

RESEARCH REPORT

**Understanding referral pathways and
diversionary support for children
within the criminal justice system in
England and Wales**

Exploratory study report

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What was this research about?

Every year, thousands of children in England and Wales come into contact with the criminal justice system – often for the first time. Many of these children are vulnerable and face complex challenges including mental health issues, neurodiversity, adverse childhood experiences, and socioeconomic disadvantage. This research aimed to explore how police and youth justice services (YJSs) in England and Wales safeguard these children and provide diversionary support—particularly for those who receive an Out-of-Court Resolution (OOCR).

Commissioned by the Youth Endowment Fund as part of our joint research programme with the Department for Education, this exploratory study by Cordis Bright used a four-phase mixed methods approach to examine how well the system supports children following police contact. It combined a national survey of YJSs, expert interviews, deep dive site visits, and journey mapping with children. The study sought to understand how referral pathways work, what support is available, and how inter-agency collaboration and evidence-based practice influence outcomes.

What did the research find?

Child-centred policing is delivered inconsistently

While some police officers are adopting ‘Child First’ principles – centring compassion, developmental needs, and diversion – the application remains inconsistent. High staff turnover and limited training mean that children are not always seen as vulnerable individuals in need of safeguarding. Children from minority ethnic backgrounds, particularly Black and Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller communities, are more likely to be adultified or distrusted, reducing opportunities for effective diversion.

Clear OOCR pathways are essential, but implementation varies widely

OOCRs allow police to resolve cases without court, but the consistency and timeliness of these pathways vary. Police knowledge of referral options depends on local training and support structures. In some areas, seconded YJS police officers streamline this process; in others, bottlenecks cause delays, especially when children are under investigation for lengthy periods. Good practice includes training officers on the voice of the child, including prompts in referral forms and providing feedback on referral quality.

Multi-agency working is strong in pockets, but information sharing remains a barrier

YJSs, police, and children’s services often work together effectively through co-located teams and joint decision-making panels. However, inconsistent access to key data—especially from health and education—undermines assessments and timely intervention. Children frequently move between services without continuity or shared understanding of their needs.

Timely, tailored and evidence-based support is not equally accessible

While some areas embed support into custody environments (e.g. dedicated staff or co-produced child friendly resources explaining criminal justice processes and outcomes), others lack the infrastructure to make a difference. YJSs provide a broad range of support – mental health, education, substance use – but access to these services is uneven, especially in rural areas. Neurodivergent children often go unidentified, and mental health waiting lists are long. Just a third of YJSs report their support for diverted children as being ‘very well aligned’ to the evidence-base, with many citing training gaps, resource limitations and operational constraints as barriers to engagement with evidence.

Children’s interactions with professionals shape perceptions of the justice system and their engagement with diversionary support

Journey mapping interviews showed that children value being treated with respect, being given choices, and having consistent relationships. In areas where caseworkers built trust and adapted support, children reported feeling heard and supported. In contrast, some children described custody as traumatic and confusing, with little explanation of what was happening or support.

Interpretation and implications

This research suggests that there are gaps and opportunities in how the youth justice system responds to children. While good practice exists, systemic inconsistencies mean that too often, vulnerable children do not get the help they need when they need it. To address this, the study suggests:

- Embedding **child-centred and trauma-informed practices** in police interactions with children, with national KPIs and regular training to support adoption.
- Having **officers dedicated to promoting child centred policing** across the force, implementing **structured feedback** on referrals and outcomes, and improving use of **Outcome 22**.
- Improving **responses to children who are neurodivergent or who have mental ill-health** through increased training for police officers and appropriate adults, and involving speech and language therapists in developing resources for arrested children.
- Improving **oversight and support** for YJSs to ensure **support for children is evidence-informed** and culturally competent.

YEF will consider including these suggestions as formal recommendations in its guidance for the youth justice sector.