven system with few resources to respond to problems as they first emerge. The result is a society that frequently fails to proactively prevent teenagers from becoming caught up in serious violence, exploitation, and crime, and is then left to deal with crisis. The tragic losses of life, criminalisation, and diminished life chances for teenagers, come alongside huge economic costs and over-stretched services.

We recommend that Government embraces an ‘invest to save’ ethos at the core of its strategy for improving the lives of vulnerable children and establishes a national co-ordinated Sure Start Plus programme of intervention and ongoing support to identify and respond to vulnerable young people’s needs, driving down risks, protecting them from violence and harm and supporting them to succeed. This “Sure Start for Teenagers” style programme would be run from a new joint Children, Schools and Families Department and a Department for Health unit.

**RECOMMENDATION 6: Government sets a target of 1,000 Sure Start Plus Hubs by 2027 to co-ordinate and deliver health and education support for vulnerable teenagers. Established in and around schools, the hubs will be run by charities, public bodies, business, and philanthropy organisations.**

Case review after case review describes how opportunities to help young people who have come to harm were missed because statutory agencies did not work together, did not share data and information, did not have resources to provide the support needed and were unclear about who was responsible for keeping the youngster safe. Young people are dying because no one thinks it’s their job to protect them.

*Sure Start Plus Hubs* will provide a new “invest to save” ethos at the heart of improving the lives of vulnerable teenagers. Their focus will be on preventing crisis by supporting young people and their families, providing clear leadership, accountability, and effective partnerships with communities and stakeholders in local areas. Ultimately, they will be about ensuring teenagers and their families get the right practical help they need, when they need it.

We recommend that the Government sets an ambitious target to deliver hubs in and around 25% (1,000) of England’s secondary schools by 2027, starting in areas with the highest levels of deprivation and need.

Like Sure Start centres, *Sure Start Plus Hubs* will lead and co-ordinate health and wellbeing support, early intervention, education psychologists, mental health support, SEND support and support for families through trauma informed and responsive practice - but with a focus on teenagers. Long-term relationship building by youth practitioners and family support workers with young people, their families, and the community will be central to their work.

The Hubs will be delivered by a broad range of providers including charities and voluntary organisations, public bodies, business, and philanthropy, collaborating closely with local statutory agencies, and other public bodies including the health service and the police. The hubs will be staffed by those who reflect and who have the trust of the local community they serve. The voice of children and young people will be reflected in decision-making and in the services and facilities provided. Hubs will bring together services that are already funded to work in a new co-ordinated way. Additional funding will be needed to extend preventative work and provide leadership and co-ordination.

The work of the Hubs will be co-ordinated and supported by new local strategic partnerships which gather local data, map vulnerability, identify need, and co-ordinate services in response and account for outcomes for children. These partnerships were recommended in the Independent Children’s Social Care Review.

**RECOMMENDATION 7: A national mission to identify and remove racial bias in the systems that are currently failing many Black, Brown and Minority Ethnic children**

The disproportionate numbers of Black boys in the youth justice system and in every part of the social care landscape is shocking. Black children are disproportionately more likely to be excluded from school and affected by criminal exploitation. They are less likely to be seen as victims and more likely to be viewed as offenders. We have heard and received a wealth of evidence showing there are racial biases in systems that are failing Black, Brown, and Minority Ethnic children.

We strongly agree with the Lammy Review recommendation to ‘explain or reform’ racial disparities in the youth justice system and believe it should be applied to other systems that are responsible for keeping children safe and improving children’s lives.

Firstly, we recommend that Government accepts these biases exist, and then undertakes urgent work to develop positive, inclusive, anti-racist approaches and accountability to all aspects of young people’s services and support, including positive workforce strategies, rooting out racial biases and introducing strategies with targets to end them.

We recommend a rapid review into the adultification of Black children and young people, involving the education, social care, mental health, and criminal justice systems which sets out proposals for Government to adopt.

We recommend that the new Department for Children, Families and Schools leads a new Black-led taskforce to work with school leaders, children’s services and health professionals, the police, and parents to not only remove biases in the system but better reflect all communities in systems that support children and young people. This work must be a high priority for Government and include clear targets to increase recruitment of Black, Brown and Minority Ethnic teachers, social workers, youth practitioners, mental health workers, foster-carers, and those working in the criminal justice system. We also recommend changes to the school curriculum to make it fully inclusive for all children.

**RECOMMENDATION 8: A new Family First approach that supports families with children at risk of becoming involved with gangs, serious violence, or criminal exploitation and which prevents crisis, financed through the implementation of Children’s Social Care reforms, and delivered by local authorities and family organisations.**

A theme throughout the Commission is how often families feel ignored or left with nowhere to turn when their children become at risk of gang involvement, serious violence, and criminal exploitation. Stronger support systems will make it harder for those that want to exploit teenagers to succeed.

We recommend a new “Family First” approach in government and local agencies to build and strengthen the capacity of, and resilience of, families with vulnerable teenagers. This would include a bespoke scheme led by the Department for Children, Families and Schools, within the Government’s existing ‘Supporting Families’ programme, specifically targeted at families with teenagers, and would be delivered through *Sure Start Plus* hubs or schools.

The emphasis would be on working with families to prevent crisis and protect teenagers at risk of being drawn into gangs, violence, and crime. This should include working with families to provide intensive support if crisis hits to prevent them going into statutory care.

All Government policies should be put through a 'family test assessment' to determine their impact on children and families.

We recommend Government launches and funds a new 'Teenager at Risk' helpline to respond to children and their parents who are worried about the threat of grooming and violence and want help to stay safe. This helpline could be run by existing providers of support for families, who already have a wealth of expertise in this area, and should provide a direct link to local agencies, charities and other organisations and services who can offer immediate support and help.

**RECOMMENDATION 9: Reforming the children's social care system to provide high quality care for all teenagers, taking an invest-to-save approach and delivered by a partnership of Government, local authorities and the third sector.**

Whilst we believe additional support for families will reduce the number of teenagers in care, there will always be some children who will be unable to live with their parents.

Going into care can put vulnerable teenagers at greater risk of harm because there is a chronic shortage of appropriate residential care places for teenagers. Thousands of young people are currently accommodated in unregulated provision which can be very unsafe, and many more in children's homes where they are moved too often and sometimes to areas far from home. We believe many more teenagers could stay with their extended family if they had the right support.

We want there to be high quality specialist social care for teenagers for those who need it.

By 2027, we recommend:

- 300 new local children's homes to be established for local shared care support for teenagers or converted from current unregulated provision.
- 2,000 specialist youth foster carers are recruited to provide care for teenagers unable to live with their family or whilst they are on remand.
- 3,000 families are supported to provide kinship care for teenagers to stay with their families.

**RECOMMENDATION 10: The recruitment of an army of Youth Practitioners to inspire, support and guide young people in their community, financed by funds from the proceeds of crime and administered by a collaboration of national charities.**

Funding for youth services has reduced by 70% over the last 10 years leaving teenagers without the places and trusted adults to turn to in order to build relationships, keep them safe and inspire them. Some young people are being too easily exposed to the criminals who groom them into believing they are providing relationships they are missing elsewhere in their life. We believe vulnerable children need a new army of Youth Practitioners that understand and can engage with young people.

With a recognised importance and status on a par with education, 'Youth Practitioners' would hold youth work qualifications and receive salaries that reflect this.

We want to see a major programme of recruitment starting in the most disadvantaged areas that leads to the recruit of an additional 10,000 Youth Practitioners by 2027. This workforce would be employed by community groups, schools, and local authorities. They would work with young people in and around schools to develop positive activities and support long-term, intensive relationships and support for teenagers at risk of violence and exclusion. Youth Practitioners will integrate with pastoral staff in school and youth justice teams to provide universal and specialist support.

We recommend this national recruitment programme is administered by a collaboration of national charities and funded partly through ringfencing the millions of pounds the Treasury receives from the proceeds of crime.

**RECOMMENDATION 11: Open all school buildings before and after school, at weekends and during holidays, to provide safe and appealing places for teenagers, financed by funds from dormant bank accounts and National Lottery community funding.**

Our schools are full of facilities and resources that are underutilised. They should be a whole community asset, but often they are locked away, often for weeks on end. We want all secondary schools to open their doors for breakfast before school, after school, into the evenings, and during weekends and school holidays. We need to make all our schools a huge community resource available to all young people and their families. This should also include schools in the independent sector.

We recommend out-of-formal-school programmes should be co-ordinated with local Sure Start Plus Hubs, with activities delivered by Youth Practitioners, local community groups, sports coaches, artists, and volunteers. In areas without a hub, the local authority would co-ordinate and lead activities in conjunction with community groups.

We recommend that capital funding is made available to pay for minor alterations to school buildings to open-up extended hours and that funding is made available to schools and community groups to provide out of school programmes. This would also provide childcare for older children to support working parents.

We recommend that the Youth Investment Fund, established to create and expand youth facilities and services, is seen as a down-payment investment to establish improved facilities and works strategically with *Sure Start Plus* to develop provision in and around schools and in the wider community.

**RECOMMENDATION 12: Government to promote a new era of inclusive education, ending the culture of exclusion and helping all children to succeed in their education.**

Many vulnerable teenagers fall through the gaps in education, diminishing their opportunities in life and heightening the risks of harm. Behind the headlines of the tragic deaths, acts of serious violence and criminal exploitation of our young people over recent years there is often a pattern of children disengaging and falling out of school and into harm. Too often these children have Special Educational Needs, and they are disproportionately Black. The education system overall is not doing enough to prioritise the needs of vulnerable children, and it needs significant reform to ensure all children can succeed.

Government should set the tone for a new culture of inclusion, support and accountability across all schools, bringing an end to the culture and habit of exclusion in some schools. We want all schools to have high expectations for all their children, alongside an expectation that they will have the resources to support those children who need it, enabling them to stay in school or encouraging them to attend school. We recommend:

- An end to exclusions and suspensions for primary school age children by 2024
- Removal of children from a secondary school becomes a genuine last resort and is only possible when signed off by the CEO of an academy school or MAT or the Director of Children's Services
- Special Educational Need support is extended with the provision of therapeutic support and educational psychologists through the Sure Start Plus hub.
- Academy chains and local authorities must monitor rates of racial disproportionality in the use of exclusions and to take action to tackle this.

- A new transitional fund is provided to enable local authorities to develop area wide inclusion programmes.
- A new inclusion measure is introduced by Ofsted to inform judgement.
- Pupil Referral Units are disbanded, and specialist provision is established in and around schools instead.
- Tax breaks for businesses who fund a Specialist Creative Programme that is designed in partnership with the creative industries and runs in schools and specialist schools.
- A new focus on pathways to employment tasters through primary and secondary school, with a guarantee of a high-quality internships for disadvantaged students and teenagers in the social care system.

**RECOMMENDATION 13: A one-off mental health recovery programme, financed in part by a levy on social media companies and mobile phone providers.**

Children and young people are suffering unprecedented levels of poor mental health, heightened by the pandemic. Demand has soared and Children and Young People’s Mental Health Services are buckling under the pressure. Many tell us that they need wellbeing support that is not bureaucratic or over medicalised and that works alongside them to develop and build positive well-being. Vulnerable teenagers with complex needs are more likely to suffer poor mental health but also often least likely to want to seek help through the established clinical routes. This is particularly the case in many disadvantaged and marginalised communities.

We recommend:

- A one-off £1bn children’s mental health catch-up fund is established. This fund would be financed in part by a levy on social media companies and mobile phone providers.
- Young people are guaranteed mental health treatment from CYPMHS in 4 weeks with a guarantee of next day emergency for young people at risk of self-harm and suicide.
- Guaranteed mental health assessments are offered to young people at risk of exclusion from school, entering care, or at the point of arrest. This includes education psychologists for any child at risk of exclusion from school.
- Accelerate the rollout of mental health teams in schools in the two thirds of remaining schools who do not have provision, committing to new funding beyond 2023 to ensure all schools have a mental health team by 2030.
- New mental health drop-in programmes delivered as part of the Sure Start Plus programme in the community in and around schools.
- A new programme of social prescription that enables GPs and health professionals to pay for sports and arts sessions, music, drama, adventure, and volunteering programmes to improve young people’s confidence, self-esteem, build skills and make friends.
- Wellbeing and mental health training for all professionals working with young people to support the identification and understanding of poor mental health.
- Education about wellbeing on social media is delivered in schools and on all social media platforms.

**RECOMMENDATION 14: A rolling national campaign to recruit parent and community volunteers for local sports and arts activities, Scouts, Guides and Cadets, financed by the Department for Housing, Levelling Up and Communities and administered by a collaboration between national charities.**

We want to encourage and support communities to contribute to a renaissance in local activities and opportunities for our young people sharing their own talents and skills to flood local neighbourhoods with positive things going on for teenagers.

We recommend a national campaign to recruit adult volunteers into a civic movement for young people. Parent and family volunteers would contribute to community and leisure activities,

scouts, guides, cadets, and adventure for children after school and during weekends and holidays.

**RECOMMENDATION 15: Provide more opportunities for teenagers to volunteer, experience adventure to build confidence and character through an extension of the Duke of Edinburgh's Award, financed by business.**

Young people have told us that they want help to build their own health and wellbeing through activities and volunteering.

We recommend extending The Duke of Edinburgh's Award, with its strong focus on volunteering and adventure, to young people in areas of disadvantage, financed by business and the National Citizen Service.

**RECOMMENDATION 16: Reform the youth justice system to accelerate moves towards a fully welfare-based, trauma-informed Child First approach.**

Much of the evidence we have taken during the Commission has suggested that, at its worst, the youth justice system can be under-resourced, chaotic, disorientating, unsafe, and lacking in anything like the care that children need. The over-representation of Black boys in the youth justice system and of children who have been in the care of the state is particularly shocking. While we believe our previous recommendations would divert more young people away from exploitation and harm, we also believe there is a need for more urgent reform to improve outcomes for young people who do become involved in the criminal justice system.

- A swift move to a trauma-informed system across the entire criminal justice system, from police to courts, from YOTs to custody, rehabilitation, and resettlement
- Racial disparity in the youth justice system must be a core strategic priority for every aspect of the system, with clear leadership and accountability.
- The ground-breaking commitment for a new trauma informed secure school should be extended to replace all custodial settings for children. Models of welfare alternatives to custody should be quickly explored and piloted.
- Urgent work is undertaken by Government to better understand the extent of involvement of young women and girls in criminal exploitation, serious violence and gangs.
- The work of Youth Offending Teams, Safeguarding Teams, and Youth Practitioners to be better integrated to provide greater focus on prevention and diversion.
- This focus should be replicated by an integrated strategic focus from Violence Reduction Units, Police and Crime Commissioners, the police, and the Youth Justice Board working with new *Sure Start Plus* Hubs.
- Periods of time teenagers who are accused of committing crimes spend released under investigation should be time limited in line with pre-charge bail.
- A statutory definition of Child Criminal Exploitation should be introduced.
- The National Referral Mechanism, established to identify and provide support to potential victims of modern slavery, must be significantly improved with improved guidance to the CPS and judiciary and greater integration and collaboration with children's services support.
- Much more needs to be done to keep young people on remand out of custody, including the recruitment of remand foster care and intensive family support. The use of Release on Temporary License is also not utilised enough.
- Reforms to the court system to improve the experience for young people including virtual and remote hearings must continue and be extended. This should include specialist training for legal professionals in the court system – including lawyers, barristers, magistrates, and judges.

- The relationship between social media and serious violence should be investigated further to identify required action in the school curriculum, safeguarding decisions and by social media platforms.
- The approach to resettlement is overhauled to provide secure and planned support to prevent young people from reoffending.
- The age of criminal responsibility which remains very low in England compared to other European countries is raised to 14.
- The transition to young adult status at 18 remains a consistent area of concern which must be addressed urgently.

## WHAT WOULD SURE START PLUS HUBS LOOK LIKE?

The centrepiece of our recommendations is a new ***Sure Start Plus*** - a ‘Sure Start for Teenagers’.

We believe *Sure Start Plus* should be a universal offer that is established initially in the areas of greatest need. It will be delivered through local hubs operating in and around secondary schools. The Hub will be a mechanism for bringing services together and providing co-ordinated bespoke services and activities for teenagers and their families who need it. *Sure Start Plus* draws on the experience of the well-recognised and well-respected Sure Start programme for younger children, which we believe was a mistake to dismantle. It also draws on the model of community hubs around schools and of Family Hubs.

*Sure Start Plus* will bring together statutory services for families with teenagers such as therapeutic and family support, intervention for families who are struggling, and specialist help for parents suffering from addiction, poor mental health and domestic violence – one of the most common drivers of teenage vulnerability and of teenagers going into care. Family workers will be on hand to help parents who are worried that their teenagers might be being groomed or enticed into gangs and families will be able to work with professionals to develop parenting approaches and skills to keep their teenagers safe. Family workers will also be able to help families struggling with housing, debt, food, and the cost of living.

For young people, the *Sure Start Plus* Hub will provide education and health support. Led by a Hub co-ordinator, this will include:

- Work with local secondary schools, children’s services, health, local community groups and the police to build support systems for teenagers, especially those at risk.
- Identifying young people who need extra help – in school and at home. This might include teenagers with Special Educational Needs, those struggling with school, those at risk of exclusion, children with anxiety and depression and those at risk of being involved in violence and the criminal justice system.
- Co-ordinating and delivering practical help and support from specialists including education psychologists, mental health counsellors, language, social and emotional support and behaviour, decision making and coping skills and out of school activities – sports, arts, volunteering, and adventure.
- Long term relationships with youth practitioners building trusted relationships and providing valued guidance to help teenagers set goals, build confidence, navigate problems and develop solutions.
- Work with community groups to develop, co-ordinate and deliver youth activities in and around the school and in the wider community before and after school, weekends and holidays.

- Work strategically and collaborate with early years provision, children’s centre and with Family Hubs.

The Hub will be a local asset where young people trust those around them, where long-term relationships are built, that is inclusive, nurturing, culturally sensitive and representative, and relentlessly positive about encouraging success and high aspiration. We believe the role of the third sector is crucial to its success, and our vision would see charities and other organisations at the forefront of running hubs, sharing their good practice and experience, and encouraging and helping statutory services to build greater trust in communities. Our vision is a network of Hubs that endures and becomes part of the fabric of a local community, lasting for decades, adapting as society changes.

- Hubs will look like youth centres but will also be accessible for families. They may operate from part of the school or nearby building in the community.
- A coordinator and administrator will form the core of the team which will bring other agencies and professionals together to co-ordinate and deliver support in response to identified need working with young people and families.
- The co-ordinator will work strategically with local schools, community groups, children’s services, housing organisations, the police and NHS mental health teams.
- Youth practitioners will work in the hub and will also go to other places young people are in the community.
- Family workers will work with families in the hub and in the family home.
- The Hub will work seamlessly with the school, opening extended hours.
- Universal activities will encourage young people to drop in, build relationships, make friends, and have fun. Targeted activities with young people at risk will take place alongside.

## **THE COST OF VULNERABILITY AND OUR COSTED PROPOSALS FOR CHANGE.**

Every young person who loses their life, who is harmed, or who has their life chances diminished is a tragedy - for them, their family, friends, school, and community, and for us all as a nation. How can we be confident in our ability to grow and flourish as a society if we are prepared to neglect and discard so many young lives and their talents? The Commission’s final report has set out how thousands of vulnerable young people in England are paying the price for our country’s lack of oversight, focus and resolve in preventing crises from happening. We believe so much of this can be prevented and that it should be.

The comment and recommendations in this report focus on the responsibilities of national and local government and statutory agencies, but we all have a responsibility as a society. We should be appalled by the violence that some young people in our country are experiencing at the hands of exploiters and criminals.

It is happening in plain sight and is clear to see if we choose to look. We are allowing ruthless criminals to exploit, harm and commodify some of our most vulnerable teenagers for financial gain. We are making it too easy for them and we need to fight back with determined resolve to protect our young people and punish those who harm them. These are our young people – not yours to recruit. We care for our young people and we will protect them from harm.

The moral case for intervention to protect and support our most vulnerable teenagers is clear, but there is also a clear economic case. The exploitation and violence experienced by some young

people comes with a heavy price tag for the public purse. The costs of police time, social workers, schools, health, and the criminal justice system are all immediate and can last through into adulthood, bringing heavy costs on to our welfare, health, social care and council budgets. The cost of supporting vulnerable people is high.

In setting out our proposals for change and our estimated costs, we have done so recognising these existing high costs of acute care and vulnerability. Other recently published reports have already set out detailed calculations and costings. For example, in November 2021, the Independent Review of Children's Social Care estimated the lifetime social cost of adverse outcomes for all children who have ever needed a social worker is £23 billion a year.<sup>209</sup>

Five years earlier, the Early Intervention Foundation published detailed analysis of the immediate costs of late intervention - the acute, statutory, and essential benefits and services that are required when children and young people experience significant difficulties in life, many of which might have been prevented. It found that in England and Wales, we spend nearly £17 billion per year on the damaging problems that affect children and young people such as domestic violence and abuse, child neglect and maltreatment, mental health problems, youth crime and exclusion from education and the labour market.<sup>210</sup> These figures, substantial though they are, were only the immediate fiscal costs so did not capture any lasting effects into adult life and sometimes into the next generation, nor the wider social and economic costs. The £17 billion was spread across different public agencies at national and local level, from local authorities, the NHS, schools, welfare, police to the criminal justice system. Local authorities bore the largest share at £6.4 billion, followed by the NHS with £3.7 billion and the Department for Work and Pensions with £2.7 billion.

In 2017, Making The Difference and IPPR concluded that every cohort of permanently excluded pupils will go on to cost the state an extra £2.1 billion in education, health, benefits and criminal justice costs.<sup>211</sup>

In 2020, The Youth Violence Commission estimated that over the preceding 11 years, the economic and social cost of serious youth violence across England and Wales was at least £6bn, but more likely in the region of £11bn.<sup>212</sup>

Consistent evidence and evaluation shows how positive intervention to reduce the risks teenagers are experiencing and prevent harm have a strong cost/benefit case. For example, Shift UK, the organisation which exists to break the destructive cycle of children and young people caught up in or at risk of crime, has been found to cost no more than 3% of costs avoided until the age of 40 and no more than 13% of costs avoided in the next five years. Our proposals draw on these, and other similar findings, to put forward a positive and proactive programme of invest to save. We also recognise that Government is already providing funding to alleviate the impact of teenage vulnerability and in some cases to reduce risks. However, these funds, significant in total as they are, are uncoordinated, not aligned in an overall national government strategic purpose, and are not measured to common outcomes. Like so much of the funding for young people, many of the programmes are short term, and patched together.

We believe if these funds were brought together across Government into a high priority strategic programme with focus, drive, and a determination to bring about change for vulnerable young people and delivered in a consistent and measurable way in local communities, they have the potential to contribute to real change. This report has set out innovative proposals to prevent

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<sup>209</sup> [Independent review of children's social care puts cost of poor outcomes at £23 billion per year - The Independent Review of Children's Social Care \(childrensocialcare.independent-review.uk\)](https://www.independent-review.org/child-social-care-review/child-social-care-costs-23-billion-per-year)

<sup>210</sup> [The cost of late intervention: EIF analysis 2016 | Early Intervention Foundation](https://www.earlyinterventionfoundation.org/our-work/2016-2017-analysis)

<sup>211</sup> [Making The Difference: Breaking the link between school exclusion and social exclusion | IPPR](https://www.makingthedifference.org.uk/2017/05/16/making-the-difference-breaking-the-link-between-school-exclusion-and-social-exclusion-ipp/)

<sup>212</sup> [ad2256\\_a0f38547a4134e0cb923905486bcc186.pdf \(yvcommission.com\)](https://www.yvcommission.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/ad2256_a0f38547a4134e0cb923905486bcc186.pdf)

vulnerable teenagers from coming to harm and to provide the support they need to succeed. This is how much they will cost and how we recommend they could be funded.

## **The estimated cost of our recommendations**

**Government sets a target of 1,000 *Sure Start Plus* Hubs by 2027 to co-ordinate and deliver health and education support for vulnerable teenagers. Established in and around schools, the hubs will be run by charities, public bodies, business and philanthropy organisations.**

We estimate Hubs will require an average of £500,000 per year (this includes £200,000 for staff salaries for a core team to lead and co-ordinate strategic partnerships and delivery of support for teenagers and £300,000 for accommodation and activities). The total cost once fully established is **£500m per year**. In the first 3 years this would account for an average of **£250m** per year.

**RECOMMENDATION: A new Family First approach that supports families with children at risk of becoming involved with gangs, serious violence, or criminal exploitation and which prevents crisis, financed through the implementation of Children's Social Care reforms, and delivered by local authorities and family organisations.**

2,000 family support workers (2 to each *Sure Start Plus* Hub).

The Independent Review of Children's Social Care proposed an increase in family support, which we support, to prevent families falling into crisis and to reduce the number of children going into care. The existing Supporting Families programme is currently funded at £695m over the Spending Review period 2022 to 2025. The Social Care Review proposed that this is expanded by an extra £2bn over the next five years.

We are costing for two family workers to every *Sure Start Plus* Hub in addition to the Supporting Families team to ensure there is adequate and consistent bespoke support for support for families with older children. We estimate this would cost in the region of **£100m** per year.

'Teenager at Risk' helpline to respond to children and their parents who are worried about the threat of grooming and violence and want help to stay safe. We estimate this would cost **£2m** per year.

These workers would work alongside a comprehensive programme of family support for parents with younger children to offer to offer practical help and support for families to overcome addictions, domestic violence, and poor mental health and the development of family hubs. We have assumed that this work will be funded through reforms to the social care system following the Independent Review of Children's Social Care.

**RECOMMENDATION: Reforming the children's social care system to provide high quality care for all teenagers, taking an invest to save approach and delivered by a partnership of Government, local authorities and the third sector.**

The Independent Review of Children's Social Care has proposed major reforms to the system to improve support for families to prevent children entering the care system and to provide bespoke care in the care system. For teenagers who are disproportionately likely to be placed in residential care, some of which is currently inadequate, we are recommending a one-off investment to increase the supply of specialist care support. Our aim is to significantly reduce the number of teenagers needing social care. However, for those that do, we wish to see local specialist places.

**£600m** estimated cost for councils to establish or convert 300 local children's homes to provide shared care support for 1,500 teenagers.

**£60m** estimated cost to recruit, train and support 2,000 specialist youth foster carers to provide care for teenagers, including on remand.

**£50m** estimated cost to support Kinship Carers to care for teenagers at risk.

These are one-off costs to develop the supply of specialist provision for teenagers which will be funded through mainstream budgets for children's social care.

**RECOMMENDATION: The recruitment of an army of Youth Practitioners to inspire, support and guide young people in their community, financed by funds from the proceeds of crime and administered by a collaboration of national charities.**

Salaries for 10,000 practitioners are costed at **£400m per year** once they are all in post. In the first 3 years this is likely to require an average of **£200m per year**. Newly qualified teachers and those leaving the profession will be encouraged to undertake a one-year conversion course to youth work. **£30m** is required to subsidise these courses over the four-year period. A fast-track Step Up to Youth Work programme would also be established to train and support Youth Practitioners to qualification in a year. This would be a cost of **£30m** over the four-year period. Youth Practitioners would work with existing youth support workers and volunteers.

**RECOMMENDATION: Open all school buildings before and after school, at weekends and during holidays, to provide safe and appealing places for teenagers, financed by funds from dormant bank accounts and National Lottery community funding.**

Capital funding to pay for minor alterations to school buildings to open-up extended hours and to create and extend youth facilities in the community through the existing Youth Investment Capital Fund of £368m being extended to £500m.

The Holiday Activities and Food programme funds are extended from £200m per year (our assumption is £100m per year for secondary school age children) with an additional £200m per year to provide **£300m per year** for out of school programmes in and around secondary schools and youth activities in the community. This would be financed through a dedicated funding programme from the National Lottery.

**RECOMMENDATION: Government to promote a new era of inclusive education, ending the culture of exclusion and helping all children to succeed in their education.**

A move to inclusive education will be supported through Sure Start Plus Hubs which will work with health and wider agencies to co-ordinate and deliver specialist support including therapeutic support. This work will also benefit from a change in education policy, to prioritise inclusion. In the short term, we believe that this will require additional finances to support transition. We recommend:

**£25m** new transitional funding is provided to enable local authorities to support the implementation of area-wide inclusion programmes in schools.

**£700m** per year transitional support for 3 years for additional SEND and specialist support to enable children to succeed in school.

Support to develop pathways to employment through primary and secondary school of education, tasters with a guarantee of high-quality internships for disadvantaged students. **£100m** financed by a partnership between business and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills.

**RECOMMENDATION: A one-off mental health recovery programme, financed by a levy on social media companies and mobile phone providers.**

We propose that new Integrated Care Services identify the needs of vulnerable young people as a priority and deliver integrated strategies to meet their needs as part of a reformed mental health support strategy for young people. However, these long-term reforms will only be possible if the mental health system and the level of demand is stabilised first.

We are proposing a £1bn young people's mental health recovery programme to improve young people's mental health immediately and to enable specialist mental health services to catch up with demand. This will be transitional funding. Once reset, the funding for young people's mental health would be delivered through existing health funding.

**The £1bn recovery fund would include:**

£250m to improve CAMHS waiting times and treatment

£500m to extend mental health teams to all schools

£150m Community based drop-in mental health centres linked to Sure Start Plus Hubs.

£100m A social prescription scheme to fund sessions in sports, arts, music, drama, and adventure.

**RECOMMENDATION: A rolling national campaign to recruit parent and community volunteers for local sports and arts activities, Scouts, Guides and Cadets, financed by the Department for Housing, Levelling Up and Communities and administered by a collaboration between national charities.**

**£15m** per year from the Department of Housing, Levelling up and Communities.

**RECOMMENDATION: Provide more opportunities for teenagers to volunteer, experience adventure to build confidence and character through an extension of the Duke of Edinburgh Award, financed by business and the National Citizens Service.**

**£30m** per year financed from existing National Citizen Service budget from 2025.

	Year 1 -3 total (£)	Ongoing per year (£)	Financed by
Sure Start Plus	750m	500m	Government
Family Support Workers	300m	100m	Government
Helpline	6m		Government
Social Care	710m		Government (financed in part through proposed windfall tax on private providers)
Youth Practitioners	660m	400m	Part financed by proceeds of crime funds to Treasury
Open up schools	600m	200m	Dormant bank accounts/National Lottery
Inclusive schools/journey to employment	825m		Government/business
Mental health recovery	1bn		Levy Social Media Companies Government/NHS
Community volunteers	45m		Department Housing, Levelling Up and Communities
Young people engagement and adventure	90m		National Citizens Service

Total	£4.93bn	£1.2bn
Total Government:	£1.94bn	£600m pa as ongoing invest to save

### Note on costing assumptions:

**Sure Start Plus** costs are estimated as a gradual roll out programme to 1,000 hubs in four years' time. £500,000 per year is comprised of £200,000 for core staff salaries and £300,000 for accommodation and activities. Staff will co-ordinate and integrate existing services to improve effectiveness and reduce levels of high-cost teenage risk. This is an invest-to-save programme.

Estimates are based on two **family support workers** to each of the 1,000 Hubs. They are costed from the start of the programme to enable workers to begin working with families from the outset. Some of these costs may be covered by existing funding for the programme or additional funds that may be available for the reform of children's social care following the Independent Review, however we believe that this support is so urgent for families of teenagers at risk that we have also estimated costs for it independently to ensure it is in place.

The **helpline** is funded for three years, and it is anticipated that young people and families will be able to turn to their local hub for help in the longer term.

**Social Care** costs are estimated as one-off three-year transitional funds to reset the supply of social care for teenagers. Social care is funded as a statutory responsibility of local authorities.

Costs related to the recruitment and employment of **youth practitioners** are estimated on a programme which will reach 10,000 practitioners in year 4.

Estimated costs to **open up schools** and other local facilities for young people at risk include capital grants to modify buildings and revenue costs to run activities.

Estimated costs to support **inclusive schools** are three-year transitional funds to enable schools to reset their support for vulnerable young people. The journey to employment programme is a one-off programme.

The community volunteers programme is a one-off programme to boost the number of volunteers working with young people.

**The young people engagement and adventure programme** is a one-off programme to boost engagement with young people at risk.

## Contributions to the Commission on Young Lives

### The Commission's Expert Panel

We are grateful to our national panel of experts and leaders who helped to guide and inform the work of the Commission. This unique group of people combined personal and professional insight, understanding of the issues and the impact on the lives of young people and communities, with extensive experience of 'getting things done' in communities, services, and government. Commissioners also participated in our evidence sessions with expert witnesses.

Amani Simpson, storyteller, social entrepreneur, and youth coach  
Baroness Louise Casey DBE, CBE, former senior government advisor  
Bianca St Prix, criminal defence solicitor  
Deborah White, Chair of the Passion Project Foundation  
Duncan Bew, trauma surgeon and founder of GAVEducation  
Geeta Subramaniam-Mooney, former Corporate Director Brighter Futures (Newham)  
Jeffery Wotherspoon, executive, leadership, and life coach  
Junior Smart OBE, founder of the SOS Project at St. Giles Trust.  
Kendra Houseman, trainer and advisor on all aspects of safeguarding and co-founder of Out of the Shadows  
Prof. Leon Feinstein, Professor of Education and Children's Social Care, University of Oxford  
Martin Hewitt, Chair of the National Police Chiefs Council  
Naomi Hulston, Chief Executive, Catch22  
Neil Giles, Director, Stop the Traffik  
Prof. Sir Kevan Collins, leading educationalist  
Sophie Humphreys, founder of Shift UK.  
Rev. Steve Chalke MBE, founder of the Oasis Charitable Trust.  
Stuart Roden, Chair of Unlocking Potential.

### The Oasis Practitioner Group

Oasis practitioners from a diverse group working on the frontline in different areas in England shared their experience of working with young people, families, and communities, particularly those who are vulnerable and under pressure. We are thankful to Oasis practitioners from South Grimsby, Waterloo, Lister Park (Bradford), Oasis Academy Hadley, South Quay School, Oasis Community Housing.

### Young Lives Panel

The Commission was informed by a Young Lives Panel of 15 young people from around England who shared their experience and ideas for change with the Commission.

We are grateful to Oasis Oldham, Oasis Brightstowe, Oasis Hadley, Oasis North Bristol & Bradford County Council for facilitating these discussions.

### Parliament

We are grateful to the wide range of Parliamentarians from all the main parties who have offered invaluable advice, encouragement, and guidance during the last 15 months.

### Evidence gathering

The Commission on Young lives is grateful to all the organisations and individuals who have given their expertise and support through evidence sessions, evidence submissions and hosting visits and roundtables, including:

A Better Start, Southend	Crest Advisory	Local Government Association
Action for Children	CYP Mental Health Coalition	London Borough of Islington
Action Isleworth Mothers	Department for Culture, Media and Sport	London Borough of Newham
ADCS	Department for Education	London Violence Reduction Unit
Agenda	Department for Levelling Up	Manchester Violence Reduction Unit
Alliance for Youth Justice	Department of Health	Merseyside Police Violence Reduction Partnership
Anna Freud Centre	Devon and Cornwall Police	Metropolitan Police
Article 39	Do It Justice	Ministry of Justice
Association of School and College Leaders	Edmonton Academy Trust	Missing People
Association for Young People's Health	EIF	Nacro
Association of Colleges	Education Policy Institute	National Education Union
Association of Youth Offending Team Managers	Essex Police	National Police Chief Council
Barca Leeds	Family Action	National Youth Advocacy Service
Barnardo's	Family Rights Group	Neighbourhood Policing Coventry
Barnsley Safeguarding Children Partnership	Girl Guiding	New Horizons
Become	Glasgow City Council	NHS Confederation
Big Education Trust	Gwent Police	NHS England & NHS improvement
Bradford LA	Home Office	NSPCC
Brent LA	Howard League	Oasis Restore
Brook	Humankind	Ofsted
Camden LA	IPSEA	Our Time
Centre for Innovation and Research in Childhood and Youth (CIRCY) at the University of Sussex.	Just for Kids Law and CRAE	Partisan
Centre for Social Justice	Kinship	Passmores Academy
Chance UK	Kirklees College	Pathfinders
Children's Society	Lancaster University	Peter Hyman
Chris Wild	Leaders Unlocked	Place2be
Centre for Mental Health	Leeds City Council	
College of Policing	Leigh Middleton, National Youth Association	
Coventry YOS	Voice 21	

Police and Crime Commissioners	Seashells Children's Centre, Sheerness	The House Project
Polly Curtis, Demos	Seyi Obakin, Centrepoint	The Magistrates Association
Positive Steps	SHiFT UK	The Nest
Power2	Sir Norman Lamb	The Parent and Infant Foundation
Prathiba Chitsabesan	Smart Social	The Streetlife Trust
Prison Reform Trust	Social Finance	PRUs
Prisoners' Education Trust	South & West Yorkshire Resettlement Consortium	University of Birmingham
Race Equality Foundation	Southwark Council	University of Bristol
Rachel Sylvester, The Times	SPACE	University of Oxford
Revolving Doors	Square Peg	We Are With You
Robert Halfon MP, Chair of the Education Select Committee	St Basils	West London Zone
Roots of Empathy	Steve Walk CAMHS Consultant	White House Communications
RSA	Stop the Traffik	Wiltshire County Council Youth Offending Team
Safer Young Lives Research Centre	Thames Valley Violence Reduction Unit	Youth Access
School Home Support	The Difference	Youth Endowment Fund
	The Education Endowment Foundation	Youth Justice Board

Finally, we would like to thank all those who shared their personal experiences with us. We have been contacted by many people who have been failed by systems that are supposed to protect and support them or their children, and who have wanted to tell their stories in that hope that these systems can be improved. We have also been contacted by many practitioners or retired practitioners who passed on their own experiences and ideas. We are very grateful for every one of these contributions.

