

YEF review of community sentences for children

Summary

- YEF is seeking a team to conduct a review of community sentences used for children. This review will assess current use and variation in these sentences, along with the decision-making underpinning this practice. We are specifically interested in which requirements are placed on children, and the extent to which this aligns to the evidence base on what works.
- The study will inform YEF's recommendations for the youth justice 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 proposals is 9am on 2nd March 2026. We intend to have appointed the successful team by 3rd April. The deadline for the full draft report is 13th November 2026.

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 rigorous evaluations to find out what works. We also synthesise the best available evidence from across the world and mobilise what we learn 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. 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 youth justice sector is one such system that supports children.

YEF's youth justice sector work

In 2027, YEF will publish two guidance reports for the youth justice sector in England and Wales: Practice Guidance and System Guidance. These reports will set out recommendations for how the sector can support the reduction of serious violence involving children and young people.

- Practice Guidance is delivery-focused, guiding practice leaders and commissioners on what works to keep children safe from violence.
- System Guidance is system-focused, guiding policymakers and system leaders on the changes needed to enable and sustain best practice.

The recommendations in these reports will draw on YEF's existing work in the sector, including:

- Projects YEF has funded and evaluated in the sector (such as a trial of [therapeutic support](#) for children who have been in police custody, research into the [referral pathways and support](#) available for arrested children, and secondary data analysis on the use of [diversion](#))
- Relevant sections of the YEF [Toolkit](#) (e.g. restorative justice, informal and formal pre-court diversion, and custody aftercare and resettlement programmes)
- Our annual [Children, Violence and Vulnerability](#) survey of young people
- Our work understanding the lives of young people with the [Peer Action Collective](#)
- YEF's [practice guidance](#) and [system guidance](#) on supporting children through effective, equitable diversion

In addition, YEF is currently commissioning two other research projects which focus on youth justice responses to serious violence, weapons and Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG), and custody resettlement for children and young people. In February we will be commissioning a fourth research project focussed on the health needs of children in the youth justice system. We are open to teams applying for more than one project, particularly if efficiencies can be achieved through combining methods or reporting.

Context

Community sentences are a common outcome for children involved in violence and offending. In the year ending March 2024, 72% of all sentences given to children were community sentences (9,204 children), which is an 11% increase on the previous year.¹ For children involved in a knife or offensive weapon offence, 61% of disposals were a community sentence.² These sentences are served in the community rather than in custody and can be one of two types: a referral order or a youth rehabilitation order (YRO). These orders can place a range of requirements on a child, such as abiding by a curfew, undertaking education, drug or health interventions, or unpaid work.³

Despite the common use of community sentences for this cohort of children, we know surprisingly little about what they involve in practice and how decisions are made about the requirements attached to them. There is a lack of research on the topic. Sector feedback indicates issues with inconsistency in which requirements are attached, and a lack of consideration of research evidence on what interventions work to reduce offending when deciding requirements. Currently, we understand from conversations with youth justice professionals that requirements attached to community orders tend to follow a "ladder" of intensity, based largely on the severity or pattern of offending. This is in line with the Sentencing Council's child-specific guidance on sentencing.⁴ This guidance focuses on overarching principles, but the operational detail remains grounded in general sentencing law that applies to adults and children alike – meaning decisions are likely informed by adult frameworks.

¹ [Youth Justice Statistics: 2023 to 2024 – GOV.UK](#)

² [Knife Crime Evidence and Insights Pack 2025 – Youth Justice Resource Hub](#)

³ Referral orders involve a panel of community members, supported by a representative from the YJS, who design a programme to support positive behaviour and development. These require an admission of guilt from the child, and their agreement to the programme, and can be made for up to 12 months. In contrast, YROs can be made for up to 3 years, and the attached conditions are chosen by the court. These can include requirements to carry out unpaid work or keep to an electronically monitored curfew. For further information on these orders, and the requirements that can be attached to them, see: [Youth Rehabilitation Order](#) and [Referral Order](#)

⁴ [Sentencing children and young people](#)

Sentencing decisions may be influenced by a number of factors, but we are aware of two factors which could be impairing the practice of community sentences for children. The first is a lack of quality health information being provided to the court to help inform sentencing. Recent research into pre-sentence reports in the youth justice system⁵ found high variability in the aspects of children's backgrounds covered – including information on children's mental health, learning difficulties, communication needs and the impact of the sentence on the child. We have also heard from legal professionals that there is a lack of quality psychiatric and psychological assessments taking place to help inform these sentences. Possible reasons for this are a lack of solicitor awareness, lack of regional provision for assessments, and a lack of specificity in the reports for informing the court. This suggests that children's health might not be consistently or thoroughly considered at the point of sentencing, and this could impact negatively on the support the child then goes onto receive. The second factor possibly impairing practice is the availability of certain sentencing options; in certain circumstances, YROs are not available for children, and a referral order must be imposed.⁶ Conversations with the sector have highlighted this as an issue, as it places limitations on the types of conditions available at sentencing. We're interested in further understanding these potential challenges.

The aim of this project

This project aims to assess the current practice around community sentences given to children. We want to understand more about the use and variation of these sentences and understand the decision-making underpinning this. We're interested in the requirements attached to these sentences – we'd like to know what requirements are being placed on children and why. We're interested in what information is used to decide upon appropriate attached requirements, and how well these align to the evidence-base on what works to reduce offending. We are keen to generate insights that help us quantify current variations in practice so that we can describe them precisely. Within the project we are especially interested in insights that relate to violence-related offences.

We'd like the project to explore specific opportunities for improvement based on the evidence of what works: namely whether, and how, restorative justice is built into sentences and orders, given its potential for reducing violence and offending;⁷ and the extent to which timely, quality health information is provided to the court to support decision-making. This project also aims to describe how insights into community sentences for children might vary according to their ethnic background. Understanding current practice will help us to make recommendations aimed at improving parts of the sentencing process which could better incorporate the evidence on what works to reduce violence and offending.

Race equity

There are significant racial disparities⁸ in children's experience of violence, policing and youth justice. While most children in the youth justice system are White, some minority ethnic groups are over-represented relative to their share of the population. This is most pronounced for children who are Black, Mixed Ethnicity or from Gypsy, Roma and Irish Traveller backgrounds. For example, Black children continue

⁵ [Exploring the production and utilisation of pre-sentence reports \(PSRs\) in the youth justice system](#) (Ipsos UK and Manchester Metropolitan University, 2024)

⁶ For further information, see: [Referral order](#)

⁷ [Restorative justice | Youth Endowment Fund](#)

⁸ <https://youthendowmentfund.org.uk/reports/racial-disproportionality/>

to be over-represented across stop and search, arrest, youth cautions, first-time entrants, children in custody and reoffending rates.

In the year ending March 2024, Black and Mixed Ethnicity children accounted for 11% and 10% respectively of all children cautioned or sentenced, with Black and Mixed Ethnicity children each accounting for 6% of the 10 to 17 population.⁹ The available data on the ethnicity of children sentenced at court is of poor quality, with ethnicity recorded as unknown in 44% of sentencing occasions for indictable offences in 2023–24.¹⁰ We do know that children from some communities are overrepresented in custody though. Black children make up 6% of all 10–17-year-olds, but in 2023/24 they accounted for 24% of children in custody – four times their population share.¹¹ 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.¹²

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

- 1) Use and Variation.** How are community sentences currently used for children, and how does this vary across England and Wales?
 - a) Which children receive community sentences?
 - b) How does use vary by geography, offence type, age, prior contact, and other characteristics?
 - c) What factors appear to explain variation in use?
 - d) What evidence is there of the impact of these variations on variation in children's outcomes?
- 2) Decision-making and system roles.** How are decisions made about the type of community sentence and the requirements attached to them?
 - a) How do courts decide which sentence or order to impose?
 - b) How are specific requirements selected?
 - c) What role do local youth justice services play in assessment, recommendation, and review?
 - d) How do Youth Justice Management Boards influence local practice and court processes?
- 3) Requirements.** What requirements are attached to community sentences, and how well do these align with evidence on what works?
 - a) What requirements are most commonly used, and for what stated purposes?
 - b) What statutory or professional guidance informs their use?
 - c) To what extent do requirements reflect the evidence on preventing violence and offending?
 - d) To what extent are YEF Toolkit interventions currently used, and where is there scope for greater alignment?
- 4) Race Equity.** How does community sentencing vary by a child's ethnic background? We are particularly interested in variation relating to children from Black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds, including those from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities

⁹ [Youth Justice Statistics: 2023 to 2024 – GOV.UK](#)

¹⁰ [Youth Justice Statistics: 2023 to 2024 – GOV.UK](#)

¹¹ [Youth Justice Statistics: 2023 to 2024 – GOV.UK](#)

¹² [Children in custody 2022–23: An analysis of 12–18-year-olds' perceptions of their experiences in secure training centres and young offender institutions, November 2023](#)

a) Does a child's ethnic background influence which community sentence and conditions they receive?

b) How are suitability and appropriateness of conditions assessed across different groups?

c) What changes to policy, guidance, or practice could actively improve equity?

5) Opportunities for improvement. What are the key opportunities to improve the use of the evidence on what works in community sentences for children?

a) Do courts have timely and sufficient information about children's health, wellbeing, and support needs? What specific changes are required to increase the consistency and quality of this information?

b) To what extent is restorative justice currently used within community sentences and court orders, and what specific changes could increase and improve its usage?

Bidding teams are welcome to propose amendments 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.

Required outputs and suggested methodology

To answer the research questions, we would expect to see a range of methods used, which may include:

- Analysis of any available administrative data sets on community sentences and court orders, including the conditions attached to them.
- Analysis of any available case files or pre-sentence reports data sets.
- Case studies with courts, likely to include interviews, focus groups and observations.
- A survey of the relevant stakeholders involved in making decisions around community sentences (e.g. the judiciary, defence solicitors, Crown Prosecution Service and Police).
- Interviews and/or focus groups with a range of professionals across the judiciary, courts, legal profession, police and youth justice services.
- Relevant, focussed desk-based research. This could include relevant legislation and guidelines relating to sentencing children, and research papers and reports on the topic.
- Additional methods suggested by the research team.

We strongly encourage teams to consider how they could provide quantitative insights on the research questions, for example through surveys and analysis, or quantitative components to interviews and focus groups.

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 9am on 2nd March 2026. We intend to have appointed the successful team by 3rd April. The deadline for the full draft report is 13th November 2026 after which a peer review process will take place.

If teams have good ideas for specific pieces of data analysis that may take longer than this timeline, we are very open to considering them. In such cases, we would encourage teams to explain what they could achieve by 13th November, and what additional work could then be completed following this date.

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. If a team presents a proposal for a higher cost, but can fully justify why a particular method or additional element of the project adds significant value, we are open to considering it.

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 youth justice, specifically courts and sentencing?
- **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 and address 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 clearly set out the team's subject expertise, research experience, methodological approach, budget and value for money, and a project plan and timeline. Proposals should be no longer than 2,500 words. You may attach relevant documents to support your application, but there is no guarantee that these will be read. Attached documents will not be included in the word count.

As noted above, we are open to research teams suggesting amendments or additions to the research questions and methodology. 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 by 9am on 2nd March. If you have any questions regarding the project, please email these to leanne.robinson@youthendowmentfund.org.uk by 6pm on 20th February.