

# **Policing's response to children's involvement in drug markets, violence and exploitation– a YEF review**

## **Summary**

- YEF is seeking a team to conduct a review of the relationship between drug markets, exploitation and violence involving children – and policing's response. This project will explore how the police disrupt these markets, target adults who exploit children, and keep children safe, identifying effective practice and the policy and practice changes needed to improve this practice.
- The study will inform YEF's recommendations for the policing sector on how to reduce violence amongst children and young people (which will draw on a range of ongoing and completed research work).
- The deadline for the full draft report is 20<sup>th</sup> February 2026. The deadline for proposals is 3<sup>rd</sup> June 2025. We intend to have appointed the successful team by 18<sup>th</sup> July 2025.

## **Background**

The Youth Endowment Fund (YEF) is a charity with a mission that matters. We exist to prevent children and young people becoming involved in violence. We do this by finding out what works and building a movement to put this knowledge into practice.

Children and young people at risk of becoming involved in violence deserve services that give them the best chance of a positive future. To make sure that happens, we fund promising projects and then use the very best evaluations to find out what works. We also synthesise the best available evidence from across the world, and then aim to mobilise what we learn across various sectors to make a change to the lives of children.

It is also imperative that YEF fully understands the context in which children live, and in which services operate to support them. Only then can we make evidence-based recommendations on how best to reduce serious violence amongst children and young people. Alongside our programme funding, and evidence synthesis work, we fund a wide range of research projects (including data analysis, youth understanding work, and practice reviews) to better understand young people's lives, and the systems and services that surround them.

The policing sector is one such system that supports children.

## **YEF's policing sector work**

In 2026 YEF will publish recommendations for how the policing sector across England and Wales can support the reduction of serious violence amongst children and young people. These recommendations will draw upon YEF's existing work in the policing sector, including:

- Projects YEF has funded and evaluated in the sector (such as evaluating [police in classrooms](#) and secondary data analysis on the use of [diversion](#))

- Relevant sections of the YEF [Toolkit](#) (e.g. hot spots policing, stop and search, and focused deterrence)
- Our annual [Children, Violence and Vulnerability survey](#) of young people

In addition, YEF is currently commissioning two other research projects, exploring evidence-based practice in policing and policing's role in safeguarding and child protection. We are open to teams applying for more than one project, particularly if efficiencies can be achieved through combining methods or expertise.

## **The aim of this project**

Currently, we do not know the extent to which violence involving children is driven by the exploitation of children in drug markets. This exploitation may make a significant contribution to children's involvement in serious violence, but there's a lack of research on this relationship.

Regardless of the strength of this relationship, we know that there are some children who become involved in violence via this route. Drug markets can create the conditions for the exploitation of children, with violence used as a method to protect territory and enforce debts. Children exploited within these markets are likely to be very vulnerable to involvement in violence. In addition, recent analysis by the Centre for Young Lives has revealed a sharp increase in cases of CCE over the last two years, with children identified by social services almost 40,000 times in 2024 as victims of either CCE or CSE, or involved in gangs;<sup>1</sup> and we know from last year's Children, Violence and Vulnerability survey (YEF)<sup>2</sup> that experiences of violence are concentrated among the most vulnerable (including those at risk of exploitation and those in gangs).

We want to better understand the police response to these children, and to those individuals involved in exploitation. A recent Home Office funded systematic review into the impact of drug-related enforcement activity on serious violence and homicide highlights the need for more UK-based, recent research (the review did not identify any UK-based evidence and a lack of evidence from the last decade).<sup>3</sup>

This project aims to assess the tactics and interventions used by police to disrupt drug markets, target the adults who exploit children, and protect children – identifying best practice and opportunities for policy changes to improve and spread good practice. A better understanding of the nature and dynamics of the relationship between drug markets, exploitation and violence involving children, along with what works to tackle this, will enable the police to better safeguard vulnerable children from exploitation and violence.

## **Race equity**

There are significant racial disparities in children's experience of violence, policing and youth justice. Our 2023 survey of 7,500 children found that while the majority of violence was committed by White children (70%) and the majority of victims were White (72%), Black teenage children were, on average, more likely to be vulnerable as both victims (21%) and perpetrators (22%) compared to White children (16% and 14%,

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.centreforyounglives.org.uk/news-centre/child-of-the-north-centre-for-young-lives-report-warns-thousands-of-vulnerable-children-at-risk-of-criminal-exploitation-and-urges-government-to-roll-out-young-futures-in-disadvantaged-areas>

<sup>2</sup> <https://youthendowmentfund.org.uk/reports/children-violence-and-vulnerability-2024/who-is-affected/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/drug-related-law-enforcement-activity-and-serious-violent-crime/the-impact-of-drug-related-law-enforcement-activity-on-serious-violence-and-homicide-a-systematic-review#s6>

respectively).<sup>4</sup> Racial disparities in the justice system are particularly pronounced for Black children, who continue to be over-represented across stop and search, arrest, youth cautions, first-time entrants, children in custody and reoffending rates.<sup>5</sup> Black children make up 6% of all 10–17-year-olds, but in 2022/23, they accounted for 26% of children in custody. Other communities are also overrepresented. For instance, Gypsy, Roma and Irish Traveller children make up less than 1% of children; yet a self-reported 7% of children in custody are from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller backgrounds – over 7 times their population share.<sup>6</sup>

The Youth Endowment Fund’s mission is to prevent children and young people from becoming involved in violence. We can’t achieve this mission if we do not challenge this racial inequity. Addressing these disparities is an important aspect of our work, and race features in the research questions posed in this call for proposals.

## Research questions

These research questions are only indicative, and we encourage bidding teams to propose amendments to them and/or additional questions that they think could help meet the aims of the project. We would expect to finalise the detailed research questions and methods with the appointed team.

### 1. **Characteristics of drug markets and exploitation.**

- a. Why are children involved in drug markets in England and Wales at heightened risk of involvement in violence?
- b. Are there particular characteristics of drug markets or tactics used to exploit children which put children at a heightened risk of violence? (such as types of drugs, or particular tactics used by those exploiting children)

### 2. **Current tactics and interventions.**

- a. What tactics and interventions do police use to disrupt drug markets, target exploitative adults and protect exploited children?
- b. What are police perceptions of these tactics?
- c. What is considered to be ‘best practice’? And are the police delivering ‘best practice’?

### 3. **Race equity.**

- a. Are children from Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic groups more likely to be exploited in relation to drug markets?
- b. Are police tactics and interventions equitably supporting and protecting children from Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic backgrounds? Are children from these groups more likely to be prosecuted for offences?

### 4. **Policy and practice changes.**

- a. What changes should be made to policing tactics to better protect children exploited within drug markets from involvement in violence?

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<sup>4</sup> <https://youthendowmentfund.org.uk/reports/children-violence-and-vulnerability-2023/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/youth-justice-statistics-2023-to-2024/youth-justice-statistics-2023-to-2024#gateway-to-the-youth-justice-system>

<sup>6</sup> <https://youthendowmentfund.org.uk/reports/racial-disproportionality/>

- b. What changes should be made to funding, inspection, regulation, guidance and/or training to better protect children exploited within drug markets from involvement in violence?

## **Required outputs and suggested methodology**

To answer the research questions, we would expect to see a detailed written discussion that may draw from a range of methods, including:

- a. Desk based research. This will likely include a rapid evidence review to find out what we know about the relationship between drug markets, exploitation and violence, and a review of current statutory guidance and the literature to search for any examples of 'best practice' principles for police in targeting adults who exploit children and keeping exploited children safe.
- b. Case studies to identify 'best practice' approaches, including interviews with policing professionals. We propose initially working with the four forces who receive funding from the Home Office to tackle drug-related networks and have the most established approaches, with additional focus groups carried out to generate further insights if deemed necessary.
- c. Interviews and focus groups with experts in policing, national policy and governing bodies.
- d. Any data analysis that the review team deem possible.
- e. Additional resources suggested by the research team.

At the end of the study, we would expect all these outputs to be drawn together in a written report, comprising:

- a. An executive summary
- b. An introduction
- c. Methodology
- d. Findings (written discussion of each of the research questions in turn)
- e. Conclusion and insights for policy and practice

Upon sharing the final report with us, we would expect the research team to provide a short presentation to the YEF team on the study's findings. YEF will pay for the peer review of the report.

## **Timeline**

The deadline for proposals is 12pm on 3<sup>rd</sup> June 2025. We intend to have appointed the successful team by 18<sup>th</sup> July 2025. The deadline for the full draft report is 20<sup>th</sup> February 2026 after which a peer review process will take place.

## **Budget**

We expect the project to cost approximately £75-110k. However, we have some flexibility here, and will be judging bids on value for money rather than absolute cost. This range gives an indication of the scale of budgets we envisage - we will consistently prioritise proposals that give good value for money and strongly discourage research teams using these figures as the sole driver of their costs.

We would not expect VAT to be included in teams' budgets. Pass through VAT via sub-granting work to other organisations may in some circumstances be included. However, it is up to the bidding team to decide if they need to include VAT and any charges must be covered within the total grant amount.

We do not require budgets to use a specific template in proposals. Any approach that enables us to see total cost, the cost of project components, day rates, and number of days assigned to each team member is sufficient.

## How to apply

YEF will judge research applications using the following criteria:

- **Subject expertise (20%).** How much expertise does the team have relating to policing, drug markets, exploitation of children and violence involving children?
- **Research experience (20%).** How much experience does the team have in delivering similar research projects? Does the team have expertise and experience in delivering research projects that aim to understand racial disparities?
- **Proposed methodological approach (40%).** What methodology has the team suggested, and does it match our needs?
- **Value for money (20%).** Does the bid represent value for money?

Where teams may be weak in any of the above areas, we encourage applicants to seek expert consultants and partnerships to supplement their bid.

Proposals should be no longer than 2,500 words, and should set out the team's expertise, experience, methodological approach, and budget. You may attach relevant documents to support your application – this will not be included in the word count.

As noted above, we are open to research teams suggesting their own research questions and methodology, and/or suggesting improvements and amendments to our own. Teams are welcome to apply for multiple projects, particularly if there are opportunities to streamline methods or reporting for greater efficiency.

**Please email your application to [leanne.robinson@youthendowmentfund.org.uk](mailto:leanne.robinson@youthendowmentfund.org.uk) by 12pm on 3<sup>rd</sup> June 2025. If you have any questions regarding the project, please email these to [leanne.robinson@youthendowmentfund.org.uk](mailto:leanne.robinson@youthendowmentfund.org.uk) by 5pm on 23<sup>rd</sup> May 2025.**