

YEF review of youth justice responses to serious violence, weapons offences and VAWG

Summary

- YEF is seeking a team to conduct a review of how youth justice services respond to children involved in serious violence, weapons offences, and VAWG (Violence Against Women and Girls). This review will describe the challenges practitioners face, how they make decisions, and the responses they choose. We're interested in whether evidence on what works to reduce violence and offending is used in this context and how evidence could be tailored to support practitioners with the decisions they make.
- 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 the 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 the use of community sentences for children involved in violence, and custody resettlement for children and young people. In February we will commission 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.

Race equity

There are significant racial disparities in children's experience of violence, policing and youth justice.¹ While most children in the youth justice system are White, some minority ethnic groups are overrepresented relative to their share of the population. This over-representation is most pronounced for children who are Black, Mixed Ethnicity or from Gypsy, Roma and Irish Traveller backgrounds. For example, Black children continue to be over-represented across stop and search, arrest, youth cautions, first-time entrants, children in custody and reoffending rates.

Of the children notified to the Youth Justice Board as being involved in a Serious Incident in 2023–24, 48% were from ethnic minority backgrounds (a significant overrepresentation given that 27% of the 10–17-year-old population is from an ethnic minority background).² This overrepresentation was particularly prevalent for Black children and Mixed Ethnicity children. Data from the Ministry of Justice shows that over the three years between 2021 and 2024, Black children made up 32% of 10–17-year-olds sentenced to immediate custody for manslaughter or murder, more than five times greater than their relative share of the total population.³ 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.⁴ Other communities are also overrepresented in custody. 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

¹ <https://youthendowmentfund.org.uk/reports/racial-disproportionality/>

² [Serious Incidents Annual Report 2023/24](#) (YJB, 2025)

³ <https://youthendowmentfund.org.uk/reports/racial-disproportionality/>

⁴ [Youth Justice Statistics: 2023 to 2024 – GOV.UK](#)

- over 7 times their population share.⁵ And while there is promise in that the total number of children serving custodial sentences has fallen over the past decade, this hasn't impacted children of all ethnicities equally. For instance, the number of White children in youth custody fell by 80% between 2010/11 and 2020/21. In the same period, the number of Black children fell by only 54%, and the number of Mixed ethnicity children by 37%.⁶

There are disproportionate outcomes that factors such as type of offence, offence history, and demographic characteristics, cannot explain: there are more restrictive remand outcomes for Black and Mixed Ethnicity children; there are fewer out-of-court disposals for Black, Asian and Mixed Ethnicity children; and there are harsher court sentences for Black children.⁷

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.

Context

Although fewer children are entering the formal youth justice system, the behaviours and vulnerabilities of children who are in the system are complex. Youth justice practitioners are dealing with high-harm caseloads,⁸ involving children who are involved in serious violence, carry and use weapons, or perpetrate VAWG (definitions below). A recent joint inspection, which involved reviewing a number of cases where children were involved in these behaviours, highlights the complexity of the types of cases practitioners face;⁹ many children have significant needs, and a growing number display escalating behaviours requiring more intensive support. In this context, practitioners are being asked to manage the high levels of risk some children pose, while upholding Child First principles. This is a balance which has been raised as a key challenge by academics and sector professionals.¹⁰

When a child is involved in serious violence, weapons offences or VAWG, there are a variety of responses a practitioner could take. These include referrals to different kinds of support, various risk management strategies, and a wide range of civil powers.¹¹ We don't have a clear sense of how prevalent different types of response are, but suspect that there are high levels of variation in practice. In the year ending March 2023, the proven reoffending rate for children increased slightly to 32.5%.¹² While children released from custody have the highest reoffending rates, this is closely followed by those who received a Youth Rehabilitation Order (with rates close to 60%). Feedback from youth justice practitioners suggests that services are struggling. A factor in this could be the lack of clarity on how practitioners should be

⁵ [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](#)

⁶ House of Commons Library (2022). Research Briefing: Youth Custody. Available from: <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-8557>

⁷ <https://youthendowmentfund.org.uk/reports/racial-disproportionality/> and [YJB_EDRR_QuantReport.pdf](#)

⁸ [Youth Justice Statistics: 2023 to 2024 - GOV.UK](#)

⁹ [The effectiveness of diverting children from the criminal justice system: meeting needs, ensuring safety, and preventing reoffending \(HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2025\)](#)

¹⁰ [The role of systems of support in serious youth violence: evidence and gaps](#)

¹¹ Examples of these include Community Protection Warnings, which can move to a Notice if breached and breach of that is a criminal offence; a Disruption Notice; a Child Abduction Warning Notice; and a range of injunctions and court orders, including knife crime prevention orders, gang injunctions and VAWG-related orders (such as restraining orders, sexual harm prevention orders and sexual risk orders).

¹² [Youth Justice Statistics: 2023 to 2024 - GOV.UK](#)

responding in these high-harm cases, with a broader sector focus on diversion and prevention.¹³ We also do not know the extent to which the evidence on what works to reduce violence and offending is being applied in these cases.

The recent inspection into youth justice responses to children diverted from the justice system¹⁴ found a number of issues relevant to responding to high harm behaviours. These included the inappropriate use of some diversionary outcomes for serious offences, a lack of involvement of youth justice services in some serious cases, and a lack of consideration of patterns of repeat offending meaning children could receive multiple disposals without escalation or timely intervention. The inspection also found that, in many cases, more emphasis was needed on safety and understanding of risk.

A further challenge in responding to these high harm behaviours is that some of the children involved in these serious offences sit outside the ‘formal’ justice system – they are repeatedly coming to police attention and deemed at high risk of harm, but they are not currently subject to, or do not go on to receive, a caution or conviction for an offence. Of the children notified to the Youth Justice Board as being involved in a Serious Incident in 2023-24, 49% had no previous cautions and convictions.¹⁵ In an inspection exploring the use of custodial remand, nearly half of the children in the sample of cases had no previous convictions.¹⁶ We understand that services are limited in what support and intervention they can provide to this cohort of children, and that different areas approach this group differently. We are interested in exploring this further within this project.

The aim of this project

This project will describe the current challenges and map responses of youth justice services to children engaged in the most serious forms of violence, weapons offences and VAWG. Our working definition¹⁷ of the cohort of children in scope is: under 18s who are suspected or have perpetrated the most serious forms of violence, weapons offences or VAWG.

- By ‘suspected or have perpetrated’ we include children who have been arrested, are named as a suspect on a crime, or have been cautioned, charged or convicted.
- By ‘most serious forms’ of behaviours, we are focussed on gravity score 5 offences.¹⁸
- By serious violence we include offences of homicide, Grievous Bodily Harm (GBH), and robbery. This can include both individual and group-based violence, which takes place in private or public.
- By weapons offences we include weapons possession offences and offences where weapons were involved, e.g. aggravated burglary, threatening with a weapon, or robbery involving a weapon. Both offensive weapons and firearms are included here.

¹³ See for example: [Case management guidance – How to use out-of-court resolutions](#) and [Prevention and Diversion Assessment Tool \(PDAT\)](#)

¹⁴ [The effectiveness of diverting children from the criminal justice system: meeting needs, ensuring safety, and preventing reoffending \(HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2025\)](#)

¹⁵ YJB (2025) Serious Incidents Annual Report 2023/24:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6811f07c9d4e05673112166e/Serious_Incidents_Annual_Report_2023-24_print_version.pdf

¹⁶ [A joint thematic inspection of work with children subject to remand in youth detention \(HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2023\)](#)

¹⁷ We welcome refinement of this definition and will agree on a finalised version with the appointed team.

¹⁸ [Child Gravity Matrix v2.4](#)

- By VAWG we include domestic abuse, sexual offences, stalking and harassment, and coercive and controlling behaviour.

We welcome refinement of this definition and will agree on a finalised version with the appointed team.

We first want to understand the demand on youth justice services, including quantifying the scale and describing the nature of the cohort of children involved in these offences. As part of this, we'd like to know how much of services' caseload is working with children who haven't been cautioned or convicted. We then want the project to map out how services respond to these different types of behaviour, exploring variation and trying to understand the reasons for differences. We are keen to generate insights that help us quantify current demand and map variations in practice so that we can describe these precisely. This is an important aspect of the project.

The project will also seek to understand what underpins services' decision-making in this context, and as part of this, the role Child First, risk management and evidence does or doesn't play. Within this, we are interested in how the evidence YEF produces (in particular the YEF toolkit), currently meets the needs of practitioners, and how it could do this better. Understanding how professionals view the appropriateness of interventions in the YEF toolkit in this context, and whether they align with practice, will help us support practitioners in the future.

While much of the focus of the project is on the operational actions of youth justice services, we are also interested in the role of Youth Justice Management Boards in this context, given their oversight, influence and statutory functions. We want the project to give us findings which help us to understand the changes needed to better support evidence-based, equitable responses to children engaged in these behaviours.

Research questions

- 1. Understanding the need.** What is the scale and nature of Youth Justice Service (YJS) involvement with children in relation to serious violence, weapons offences and VAWG?
 - Which children are YJSs working with in this context, including their age, background, offence type, and stage of the justice process?
 - To what extent are YJSs working with children involved in these behaviours who have not been cautioned or convicted?
 - What disproportionality is present in this context?
- 2. Understanding the response.** What responses do YJSs take to children involved in serious violence, weapons offences or VAWG?
 - What types of responses are available and used in practice (including YJS-led and multi-agency responses)? How are these recorded?
 - To what extent do YJSs lead responses, and when are other sectors responsible or co-leading?
 - How common are different responses? What variation is there in responses across the sector, populations and offence types, and what factors explain this?
 - Do responses differ for different groups of children, particularly those from Black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds, including Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities?
- 3. Understanding decision-making.** How do YJSs make decisions about which responses to take in cases involving serious violence, weapons offences or VAWG?
 - What information, guidance and tools do they use to inform decision-making?
 - How are risk management approaches and Child First principles applied and balanced in practice?

- c. What challenges do practitioners face in making these decisions, and what improvements could better support them?
- d. How do YJSs seek to ensure responses are tailored, culturally appropriate, and accessible for all children?
- e. What changes to policy, guidance, or practice are needed to actively advance race equity in decision-making and responses?

4. System leadership and governance. How do Youth Justice Management Boards fulfil their statutory responsibilities for governance, coordination, and accountability in responding to serious violence, weapons offences and VAWG involving children?

5. Use of YEF evidence. How useful is evidence generated by YEF in informing youth justice responses to serious violence, weapons offences or VAWG?

- a. To what extent are practitioners using the YEF Toolkit, or other pieces of evidence generated by YEF, to inform their responses? In which contexts and for which children?
- b. Which interventions in the Toolkit rated as having a 'high' or 'moderate' estimated impact are considered applicable in this context, and why or why not?
- c. Are there gaps in the Toolkit, or wider research, where additional evidence or guidance would be helpful (for example, responses to acute risk or offence-specific behaviours)?
- d. How could YEF make Toolkit evidence more accessible, practical, and actionable for youth justice professionals?

We acknowledge that serious violence, weapons and VAWG covers many different contexts and behaviours, and therefore needs and responses are likely to vary based on this. Across the research questions we would like the research team to try and understand variation by offence type and grouping.

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:

- a. A large-scale national survey of Youth Justice Services and Management Boards. A high-quality survey with high reach and response rates is a priority for this project.
- b. Case studies with Youth Justice Services and Management Boards. These should be in areas with high rates of serious violence, weapons offences and VAWG. Alongside youth justice professionals these are also likely to engage multi-agency partners in these areas.
- c. Any data analysis the team deem possible, such as analysing administrative data, anonymised case files or serious incident notifications.
- d. Relevant, focussed desk-based research. This could include existing guidance, safeguarding practice reviews and local learning reviews following serious incidents, and reports such as the Serious Incidents Annual Report or inspection reports.
- e. 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, serious violence, weapons offences and VAWG?
- **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 jeanne.robinson@youthendowmentfund.org.uk by 9am on 2nd March. If you have any questions regarding the project, please email these to jeanne.robinson@youthendowmentfund.org.uk by 6pm on 20th February.