



Policing, Children and Violence

Practice guidance for senior police leaders
on reducing children's involvement in violence

About the Youth Endowment Fund

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

The charity was established in 2019 with a 10-year, £200 million endowment from the Home Office.

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Introduction

This guidance sets out six evidence-based recommendations for policing across England and Wales to help prevent 10–17-year-olds from becoming involved in violence. The recommendations focus on three key areas: **treat children as children**, focusing on positive interactions and effective safeguarding; **focus on what works**, prioritising approaches that have the best chance of reducing violence; and **do diversion well**, making it effective and fair.

This guidance is primarily written for:

- Senior police leaders, including Chief Constables, Assistant and Deputy Chief Constables and Chief Superintendents; and
- Thematic leads in policing with responsibility for relevant areas, including children, custody, safeguarding, serious violence, stop and search, and prevention.

This guidance is also relevant for officers and staff who are involved in policing that interacts with children, including frontline police, supervisors and specialist staff.

The guidance can be used by wider policing partners, governance and oversight bodies. This includes Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs),¹ Mayoral Offices exercising PCC functions and Violence Reduction Partnerships.

Children's experiences of violence

We define violence as:

- The use or threat of intentional physical force,² which includes murder, physical assault, harm with a weapon and robbery³ or
- Any act of gender-based violence, which can result in physical, sexual or psychological harm.⁴

Violence is too common amongst children. Last year, a survey of over 11,000 13–17-year-olds across England and Wales found that nearly one in five had been a victim of violence, one in eight had committed a violent offence and one in two had witnessed violence against someone else.⁵ Much of this violence is serious: nearly three in ten victims needed medical treatment from a doctor or hospital. Of the children who were in relationships, two in five had experienced emotional or physical abuse.⁶

What is policing's contribution to keeping children safe from violence?

All sectors that impact children's lives have a role in keeping them safe from violence. The Youth Endowment Fund (YEF) has also published guidance for other key sectors, including children's services, education and youth work.

Policing has an important and distinct contribution to make:

- **Police are a statutory safeguarding partner.** They have a legal duty to work with other partners to protect children.⁷
- **Police interact with children who are at risk of, or involved in, violence.** These children are often very vulnerable, and interactions with them provide opportunities to intervene.
- **Police investigate offences and apprehend those responsible.** This can prevent individuals from causing further harm and can discourage others from offending.
- **Reducing violence is a policing priority.** The Serious Violence Duty requires policing and other specified authorities to collaborate to prevent serious violence in their area.⁸ Policing also has a national commitment to tackling violence against women and girls (VAWG).⁹

For many of the recommendations in this report, delivery will depend on strong multi-agency collaboration. Recent findings from the Southport Inquiry¹⁰ and joint area inspections of multi-agency responses to serious youth violence¹¹ reinforce the need for clear multi-agency leadership, accountability and coordination.

What about the broader system?

The six recommendations set out what good practice looks like. However, we recognise the challenging context in which policing takes place, including limited resources and competing demands. This guidance aims to help you make the most of the resources you have available. In the future, we will publish recommendations for the government on improving the broader policing system to make it easier for you to do what works.¹²

This guidance should be read alongside statutory guidance and key resources from policing bodies, including the College of Policing and the National Police Chiefs' Council.¹³

What evidence underpins this guidance?

This guidance draws upon the best available global evidence on how to prevent children's involvement in violence. This includes the YEF Toolkit, a rigorous summary of more than 2,000 studies spanning more than 40 different violence prevention approaches, and the College of Policing's Crime Reduction Toolkit.¹⁴ This guidance also uses new YEF-funded research, including reviews of policing practices, programme evaluations, our annual survey of over 11,000 13–17-year-olds and insights from children collected by our Peer Action Collective's (PAC's) peer researchers.

An Expert Panel of police officers and staff, commissioners and academics, alongside a Strategic Advisory Group of senior policing

leaders, have shaped this guidance to ensure the recommendations are feasible, relevant and useful.

The six recommendations in this report are 'best bets' based on the best available evidence: approaches that, on average, have been found to reduce violence. An evidence-to-decision framework (published alongside this guidance) sets out the full underpinning evidence. Your professional judgement on how to use these recommendations, alongside your knowledge of your local context, remains critically important. Where you are already implementing a recommendation, focus on refining practices in line with the sub-actions.

Racial disproportionality

Why focus on racial disproportionality?

While children from all backgrounds face violence, children from certain ethnic backgrounds are less safe than others. The majority of children who are in the youth justice system and involved in violence are White. However, relative to their share of the population, some minority ethnic groups are over-represented. Black children are six times as likely to be victims of homicide.¹⁵ This disproportionality is driven by factors such as poverty, racism and unequal access to support.¹⁶

Broad ethnic groupings can also mask underlying differences. Although often categorised as White, children from Gypsy or Irish Traveller backgrounds are significantly over-represented in the criminal justice system. Children from Black Caribbean backgrounds are also significantly over-represented in arrests, but children from Black African backgrounds are not.¹⁷

Other inequities must also be addressed. Children who have experienced poverty or the care system and children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) are over-represented in the criminal justice system.¹⁸ All these inequities matter.

Why is racial disproportionality relevant to policing?

Police have a legal responsibility under the Public Sector Equality Duty to have due regard to the need to eliminate unlawful discrimination, advance equality of opportunity and foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.¹⁹

Policing has also committed to working to reduce racial disproportionality and prevent racism.²⁰ Multiple independent inquiries, reviews and inspections have documented issues of discrimination, racism and racial disproportionality within policing in England and Wales.²¹

Fair policing supports effective violence prevention. Over-policing can expose children to unnecessary criminalisation and weaken access to diversion and safeguarding; under-protection can leave children exposed to violence and exploitation. Unfair practice can also undermine trust in the police.

How can we address disproportionality?

Use the six-step **REPAIR** model to address racial and other disparities:²²

- R** **Responsibility for action:** assign senior ownership, governance and timescales for understanding and addressing a disparity. Carefully consider where best this sits in your force.
- E** **Examine the disparity:** use your data to establish where the disparity occurs and who is affected. Consider whether the disparity is shaped by overlapping characteristics and vulnerabilities, such as age, gender, ethnicity, faith, disability and SEND, care experience and deprivation.
- P** **Probe the causes:** investigate evidence-based explanations for the disparity. These may relate to policing, including policy, practice, deployment, discretion, supervision, bias or data quality; wider factors, such as different age profiles; or wider system responses. Test explanations against your data.
- A** **Ask others:** test your explanations with communities, partners and independent experts. This can help ensure your explanations are robust and provide insights on possible improvements.
- I** **Improve practice:** identify whether policing activity is contributing to the disparity. Where it is, assess whether the activity is justified – it should pursue a legitimate aim, be necessary and proportionate, and be supported by objective evidence rather than bias or assumptions. If these requirements are not met, change practice, tackling the root cause of the disparity. Even where the activity is justified, consider whether a less harmful approach could achieve the same outcome or whether additional safeguards could reduce its impact. This may require changes to policy, deployment, supervision, safeguards or training.
- R** **Review outcomes:** measure progress, publish findings and revise your responses as needed. Where a disparity is not improving, consider reducing or suspending activity. Publish disparity data with clear explanations and improvement steps, and report progress through governance arrangements.

You should also consider an Equality Impact Assessment when developing or significantly changing activity. This can help identify whether the activity could disadvantage people with protected characteristics and what action is needed to prevent or mitigate this.²³

Recommendations



Treat children as children

1 Translate child-centred policing into everyday practice.

Why? Child-centred policing supports violence prevention, builds trust and improves safeguarding, but practice remains inconsistent.

Recommended actions:

- A. Set clear expectations for interactions with children in your force.
- B. Reinforce these expectations through leadership, supervision and training.
- C. Create safe, structured opportunities for children to shape local policing.

2 Audit how you safeguard children to prevent violence.

Why? Good safeguarding can prevent violence, but police interactions with children do not consistently lead to effective safeguarding.

Recommended actions:

- A. Publish a force-wide safeguarding standard for children.
- B. Scrutinise safeguarding practice, including the use of custody for children.
- C. Improve safeguarding performance and address disproportionality.



Focus on what works

3 Take a problem-oriented policing approach.

Why? Problem-oriented policing (POP) is effective in reducing violence.

Recommended actions:

- A. Enable data-informed POP by supporting analysts and strengthening data quality (particularly in relation to VAWG and ethnicity).
- B. Develop high-quality POP plans with partners and local communities.
- C. Choose evidence-based responses that are tailored to your violence problem.
- D. Monitor POP activity and address areas for improvement and disproportionality.

4 Stop harmful approaches and deprioritise unevidenced approaches.

Why? Limited resources should be directed to approaches with the best chance of reducing violence.

Recommended actions:

- A. Conduct an annual assessment of your local violence prevention activity.
- B. Stop delivering approaches that are likely to increase violence (including prison awareness programmes and boot camps).
- C. Deprioritise approaches where impact on violence is unknown (including knife education programmes, media campaigns and police in schools).

5 Improve the quality of stop and search.

Why? Good quality stop and search practice is more likely to reduce violence. Poor quality practice can lead to unfairness and damage trust in policing.

Recommended actions:

- A. Scrutinise stop and search of children, driving improvements in the strength of grounds and quality of interactions.
- B. Monitor, publish and address racial disproportionality in stop and search of children.
- C. Provide refresher training on stop and search to frontline officers.



Do diversion well

6 Build an effective and fair out-of-court resolution approach.

Why? Out-of-court resolutions (OOCRs) can reduce violence, but they are often used ineffectively and unfairly.

Recommended actions:

- A. Establish an OOCR protocol for children with your local youth justice service(s).
- B. Monitor your OOCR approach for children and address areas for improvement and disproportionality.



Treat children as children

Recommendation 1.

Translate child-centred policing into everyday practice.

Why? Child-centred policing means treating children as children.²⁴ It means officers and staff take account of children's age, vulnerability, welfare and understanding when making decisions and exercising police powers.²⁵ The way police interact with children matters: fair, clear interactions can support violence prevention, build trust and strengthen safeguarding.²⁶ Despite forces' commitment to child-centred policing, practice remains inconsistent.²⁷

Recommended actions

- A. Set clear expectations for interactions with children in your force.
- B. Reinforce these expectations through leadership, supervision and training.
- C. Create safe, structured opportunities for children to shape local policing.

A. Set clear expectations for interactions with children in your force.

Police responses to children should differ from those used with adults and take account of the child's age, vulnerability and level of understanding. However, some forces still rely on procedures designed for adults and do not consistently adapt interactions for children.²⁸

Use the eight principles of child-centred policing to set expectations for interactions with children across your force. The principles were developed by children and young people in consultation with police, who tested them to ensure they are operationally realistic.²⁹

Eight principles of child-centred policing

- 1 Appropriate communication:** communication shapes whether children feel safe and understand what is happening. Communication, including tone, pace, vocabulary and body language, should be calm, clear and appropriate for the child's age and needs.
- 2 Keeping children informed:** children should understand what is happening and why and what will happen next. Simple explanations and predictable steps can reduce confusion and anxiety.
- 3 Familiar presence:** children are more likely to see police as approachable and trustworthy when officers are visible in their communities beyond moments of crisis or enforcement. Regular presence and continuity of personnel can strengthen relationships.
- 4 Fair treatment:** children should be treated as children and according to the circumstances in front of the officer, not on assumptions about appearance, background or previous behaviour. Officers should actively guard against bias, stereotyping and adultification.

- 5 Supporting voice and participation:** children are more likely to engage with and trust police when they feel heard. They should have opportunities to speak, be listened to and influence decisions affecting them – both in individual interactions and in shaping policing practice more broadly.
- 6 Welfare first:** officers should prioritise welfare, professional curiosity and de-escalation with children wherever possible. Children respond best when officers begin with concern for their wellbeing, using the least intrusive intervention necessary and avoiding unnecessary force.
- 7 Appropriate environments:** children are more likely to feel safe when interactions take place in calm and manageable conditions. Police should minimise public exposure, avoid sudden actions and ensure facilities meet children's needs. Particular care is needed in custody, transport and interview environments where children may feel especially vulnerable.
- 8 Reliability and follow-through:** trust grows when officers are transparent, consistent and do what they say they will. Clear handovers, timely updates and accessible routes for feedback and complaints support accountability.

Use these eight principles to set expectations for:

Engaging with children: officers and staff should seek to establish age as early as possible and then embed these principles into all interactions with children. The Principles in Practice [resource](#) provides practical examples that may be particularly useful for newer officers and staff.

Adapting police procedures for children: this includes stop and search, arrest, voluntary attendance, custody, missing episodes, the use of force and child victims and witnesses.

Procedures should:

- Explain how the practice differs for children and adults.
- Be accessible to officers through simple guides or automated workflows.
- Include child-friendly communication materials.
- Set clear expectations for using and uploading body-worn video.
- Require officers to record how they adapted their approach.
- Provide child-appropriate environments, such as custody and interview spaces, where possible.³³

Adultification bias

Adultification takes place when children are treated as older than they are – including when they are perceived as being more mature, more responsible and less vulnerable.³⁰ When this happens, children may not receive appropriate support and safeguarding, leaving them vulnerable to violence and exploitation. They may also receive harsher responses or punishment.³¹

Adultification bias can affect how professionals respond to any child, but it can be exacerbated by bias about a child's characteristics or background, such as ethnicity, gender and socioeconomic status. There is a particular risk that Black children and children of all ethnic groups from poorer backgrounds are not treated as children in practice.³²

An example of a child-centred custody procedure

1. Check necessity and minimise detention.

- Consult the Custody Sergeant before a child is brought into custody, providing an additional check that detention is necessary, proportionate and appropriate.³⁴
- Prioritise arrested children at booking-in.³⁵
- Keep children in custody for the shortest possible time, with the aim of interviewing within six hours and releasing within 12 hours.³⁶
- Require an Inspector to review detention when it may exceed 12 hours or extend overnight.³⁷
- Conduct retrospective multi-agency scrutiny of child detention decisions.

2. Protect rights and support understanding.

- Make legal representation mandatory and make immediate efforts to secure an appropriate adult.³⁸
- Provide child-friendly information explaining rights, processes and next steps.³⁹
- Provide a named officer as the child's main contact during each shift.

3. Identify needs and coordinate support.

- Automatically notify Children's Services and Youth Justice Services (YJSS).⁴⁰
- Provide custody checklists that set out the key steps required when detaining a child.⁴¹
- Screen children for communication needs and provide clear pathways to mental health, neurodiversity and healthcare support.

4. Create a child-appropriate environment.

- Provide child-appropriate custody and interview environments.⁴²
- Provide access to wellbeing, distraction and sensory materials, subject to identified risks.⁴³

B. Reinforce these expectations through leadership, supervision and training.

Setting expectations alone will not change practice. Reinforce expectations through:

Leadership

Chief Constables should set a clear expectation that all officers and staff follow child-centred policing principles.⁴⁴ A senior lead should then be responsible for embedding child-specific procedures across force policies, operational guidance and performance frameworks. The lead should also monitor whether expectations are reflected in practice. They can draw on audits, performance reviews, complaints, surveys, child-witness dropout rates and feedback from children and partners to do this, using their findings to drive improvement.⁴⁵

"It's great when our supervisor is out with us on the street. He's got years of experience, and people in the community know him so well. We like to see him in action, as we learn a lot, and it helps us to engage with people better, particularly children."

A Police Constable interviewed in *Child-Centred Policing in Greater Manchester*, Kemp and Bevan (2026)

Supervision

While senior leaders set the vision, supervisors (including Sergeants, Inspectors and police staff who manage teams) shape day-to-day practice.⁴⁶ Supervisors should reinforce expectations by enhancing oversight of incidents involving children, accompanying officers on patrols, reviewing body-worn video and engaging in reflective discussion.⁴⁷ They should address poor practices and embed child-centred policing in performance expectations and supervision. Supervisors could also consider shift-shadowing arrangements for frontline teams or secondments to other specialist units to build understanding.⁴⁸ Where needed, supervisors should support their staff to access specialist advice, including on engaging with girls or exploited children.

Training

Provide initial training to new recruits on interactions with children and refresher training to officers and staff who routinely encounter children.⁴⁹ This should be owned by force learning and development leads, working with leads for children, safeguarding and relevant operational areas. Consider whether this training content could be incorporated into existing relevant training rather than delivered separately, and ensure staff across a range of roles receive the training (including response, neighbourhoods, custody, investigation teams, civilian staff and call handlers).⁵⁰

Training should equip staff to communicate effectively with children; recognise and respond to trauma, exploitation and safeguarding needs; understand neurodiversity and SEND; apply procedural justice and de-escalation techniques; recognise and address adultification bias; improve cultural competence; and prevent discrimination.⁵¹ Use scenario-based training whenever possible, and include opportunities to practise communication and decision-making with children.⁵² Staff who are responsible for learning and development should monitor training completion and coverage across the relevant teams at the force level.

“A lot of this comes down to [the] training of staff... making sure that the people dealing with young people on a day-to-day basis know how to do that. We don’t get that training....”

A Police Constable interviewed in the YEF’s *Child-Centred Policing in Practice*, Allnock et al. (2026)

C. Create safe, structured opportunities for children to shape local policing.

Involving children in shaping local policing can help you identify what needs to improve and make services work better for children.⁵³

Structured opportunities for children to inform local policing practice include:

Youth advisory panels: established groups of children who meet regularly to advise police on policies and practice.

Community surveys: gathering children’s views and experiences at scale to identify concerns and priorities.

Other opportunities include inclusion in scrutiny panels, involvement of children in the design of new approaches and participation in officer training.

When using any of these approaches, officers leading the engagement should ensure they are clear with children on the role they will play and should act on the feedback they provide where appropriate. Clearly explain to children the changes made following their input (and where you have been unable to action their feedback and why).

Officers leading these engagement opportunities should ensure that children feel safe. Do this by considering which officers are best placed to engage and whether they should wear uniforms. Also consider how you can involve trusted adults and organisations to help facilitate engagement. These might include youth workers, schools, social workers and community organisations who already have strong relationships with the children involved.⁵⁴

YOUTH VOICE

“It’s alright for them [to say,] ‘We listen to you’... but does it go any further?”

A child interviewed in the YEF’s *Child-Centred Policing in Practice*, Allnock et al. (2026)

Ensure that you are attempting to engage children who have directly experienced policing and violence. These children may be less likely to trust the police – it is crucial to hear their opinions, but care must be taken to ensure they feel comfortable enough to participate. Finally, ensure you are engaging children from all backgrounds, particularly those disproportionately impacted by violence (such as Black children and children in care).

CASE STUDY

Leicester Peer Action Collective

The Leicester Peer Action Collective (PAC) gives young people a direct route into shaping local policing. PAC is delivered by the Leicester Violence Reduction Network, Young Leicestershire, Leicestershire Police and two grassroots community organisations – St Matthews Big Local and Team Hub.⁵⁵ The programme recruits 12 PAC Leads, aged 16–20, who have experience engaging with police. These leads are employed in paid roles and trained as peer researchers. They meet weekly, and each receives line management and pastoral care.

PAC then leads research with young people across Leicester, exploring how police and young people can build better communication and trust in their neighbourhoods. Findings are presented directly to Leicestershire Police.

Deputy Chief Constable Michaela Kerr described the project as *“a fantastic opportunity to use the ideas, insights and needs of young people across East and West Leicester to tangibly improve the policing service they receive.”*

As one young person involved in PAC stated, *“If PAC wasn’t a thing, police wouldn’t have feedback and know how the young people are feeling.”*



Treat children as children

Recommendation 2.

Audit how you safeguard children to prevent violence.

Why? Good safeguarding can prevent violence by identifying and responding to vulnerability, reducing children's exposure to harm and connecting children to appropriate support.⁵⁶ Police regularly encounter children at moments of vulnerability, yet these interactions do not consistently lead to effective safeguarding.⁵⁷

Recommended actions

- A. Publish a force-wide safeguarding standard for children.
- B. Scrutinise safeguarding practice, including the use of custody for children.
- C. Improve safeguarding performance and address disproportionality.

A. Publish a force-wide safeguarding standard for children.

Children's experiences of safeguarding vary considerably depending on their personal characteristics and between forces, teams and individual officers.⁵⁸ Publish a force-wide safeguarding standard to set clear expectations for consistent safeguarding practice in your force. Your safeguarding standard should be owned by your force's Safeguarding Lead and be embedded in performance frameworks.⁵⁹

The standard should set clear expectations across three areas:

1. Consistent safeguarding practice

Consider whether safeguarding concerns are present in all police contact with children.

This includes stop and search, arrest, voluntary attendance, custody, contact as a victim or witness, and missing episodes. Consider risks inside and outside the home.

Act when safeguarding concerns are identified.

This should include accurately recording concerns and taking appropriate action, such as making referrals, sharing information, taking immediate protective action and connecting children to appropriate support.

Submit high-quality safeguarding referrals within one working day of contact with a child, where needed. The referrals should clearly set out the context and circumstances of the interaction, specific observations and concerns about the child, and the child's own words.⁶⁰

Capture the voice of the child. Record the child's views in their own words as accurately as possible. Whenever practicable, speak to the child directly rather than relying solely on accounts provided by parents or carers.⁶¹

Apply the standard consistently to all children

– regardless of age, gender, ethnicity, care experience, location or status as a victim or offender – and across all teams.⁶² Even where enforcement is necessary, always work to recognise and respond to a child's vulnerability and safeguarding needs.

"Where a case lands determines the lens. If it sits with CID [Criminal Investigation Department], it becomes an investigation. If it sits with safeguarding, it becomes vulnerability. If it sits with neighbourhoods, it becomes risk and disruption. The same child can be seen three different ways depending on the unit."

Police officer interviewed in the YEF's Safeguarding Children Involved in Violence, Beckett et al. (2026)

2. Effective partnership working

Set out your key partners. These could include Children's Services, YJSs, education providers, health services, early help teams, safeguarding partnerships, violence reduction units, voluntary and community sector organisations, and specialist services supporting children affected by violence, exploitation or abuse.⁶³

Agree how you will work with partners, including responsibilities across the partnerships, thresholds for referrals and participation in multi-agency safeguarding forums.⁶⁴ Consider how co-response, co-location and training alongside partners could support coordinated safeguarding.⁶⁵

Support timely information sharing with partners. This could include implementing information-sharing agreements, digital platforms, routine intelligence-sharing processes and regular updates on progress and actions taken.⁶⁶

3. Safeguarding exploited children

Exploited children are at a high risk of experiencing violence.⁶⁸ And exploitation disproportionately affects children with additional needs (including mental health or neurodevelopmental needs) and care-experienced children.⁶⁹ However, exploited children are also at increased risk of not receiving safeguarding action – particularly when they come to the police's attention when suspected of an offence.⁷⁰

Within your safeguarding standard, set a clear protocol for identifying and safeguarding exploited children. This should cover:

Identification: use indicators of child exploitation and grooming and consider whether these indicators are present across interactions with children, including stop and search, arrest, charging and custody.⁷¹ Set out how indicators of exploitation will be identified and recorded. Be aware that girls make up a substantial minority of exploited children.⁷²

Victims first: establish a presumption that children suspected of being criminally exploited are treated as victims first and foremost, and in need of safeguarding. This is alongside any proportionate enforcement activity.⁷³

Safeguarding pathways: set out how children will be safeguarded. This should include referral to children's social care, an appropriate multi-agency safeguarding meeting, referral to the National Referral Mechanism where relevant and coordinated support based on the child's needs.

Disruption measures: set out how you will disrupt exploitation, including by targeting perpetrators of child exploitation and harmful environments.⁷⁴ Ensure this is a coordinated response with partners.

Ownership: identify named leads who are responsible for overseeing your force's response to child exploitation. Consider where responsibility sits in your force and prioritise dedicated child-exploitation teams.⁷⁵

Criminal exploitation is strongly associated with involvement in violence. Of the children who report being exploited (having held drugs, weapons or money for someone in the last 12 months), **51% report perpetrating serious violence**, and **48% are victims**. Half of all children who report committing serious violence (51%) also report exploitation.⁶⁷

Q CASE STUDY

British Transport Police

The British Transport Police's County Lines Task Force has developed a Collaborative Safeguarding Approach as part of its work to disrupt county lines activity on rail networks. The approach aims to disrupt harm, identify vulnerability and need, and ensure children and families receive appropriate responses in a timely manner.⁷⁶

Key features of the approach include:

- Reframing encounters with children as opportunities to safeguard and provide support.
- Actively involving local statutory or voluntary sector partners before, during and after operations; this includes youth workers and social workers working alongside officers during operations or being available remotely to provide support.
- Implementing safeguarding checks straight away and connecting children and families with relevant support.
- Using the intelligence gained through operations to support the safeguarding of children and the pursuit and prosecution of the adults exploiting them.
- Delivery by a multi-disciplinary team, including operational teams, an investigative-focused unit, digital forensics, analytics support and a dedicated safeguarding support unit.

B. Scrutinise safeguarding practice, including the use of custody for children.

Routinely scrutinising safeguarding practice can help you identify areas for improvement. Led by your force's Safeguarding Lead, scrutiny should monitor:

- How well officers adhere to your force-wide safeguarding standard
- Whether appropriate actions are being taken when safeguarding concerns are identified⁷⁷
- The quality and timeliness of safeguarding referrals⁷⁸
- The effectiveness of safeguarding partnerships
- Who is safeguarded and how well they are safeguarded; do this by disaggregating data by key demographic variables,⁷⁹ and ensure you consider forms of harm that are commonly overlooked, including VAWG

The use of police custody for children should be seen as a safeguarding issue.⁸⁰ Within your safeguarding scrutiny, actively monitor:

Unnecessary use: custody should be used as a last resort for children.⁸¹ Scrutinise whether children are being brought into custody unnecessarily and whether alternative routes, such as voluntary attendance or street bail, would have been more appropriate.

Unfair use: examine whether there are disparities in which children are arrested and brought into custody, how long they are detained and the outcomes they receive.⁸² Pay specific attention to over-represented groups, including Black children and care-experienced children.⁸³

Treatment in custody: where custody is necessary, ensure that children spend the minimum time possible there and that their treatment reflects their age and needs. This includes quickly and consistently securing appropriate adults and responding appropriately to children's additional needs and vulnerabilities.⁸⁴

Safeguarding action: custody can provide an important opportunity to identify safeguarding concerns and unmet needs, and connect children to appropriate support. Scrutinise whether this is happening consistently.

C. Improve safeguarding performance and address disproportionality.

Use your scrutiny findings to take action where safeguarding practice falls below your expected standard.

Start by establishing clear ownership for improving safeguarding in your force. For overall safeguarding performance, ownership may be under your force's Safeguarding Lead; for the use of custody, it could be under the Chief Officer responsible for the oversight of custody.

97% of surveyed police respondents agree that police have an important role to play in safeguarding children.⁸⁵

Then investigate the causes of poor performance and establish clear, time-bound improvement plans. Monitor any improvement activity and assess its impact on safeguarding performance. Ensure that you report scrutiny findings through force governance and safeguarding partnership arrangements.

All children are deserving of a safeguarding response. However, children can experience different safeguarding responses depending on their backgrounds – including their gender, ethnicity, disability and SEND status, and care experience – and whether they are initially seen as victims or suspects.⁸⁶ If you identify disparities within your safeguarding practice, proactively address them. You could use the [REPAIR model](#) (p5) to do this.

RACIAL DISPROPORTIONALITY

Racial disparities in responses

The ethnic profile of children who report involvement in drug markets broadly reflects the population.⁸⁷ However, children from some ethnic groups are over-represented in arrest data. For example, Black children accounted for 51% of drug-related arrests of children in London despite making up only 13.5% of the population in London.⁸⁸ There are then clear disparities in outcomes following drug-related arrests. Of all ethnic groups, cases involving White children were the most likely to result in safeguarding-related outcomes (22%) and least likely to result in charge and prosecution (43%).⁸⁹ Cases involving Black children were the least likely to result in safeguarding-related outcomes (3%) and most likely to result in charge or prosecution (71%).⁹⁰



Focus on what works

Recommendation 3.

Take a problem-oriented policing approach.

Why? Problem-oriented policing (POP) is a proactive policing approach that focuses on identifying the root causes of crime and developing tailored responses. On average, it reduces violent crime by 24%.⁹¹

Recommended actions

- A. Enable data-informed POP by supporting analysts and strengthening data quality (particularly in relation to VAWG and ethnicity).
- B. Develop high-quality POP plans with partners and local communities.
- C. Choose evidence-based responses that are tailored to your violence problem.
- D. Monitor POP activity and address areas for improvement and disproportionality.

A. Enable data-informed POP by supporting analysts and strengthening data quality (particularly in relation to VAWG and ethnicity).

To be most effective, POP requires a robust initial analysis of the problem it is seeking to address and ongoing monitoring of whether the chosen responses are having their intended impact. This requires skilled analysts and high-quality data.

Skilled analysts

Skilled analysts are best placed to identify patterns of violence, develop problem profiles, inform decision-making and assess whether activity is having the intended impact.⁹² To strengthen your analytical capability:

Involve analysts from the start and continue to engage them throughout the POP process, from problem identification and analysis to response design and monitoring.⁹³

Support high-quality analysis, ensuring analysts have the time, training, autonomy and tools (such as analytical software) to carry out their roles effectively. Training should include the use of different data sources and an understanding of disproportionality and bias.⁹⁴

Use analytical findings to inform decision-making; ensure analysts have sufficient visibility and influence for their findings to shape local priorities and responses.⁹⁵

High-quality data

High-quality data is needed to understand local violence problems, guide decision-making, monitor delivery and assess and improve impact.⁹⁶ Improve the data you use in POP in two ways:

1. Strengthen police data.

Senior leaders should ensure their force works to improve the quality and consistency of recorded data. This includes accurate information on where, what, when and why violence has occurred. Anyone recording data should ensure that demographic information – including age, gender, ethnicity, disability and SEND status, and care experience – is consistently captured across incidents, referrals, crimes and custody logs.⁹⁷ Consider making information fields mandatory where appropriate, use system prompts and spot-check records to drive improvement.

Take care to ensure that data is strengthened on:

VAWG: ensure your force has a consistent method of capturing information on VAWG perpetration and victimisation, including domestic abuse being experienced in the home.⁹⁹ Analyse child sexual abuse data to identify peer-on-peer sexual abuse, teenage relationship violence and overlaps between sexual abuse and child criminal exploitation.

Ethnicity: children's ethnicities should be recorded consistently and in sufficient detail, using self-defined ethnicity wherever possible. Support officers and staff in asking for this information appropriately and question where records are missing.¹⁰⁰

Only **17%** of surveyed police say their force routinely collects and analyses data on how interventions affect children from Black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds.⁹⁸

2. Include data from partners and the community.

Data from outside of policing can help build a more complete picture of violence.¹⁰¹ Include relevant data from multi-agency partners, including education, local authorities, youth services and health. For example, incorporating emergency department and ambulance data can provide a better understanding of where and when violence occurs.¹⁰² Also include insights from communities, including children, to understand how violence is experienced locally, where and when it occurs and what may be driving it. Communities should also be involved in shaping and reviewing responses, rather than approached only as sources of information.¹⁰³

B. Develop high-quality POP plans with partners and local communities.

High-quality POP plans bring together police, partners and communities to define a problem, understand its causes and develop an effective response.

Develop high-quality POP plans to tackle violence involving children. Focus your plans on locations that are violence hot spots, individuals who are responsible for the most persistent and serious harm, and specific types of violence, including VAWG.¹⁰⁴ Use the SARA model to structure your plan, ensuring the plan has a clear problem definition, involves high-quality analysis to understand the root causes, and builds in monitoring and evaluation.¹⁰⁵

Develop these POP plans alongside multi-agency and community partners. Partnerships with community organisations, local councils, schools, youth services and faith groups can help to identify causes of violence, strengthen delivery and build trust. Consider where specialist expertise or organisations may be needed for specific crime types.

Consider where best to store and share your POP plans internally to support force-wide awareness, learning and future problem-solving activity.

How can you apply problem-oriented policing to VAWG?

VAWG can be less visible in police data and may therefore require a broader understanding of the problem, data and partners involved. When applying POP to VAWG:

- ♦ **Make VAWG-related harm an explicit focus** of problem definitions and analysis; avoid focusing solely on public-place violence hot spots that may overlook VAWG.¹⁰⁶
- ♦ **Draw on data sources beyond recorded crime**, including school-based disclosures, early help referrals, multi-agency risk assessment conference data and information from VAWG services.¹⁰⁷
- ♦ **Engage specialist support services** to help develop and deliver POP plans, including specialist women and girls organisations, and VAWG prevention and sexual violence support services.¹⁰⁸

C. Choose evidence-based responses that are tailored to your violence problem.

When choosing responses for your violence problem, select approaches that are supported by evidence. These have the best chance of reducing violence. Three examples of interventions that have been shown to reduce violence are: hot spots policing, restorative justice and focused deterrence. You should strongly consider delivering these strategies with partners, as part of POP responses.

Hot Spots Policing

Hot Spots Policing reduces violence by an average of 14%, drug offences by 30% and crime by 17%.¹⁰⁹ It involves identifying locations where crime is most concentrated and focusing policing resources and activities on them. This involves using crime-mapping technology to identify hot spots and using a range of activities in the location. Hot spots tend to form in small locations, such as sections of streets or parks and areas around train stations, shops, pubs or clubs.

To deliver hot spots well:¹¹⁰

Clearly define the hot spot you are targeting, including its precise location and the times of day and days of the week when violence happens there.

Specify the resource you will use to deliver activity; consider whether neighbourhood officers, police community support officers (PCSOs) or officers in non-uniform are best placed.

Clearly task staff with what you want them to do; this could include high-visibility foot patrols, active monitoring of CCTV and engagement with members of the community.

Use technology to not only identify hot spots but also to direct and monitor activities; for example, consider installing an app on officers' mobile phones that provides real-time mapping of hot spots, shares briefings and records time spent in the area.

Ensure high-visibility patrols are part of a wider violence prevention strategy, not the only response you choose.

Restorative Justice

Restorative Justice (RJ) reduces violence by an average of 34% and crime by 15%.¹¹¹ The process supports the person who has committed an offence and those affected to communicate and seek to repair the harm caused. It can take place at any stage of the criminal justice process. Under the Victims' Code, victims have the right to receive information about RJ from the police and YJSs.¹¹² While almost all forces (43/44)¹¹³ in a recent survey said they deliver RJ, only 68% of officers thought it was effective.¹¹⁴ This may impact the way in which officers offer RJ to victims of crime.

To deliver RJ well:¹¹⁵

Ensure your staff offer RJ to children who have offended and those harmed.

Provide regular training and briefings for your staff.

Support children's understanding of the process and participation.

Provide plain-language preparation guides to the child, their parents/carers and those harmed.

Formalise system partnerships with YJSs and any external RJ service providers (including clear referral protocols and data processes).

Focused Deterrence

Focused Deterrence (FD) reduces crime by an average of 33%.¹¹⁶ It is used to tackle serious, persistent violence problems that involve individuals or groups. FD is a multi-agency strategy which aims to identify the people involved in serious violence and help them desist and stay safe. It involves three components: support, deterrence and community involvement. In programmes that focus on children, FD typically focuses on individuals aged 14 or older, alongside adults involved in violence. FD is complex and resource intensive to deliver.¹¹⁷

To deliver FD well:¹¹⁸

Check that you can deliver FD, ensuring you have the required resources, team and buy-in.

Involve the community, including families, residents, community leaders and organisations, in programme development and delivery.

Tackle disproportionality when designing and implementing FD¹²⁰ – without careful planning and design, FD can disproportionately affect children from Black, Asian and other minority ethnic communities.

Use data and intelligence to identify the right cohort, track their progress and monitor operational delivery.¹²¹

Communicate clearly and frequently with those in the programme.¹²²

Provide timely and appropriate support options, and implement immediate and proportionate consequences for continued offending.¹²³

YEF's Focused Deterrence delivery guidance gives further detail on how to plan and implement FD.¹¹⁹

When selecting POP responses:

Consider a range of options, including policing and non-policing interventions. Some of the most effective interventions for preventing children's involvement in violence are delivered by local partners and typically focus on improving social and emotional development, supporting mental health and developing positive relationships. Examples include psychological therapies, sports programmes and relationship violence prevention lessons.¹²⁴ Police enforcement responses may also be suitable options, particularly against adults who exploit or coerce children into crime. For example, responses could be arresting and charging perpetrators under child exploitation legislation, seeking a court order prohibiting specific behaviours and using bail conditions to restrict movement or contact with victims.

Your local context matters. Tailor responses to your local context by designing them for the specific place, problem or group rather than rolling them out as one-size-fits-all approaches.¹²⁵

CASE STUDY

Merseyside Police

Merseyside Police uses problem-oriented policing to address violence. Starting by analysing police data, alongside insights from partners and the community, force analysts identified 29 small geographic areas where serious violence and offending are most concentrated.

The force delivers high-visibility patrols in these 29 hot spots at the days and times when offending peaks. Officers and PCSOs are given clear tasking which includes being on foot, being approachable and proactively engaging with the community and partners to develop insights into local problems. Technology is used to monitor deployments and capture real-time feedback from patrols.

Alongside patrols, the force works with communities and local partners to develop tailored responses for children and young people. This has led to partnerships with community groups and businesses to create free sessions for a range of activities – from graffiti art and DJing to fitness and beauty sessions. These are designed with young people and the community organisations that support them. As Superintendent Mullally explains: *“This isn’t the police saying, ‘Come in, do this’; it’s the community and partners who know the young people saying, ‘Work with us.’”*

In 2025/26, the force saw a 20% reduction in serious violence across the 29 hot spots compared with the previous year.

D. Monitor POP activity and address areas for improvement and disproportionality.

Monitoring and evaluation should be built into POP plans from the outset to ensure activity is delivered as intended and to assess the impacts of responses. Forces should:

Collect data on implementation, outcomes and community experiences.

Analyse this data to understand whether responses are being delivered as intended; consider whether interventions are reaching the intended people and places, whether violence is reducing and whether impacts are equal across children from different backgrounds.¹²⁶

Address disparities – the REPAIR model (p5) can be used to do this – and consider how racial disproportionality is addressed at all stages in POP.

Refine responses, adapting activity where needed.

RACIAL DISPROPORTIONALITY

Considering racial disproportionality within the SARA model

Scanning: is the data used to identify the problem likely to over-represent children from specific communities? Have you included qualitative intelligence from partners, children and communities?

Analysis: does the problem definition reflect the full range of children experiencing harm? Are the drivers of harm for children captured in the analysis?

Response: what is the likely impact of the response on children from Black, Asian and minority ethnic communities? Has the response been designed with input from those communities?

Assessment: are outcomes disaggregated by ethnicity? Is harm reduction being assessed for children from all ethnic communities?



Focus on what works

Recommendation 4.

Stop harmful approaches and deprioritise unevidenced approaches.

Why? Limited resources should be directed to violence prevention approaches with the best chance of reducing violence (those which are supported by robust evidence of impact). Currently, forces are delivering a wide range of approaches – some of these are unevidenced (we do not know whether they work) and some are harmful (they can increase violence).¹²⁷

Recommended actions

- A. Conduct an annual assessment of your local violence prevention activity.
- B. Stop delivering approaches that are likely to increase violence (including prison awareness programmes and boot camps).
- C. Deprioritise approaches where impact on violence is unknown (including knife education programmes, media campaigns and police in schools).

A. Conduct an annual assessment of your local violence prevention activity.

Forces deliver a wide range of violence prevention activity, but many lack a clear picture of what they are delivering and whether they are delivering the most effective approaches.¹²⁸ Only 44% of surveyed senior police leaders believe decisions about violence prevention are informed by the best available evidence.¹²⁹

Conduct an annual assessment to understand and improve local violence prevention activity. Forces should:

Work with local partners to complete the assessment;¹³⁰ many effective approaches are delivered by education, health and the voluntary sector.¹³¹

Map what approaches are being delivered and how they are being delivered;¹³² include information on which children are being reached, and establish whether children from Black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds are being disproportionately targeted.

Assess whether violence prevention activity aligns with the best available evidence on what works and evidence on successful implementation; use the YEF Toolkit and the College of Policing Crime Reduction Toolkit.¹³³

Improve your local approach, and work with partners to identify gaps, agree on priorities and focus resources on opportunities for improvement.¹³⁴

Communicate your findings internally (to officers and staff) and **externally** (to local communities), explaining what approaches are being delivered and why they have been prioritised.

The Serious Violence Duty

The Serious Violence Duty requires specified authorities in England and Wales, including the police, to work together to prevent and reduce serious violence.¹³⁵ Duty holders, including Chief Officers, are expected to choose approaches 'rooted in evidence of effectiveness' and use resources such as the YEF Toolkit and College of Policing guidance to 'commission activities which are known to deliver the greatest impact'.¹³⁶

Learn about effective approaches for tackling violence in the [YEF Toolkit](#).

B. Stop delivering approaches that are likely to increase violence (including prison awareness programmes and boot camps).

Some approaches to violence prevention have been found to increase offending. If your local area delivers or funds either of the programmes below, stop and redirect resources to evidence-based approaches.

Harmful approaches

Prison awareness programmes

These programmes aim to deter children from crime by demonstrating the difficulties of life in prison. Current or former prisoners meet with children and show them what prison is like. The most studied programmes involve children visiting a prison, but similar programmes involve prisoners visiting a school or community setting.¹³⁷

Although these programmes are intended to deter children from crime, evidence shows they can have the opposite effect, increasing violence and offending. They should not be delivered.¹³⁸ Despite this, 47% of surveyed police believe they are effective at reducing violence, and respondents in just under half of forces (21) said that their force delivers these programmes.¹³⁹

Boot camps

Boot camps are military-style residential camps for children who have offended. They aim to improve children's self-discipline through demanding physical tasks, military-style drills, short-term confinement and swift punishment for misbehaviour. These programmes are typically delivered by prison officers, military staff or Youth Offending Teams.¹⁴⁰ Boot camps can increase violence and should not be delivered.¹⁴¹

C. Deprioritise approaches where impact on violence is unknown (including knife education programmes, media campaigns and police in schools).

Some commonly used violence prevention approaches have not been robustly evaluated, so their impact is unknown. These approaches are not the best bets for reducing violence and may potentially have a detrimental impact.¹⁴³

Unevidenced approaches

Knife crime education or awareness programmes

These programmes aim to reduce knife carrying.¹⁴⁴ They may include an exploration of attitudes towards carrying knives and a discussion of the potential consequences, including stories, photos or videos depicting the impacts of violence. They are typically one-off, one-to-two-hour sessions. These brief programmes do not address the underlying drivers of knife carrying, including fear and exploitation, and are therefore unlikely to make long-term changes to children's behaviour.

Media campaigns

Media campaigns aim to raise awareness of the risks and consequences of violence.¹⁴⁵ Campaigns are based on a series of weak assumptions: to be effective, children need to see the campaign, and increased awareness must then deter involvement in violence and lead to changes in behaviour.

Knife surrender schemes

These initiatives enable people to hand in weapons in designated locations.¹⁴⁶ There is good reason to question why surrender schemes would work: the widespread availability of knives means surrendered knives can easily be replaced, and schemes do not typically address motivations for carrying a weapon.

Given the resource pressures facing policing – with **78% of police respondents** to a recent survey identifying limited resources as a barrier to using evidence-based practice¹⁴² – focusing resources on the approaches most likely to reduce violence is essential.

Police in schools

In many schools, police officers have an active, physical presence. Officers may work with several schools concurrently, with one school at a time or on an ad hoc basis. Officers can be based on school premises and may deliver a variety of activities – either in classrooms (where they might provide lessons or assemblies on topics such as what to do in an emergency, drugs or personal safety) or in corridors (where they may conduct patrols or initial investigations into potential offences).¹⁵⁰

CAUTION

The risk of backfire effects

There is a risk that these approaches could unintentionally cause harm. If your activity creates a misconception about how common knife carrying is or increases the fear of knife-related violence, this could make children more likely to carry knives for self-protection.¹⁴⁷ Half of 13–17-year-olds who carry weapons say they do so for their own safety.¹⁴⁸ Graphic imagery of knife injuries may also be upsetting for some children.¹⁴⁹

If you choose to have a police officer regularly on site in a local education setting:

Set a specific aim for the police presence.

This aim might be to build trust between the police, the children and the community or to use the officer as an additional trusted adult for the children. Ensure you have a clear aim and monitor whether it is being achieved.¹⁵¹

Set clear boundaries with the school and the police officer who is present.

For instance, you may not want the officer stopping children in the corridors or intervening in behavioural incidents. Any searches of children or their belongings should follow statutory guidance.¹⁵²

Communicate with children, parents and carers.

Be open about why the police are present and what safeguards are in place.¹⁵³ This may be especially important for children and families who are less trusting of police.¹⁵⁴

Select and prepare officers carefully.

Ensure officers deployed in schools receive additional training and supervision to support child-centred practice and effective partnership working with education staff.¹⁵⁵

Effective liaison with schools

While police in schools is not a good bet for violence prevention, collaboration between police and education settings is vital for safeguarding children (and is mandated as part of statutory safeguarding guidance). Alongside other statutory partners, police and education settings must work together to promote the welfare of children.

One example of this collaboration is Operation Encompass, which is in place in all police forces in England and Wales.¹⁵⁶ This initiative requires that when police attend incidents of domestic violence or abuse where children are directly or indirectly involved, they notify the designated Safeguarding Lead at the child's school before the start of the next school day. This ensures that the school can support the child.

RACIAL DISPROPORTIONALITY

Police in schools and the risk of racial disproportionality

Having police in schools might carry risks for children, such as criminalisation for behaviour that would have otherwise been dealt with using non-criminal school sanctions. These risks are particularly relevant for children from Black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds, who may experience more intrusive police contact. Black children in England and Wales are almost eight times as likely to be strip searched compared to White children and are over-represented in being subject to use of force within stop and searches.¹⁵⁷

The case of Child Q illustrates the potential for serious harm. In 2020, a 15-year-old Black girl was removed from an exam and strip searched by police at school after staff suspected she was carrying drugs. No drugs were found. Child Q was on her period at the time, and the search took place without an appropriate adult present. The search was later found to have lacked reasonable justification.¹⁵⁸

A safeguarding review concluded that the response was disproportionate and harmful, and that racism and adultification bias were likely influencing factors.¹⁵⁹ Police and school staff had escalated to enforcement rather than taking a safeguarding-first approach. The case demonstrates how, without careful safeguards, police presence in schools can contribute to unnecessary criminalisation and worsen racial disproportionality.

If you choose to deliver approaches where impact on violence is unknown, you should:

Justify your decision. Why are you choosing this approach? Do you have a clear theory of change? Are you already delivering evidenced approaches to a high standard?¹⁶¹

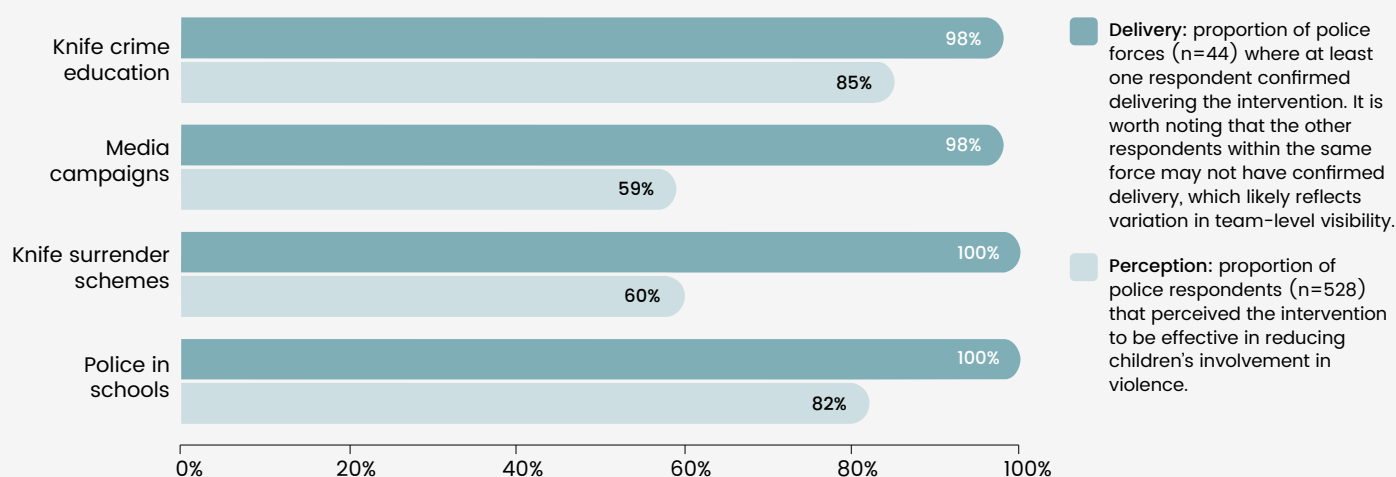
Check the evidence on implementation. Have you taken steps to minimise risk of harm? Can you take learning from other areas that have delivered the approach?¹⁶²

Embed race equity when designing and implementing approaches.¹⁶³

Evaluate the approach. At a minimum, you should define what you're trying to achieve, monitor implementation and learn from the findings.¹⁶⁴ External organisations may be able to support with more robust evaluation.¹⁶⁵

Stop and redesign approaches that do not demonstrate benefit through robust evaluation.

Figure 1: The delivery and perception of these unevidenced approaches¹⁶⁰





Focus on what works

Recommendation 5.

Improve the quality of stop and search.

Why? Stop and search powers are necessary for public safety; they allow for the detection of crime and may act as a deterrent. However, forces should not assume that increases in stop and searches will deliver reductions in violence. While global evidence (mainly from the US) suggests that increasing stop and search can have a moderate impact on crime, UK evidence suggests a low impact. And stop and search carries a range of risks for children, including racially disproportionate use. When conducted poorly, stop and search can also reduce trust and confidence in policing.¹⁶⁶

Recommended actions

- A. Scrutinise stop and search of children, driving improvements in the strength of grounds and quality of interactions.
- B. Monitor, publish and address racial disproportionality in stop and search of children.
- C. Provide refresher training on stop and search to frontline officers.

A. Scrutinise stop and search of children, driving improvements in the strength of grounds and quality of interactions.

It is important to carefully scrutinise your force's stop and search practice to drive up quality, and this requires internal and external scrutiny. Each force should:

Establish an internal scrutiny process. Monitor the rates of stop and search of children in your area, including searches under Section 60 and strip searches. Also ensure that you dip-sample records of stops, body-worn video footage and complaints to identify priorities for improvement.

"The groups that are consulted [in stop and search scrutiny] should always include children and young persons."

Police and Criminal Evidence Act Code A¹⁶⁷

Establish a community scrutiny panel. Alongside internal scrutiny, establish a community scrutiny panel which meaningfully involves children.¹⁶⁸ This includes children with experience of stop and search and children from ethnic backgrounds that are disproportionately targeted by stop and search.¹⁶⁹ Consider how best to support children to contribute to ensure they are able to participate; the best approach is likely to involve working with trusted partners who have existing relationships with children.¹⁷⁰ Ensure the panel has access to all the material they need and that you communicate how you have acted on their feedback.¹⁷¹

Focus your scrutiny on three areas:

1. Reduce unnecessary stops.

All stop and searches should be necessary and proportionate.¹⁷² For suspicion-led searches, officers should have genuine and objectively reasonable grounds to believe they will find the relevant prohibited item. Support officers in determining when a search is necessary and proportionate, weighing up the potential benefits and harms and considering alternative strategies.¹⁷³

2. Strengthen grounds.

Having stronger grounds for a stop is associated with higher find rates and lower disproportionality. Only 3% of searches find weapons, but this rises to 11% when officers have information or intelligence that a person might be carrying a weapon. Yet only one in ten searches is informed by intelligence. Work to increase the proportion of searches that are based on strong grounds to improve effectiveness and fairness.¹⁷⁴

3. Improve the quality of interactions.

The stop and search of children should be conducted in a way that is fair and maintains the child's dignity and trust.¹⁷⁵ Appropriate communication is key to ensuring a child understands what is happening and why.¹⁷⁶ Body-worn video should be activated before the interaction begins and the search should result in safeguarding consideration and action as needed.¹⁷⁷



RACIAL DISPROPORTIONALITY

Racial disproportionality in stop and search

A recent study into disproportionality in stop and search in London explored the grounds given in stops conducted in 2023.¹⁷⁸ It suggested:

- ♦ Black Londoners are likely to receive lower-quality grounds (vaguer, more subjective, less evidential) than White Londoners.
- ♦ The term 'violence' appears significantly more in stops with Black than White Londoners.
- ♦ Children and young people aged 14–19 receive the lowest quality grounds of any age group.
- ♦ Improving grounds' quality could reduce racial disproportionality.

Drive improvement following scrutiny

This could include setting and communicating improvement goals, strengthening supervision at the Sergeant and Inspector levels and addressing persistent poor performance. Support officers to improve through activities such as accompanied patrols with supervisors, feedback in briefings and performance discussions, and development opportunities where required.¹⁷⁹

B. Monitor, publish and address racial disproportionality in stop and search of children.

Stop and search is disproportionately used on Black children.¹⁸⁰ Black children are two-and-a-half times as likely to be stopped and searched and four times as likely to be strip searched compared to their share of the population.¹⁸¹ These disparities make it particularly important that forces understand and take action to address racial disparities which arise in local practices.

Make racial disproportionality a key focus of your stop and search scrutiny. Specifically, examine disparities in the volume of searches (by disaggregating the rates of stop and search on children in your area by ethnicity and comparing this with local population data and the ethnic composition of crime suspects). Also examine disparities in the types of searches, strength of grounds, outcomes, repeat searches, geography, quality of interactions, children's experiences, complaints and any resulting safeguarding actions.¹⁸²

Where racial disparities are identified, take action to address them. The [REPAIR model](#) (p5) can support this. Also publish local data and analyses on racial disparities in the stop and search of children on your force website. Include an explanation of the identified patterns and the action your force is taking in response.¹⁸³



YOUTH VOICE

"I was on a run recently; there was a robbery nearby. They searched me, but I didn't fit the description of the tall Black male. I did feel panicked... I've seen stop and searches where knives have been found... so I think there should be stop and search... but stopping those that are of colour for no reason undermines the whole process. Stop and search is useful, but it's how you do it...."

Hanzala, Member of the YEF's Youth Advisory Board

C. Provide refresher training on stop and search to frontline officers.

Many officers receive formal stop and search training only during initial police training. This means that practice may be shaped mainly through watching and listening to the conduct of colleagues, which may not reflect guidance or best practice.¹⁸⁵

Alongside training for new recruits, provide regular refresher training for frontline officers who conduct stop and search. Set the frequency of training according to your force's need and capacity. Where resources are limited, prioritise officers and teams based on their use of the power and evidence from monitoring, supervision, complaints and scrutiny.

Training should cover:

Decision-making and professional practice

- Fair decision-making, professional interactions and clear communication;¹⁸⁶ this includes requirements to use body-worn video and record encounters accurately.
- The importance of quality over quantity; searches based on strong grounds are more effective, while increasing the volume of searches won't necessarily deliver results.

Vulnerability and safeguarding

- Appropriate conduct when searching children, recognising that these encounters may be particularly distressing and can negatively affect perceptions of the police.¹⁸⁷
- The expectation for officers to be professionally curious, identify vulnerabilities and risks, consider safeguarding in every encounter and take subsequent action where needed.¹⁸⁸

Disproportionality, scrutiny and improvement

- Racial disproportionality, including local data and force improvement priorities.
- Learning from community scrutiny panels, using examples of good and poor practice.

YOUTH VOICE

"I think if they do it [in a] less discriminatory [way and] in a more calming, caring way and you just put the person at ease, that would work a ton."

A young person talking about stop and search in a focus group in Wales¹⁸⁴

What do children think about stop and search?

The YEF's 2024 survey of more than 10,000 children across England and Wales found that most children support the use of stop and search (68%), and most of those who had experienced it said officers were polite and treated them with respect.¹⁸⁹ However, confidence was weaker when children were asked about fairness. Only 56% thought stop and search was used fairly. Black, Asian and Mixed ethnicity children were less likely to support its use or believe it was used fairly, while children from all minority ethnic groups reported less positive experiences of how they were treated when they were stopped and searched.¹⁹⁰ These findings underline the importance of using stop and search fairly, respectfully and consistently with children.



Recommendation 6.

Build an effective and fair out-of-court resolution approach.

Why? Out-of-court resolutions (OOCRs) can reduce violence. While the use of OOCRs for children has increased, their use is often inconsistent and unfair. Some children are less likely to access diversion, and there are cases of inappropriate use. Children can also wait too long for evidence-based support, which can address the underlying causes of their behaviour.¹⁹¹

Recommended actions

- A. Establish an OOCR protocol for children with your local youth justice service(s).
- B. Monitor your OOCR approach for children, and address areas for improvement and disproportionality.

A. Establish an OOCR protocol for children with your local youth justice service(s).

Working with youth justice services (YJSs) on OOCRs ensures decisions reflect the child's circumstances, needs and offending history. This can lead to more appropriate decisions and access to effective support.¹⁹²

Jointly establish a protocol which prioritises swift decision-making and quick access to evidence-based support.¹⁹³ The protocol should clearly set out:

Eligibility criteria: decisions should be guided by the Child Gravity Matrix, the views of victims and the child's needs, circumstances and views. Avoid criteria based solely on offence type or previous offending.¹⁹⁴

Joint decision-making: set out how decisions are made, and ensure rationales are accurately recorded. Implement a joint decision-making panel (JDMP), bringing together police and partners to agree on the most appropriate outcome, and make decisions quickly.¹⁹⁵ Use restorative justice as part of, or alongside, the OOCR.¹⁹⁶

Referral pathways and quality: establish simple, time-bound pathways between police, YJSs, safeguarding partners and support providers.¹⁹⁷ Define what makes a high-quality referral, including information on the child's needs, circumstances and voice and the victim's views.

Access to support: work with partners to provide support which is evidence-based.¹⁹⁸ Set out what diversionary support is available and how it can be accessed. Consider specialist support, including interventions which tackle exploitation and VAWG.¹⁹⁹

Data-sharing arrangements: data sharing with youth justice partners should be proactive and clearly set out to support effective case management and continuity of communication.²⁰⁰

Operational arrangements: provide and co-locate a police officer within your local YJS.²⁰¹ Commit a senior police officer to the JDMP and assign a senior officer as OOCR lead.²⁰²

In a 2026 survey, 38% of police respondents did not believe diversion was an effective approach to reducing violence.²⁰³ To counter this belief, provide training and reminders to staff on the effectiveness of high-quality diversion for reducing violence. Ensure officers, staff and partners understand the protocol and available support pathways.²⁰⁴ Share regular feedback on outcomes to promote a positive culture around OOCRs.²⁰⁵

Use the YEF's [Diversion Practice Guidance](#) to help build an effective, fair approach in your local area.

Q CASE STUDY

Greater Manchester Police

Greater Manchester Police (GMP) worked with YJSs across 10 districts in their force area to develop a joint OOCR protocol. Drawing on best practice, including policies from other areas, GMP's OOCR lead and YJS managers developed:

- ♦ Agreed eligibility criteria, promoting consistency across the region, which included extending the availability of deferred cautions from two districts to all 10.
- ♦ Effective joint decision-making processes between police and YJSs, prioritising swift access to support.
- ♦ Robust oversight to monitor adherence to the protocol, including the development of a shared platform to enable better data collation and analysis.

Supported by the YEF's Whole Area Model,²⁰⁶ the protocol has improved consistency in decision-making and accelerated children's access to support. It has also enabled the partnership to respond quickly to the government's new knife crime guidance, which includes a requirement for a deferred prosecution scheme.²⁰⁷



B. Monitor your OOCR approach for children, and address areas for improvement and disproportionality.

Without robust monitoring, forces cannot be confident that OOCR decisions are appropriate and fair. Dedicated oversight and clear improvement processes can address inappropriate decision-making and disparities in access to diversion and support.²⁰⁸

Your OOCR oversight should:

Have clear ownership. Appoint a named senior officer to lead force-wide delivery, supported by a strategic oversight board, such as the Local Criminal Justice Partnership Board. The board should monitor the consistent application of the protocol across the force area.²⁰⁹

Review decisions and disparities. Audit individual cases for quality, consistency and compliance with the protocol. Analyse force-level data to identify patterns and disparities in who is offered, receives and completes OOCRs and the outcomes achieved. This should be broken down by age, gender, ethnicity, disability and SEND status, care experience, geography and offence type.

Draw on children's views and experiences of OOCRs.²¹⁰

Focus on the speed and quality of referrals. Review the time taken between arrest/interview and referral to support and whether referrals include the information needed to inform decisions.

Assess whether children receiving OOCRs access evidence-based support within four weeks.²¹¹

Report findings to the local Youth Justice Management Board (YJMB). An officer of an appropriate level of seniority for making strategic decisions (e.g. Chief Inspector or above) should attend the local YJMB.²¹²

Improve practice. Where needed, develop time-bound improvement plans, and share them with everyone involved in the delivery of OOCRs. Monitor improvement activity.

Complete a self-assessment of OOCR practice in your area using YEF's [Out of Court Resolution Practice Insight Creator \(ORPIC\)](#). Identify strengths and areas for development, and receive tailored recommendations to improve your local practice.

Make disproportionality a core focus of your OOCR oversight. OOCRs should be available to all eligible children, but access is currently not equitable. Black children are less likely than White children to receive diversion, even after accounting for individual and offence-level factors.²¹⁴ Access to diversion also varies by age, gender, disability and SEND status, care experience, geography and poverty.²¹⁵ Addressing disparities in diversion supports violence prevention: diversion is associated with lower reoffending, particularly for violence offences and offences involving Black children.²¹⁶

OOCRs have been used inappropriately in cases of serious violence and violence against girls.²¹³ This includes cases where a child received multiple OOCRs without appropriate escalation or intervention. It is especially important to scrutinise these cases to ensure that decisions are appropriate, relevant guidance is followed and children are safeguarded.

If you identify disparities within your OOCR approach, proactively address them. Use the [REPAIR model](#) (p5) and consider:

- Does the disparity relate to OOCR access, engagement with support or longer-term outcomes?
- Are underlying causes linked to variations between teams, officers, areas or offence types?
- Are eligibility criteria and decision-making processes being applied consistently and fairly?
- Are decisions influenced by assumptions about ethnicity, background or previous contact with services?
- Is adultification bias a factor?
- Are interventions accessible and appropriate? Consider barriers linked to additional needs, disability, mental health, language, ethnicity and cost.
- How can YJSs, community partners and affected communities help identify barriers and co-design solutions?

RACIAL DISPROPORTIONALITY

Outcomes 22 and 23 and racial disproportionality

Use Outcomes 22 and 23 to tackle racial disproportionality. These outcomes enable children to be diverted to positive support that could protect them against future offending.²¹⁷ An important feature of these outcomes is that an admission of guilt is not required for them to be used, and evidence suggests that requiring an admission of guilt to access diversion contributes to racial disproportionality in the youth justice system. It may also create barriers for exploited children. Using these outcomes may help to widen access to diversion, address disparities and reduce reoffending.²¹⁸

References

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8. Home Office (2022), *Serious Violence Duty. Preventing and reducing serious violence. Statutory guidance for responsible authorities. England and Wales*.
9. College of Policing and NPCC (2024), *Violence against women and girls (VAWG) national policing statement 2024*.
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11. Ofsted et al. (2024), *Multi-agency responses to serious youth violence*.
12. This guidance aligns with the policing reforms set out in the Home Office's January 2026 white paper, *From local to national: a new model for policing, and supports national expectations across England and Wales*.
13. Relevant resources include the College of Policing's Authorised Professional Practices (APPs), operational guidance, the *Code of ethics and the Crime reduction toolkit*; NPCC strategies, action plans and portfolio products, including the *Children and Young Persons Policing Charter* and the *Police Race Action Plan*; and statutory guidance, including *Working Together to Safeguard Children* (DfE, 2026) and the *Serious Violence Duty guidance* (Home Office, 2022).
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19. *Equality Act* (2010), section 149.
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21. These include: Casey (2023), *Final report: an independent review into the standards of behaviour and internal culture of the Metropolitan Police Service*; His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS; 2023), *Race and policing*; Home Affairs Committee (2021), *The Macpherson report: twenty-two years on*; Independent Office for Police Conduct (IOPC; 2024), *Race discrimination report*; Macpherson (1999), *The Stephen Lawrence inquiry*; Ministry of Justice (2017), *The Lammy review*.
22. This model was developed using multiple resources from the NPCC, HMICFRS, the College of Policing and IOPC, including the *Police Race Action Plan* and maturity matrix; *Race and policing* (HMICFRS, 2023); Stop and search APPs; and the IOPC's discrimination guidelines, report and toolkit (2024), alongside expert panel advice.
23. The College of Policing provides Equality Impact Assessment templates and force guidance [here](#).
24. See the NPCC's definition of child-centred policing [here](#). Be aware that although 'child-centred' applies to under-18s, needs and vulnerabilities do not end at 18. The NPCC's definition and strategy support an ongoing supportive response.
25. Existing legal and professional frameworks support this approach to children. These include the *Children Act 2004*, the *Police and Criminal Evidence Act* and its codes; the United Nations' (UN's) *Convention on the rights of the child* – right care, right person; and relevant College of Policing APPs.
26. Allnock et al. (2026), *Child-centred policing in practice*, YEF; Mazerolle et al. (2013), 'Procedural justice and police legitimacy: A systematic review', *Journal of Experimental Criminology*, 9, pp. 245–274.
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33. Allnock et al. (2026), *Child-centred policing in practice*, YEF; College of Policing (2024), *Children and young persons*, APP; HMIP and HMICFRS (2023), *Expectations for children in police custody*.
34. All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Children in Police Custody (2025), *Making children's rights a reality in police custody*; Kemp et al. (2026), *Children and policing in England and Wales: adopting a child first approach*.
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40. College of Policing (n.d.), *Detention and custody: children and young persons*, APP; Kemp et al. (2026), *Children and policing: a child first approach*.
41. For an example custody checklist, see [here](#).
42. For example, Cleveland's Child-Centred Custody Suite. For further details see: Beckett et al. (2026), *Safeguarding children involved in violence*, YEF.
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44. Allnock et al. (2026), *Child-centred policing in practice*, YEF; Beckett et al. (2026), *Safeguarding children involved in violence*, YEF; Kemp and Bevan (2026), *Child-centred policing in Greater Manchester*.
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64. This could include multi-agency child exploitation panels, MARACs, child protection conferences, multi-agency safeguarding hubs and contextual safeguarding panels.
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191. Brodie et al. (2025), *Exploring racial disparity in diversion from the Youth Justice System*; Farrell et al. (2025), *Understanding referral pathways and diversionary support for children within the criminal justice system in England and Wales*; HMICFRS (2025), *The effectiveness of diverting children from the criminal justice system*; Rahal et al. (2025), *Secondary Data Analysis of Youth Diversion in London*; YEF (2025), *Diversion practice guidance*; YEF (2025), *YEF formal pre-court diversion toolkit*; YEF (2025), *YEF informal pre-court diversion toolkit*; Youth Justice Board (2026), *The use of diversionary outcomes in England and Wales 2025*.
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193. Farrell et al. (2025), *Understanding referral pathways and diversionary support for children within the criminal justice system in England and Wales*; YEF (2025), *Diversion practice guidance*.
194. NPCC (2025), *Child gravity matrix: children under 18 (version 2.4)*; YEF (2025), *Diversion practice guidance*.
195. Home Office (2025), *Case management guidance: how to use out of court resolutions*; YEF (2025), *Diversion practice guidance*.
196. YEF (2025), *YEF restorative justice toolkit*.
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198. YEF (n.d.), *YEF toolkit*.
199. YEF (2025), *YEF formal pre-court diversion toolkit*; YEF (2025), *YEF informal pre-court diversion toolkit*.
200. Home Office (2025), *Case management guidance: how to use out of court resolutions*.
201. Farrell et al. (2025), *Understanding referral pathways and diversionary support for children within the criminal justice system in England and Wales*; Great Britain (1998), *Crime and Disorder Act 1998*; Youth Justice Board and NPCC (2023), *The role of the Youth Justice Service Police Officer*.
202. HMIP and HMICFRS (2025), *The effectiveness of diverting children from the criminal justice system*.
203. Farrell et al. (2026), *Review of evidence-based practice in policing to prevent children from being involved in violence*, YEF.
204. Partners include appropriate adults, solicitors, children's services, education, the Crown Prosecution Service and staff delivering support interventions.
205. YEF (2025), *YEF formal pre-court diversion toolkit*; YEF (2025), *YEF informal pre-court diversion toolkit*.
206. The Whole Area Model is a programme run by the YEF. For more information, see [here](#).
207. Home Office and Ministry of Justice (2026), *Government guidance for child knife possession offences*.
208. HMIP and HMICFRS (2025), *The effectiveness of diverting children from the criminal justice system*.
209. Home Office (2025), *Case management guidance: how to use out of court resolutions*; Home Office and Ministry of Justice (2026), *Government guidance for child knife possession offences*; YEF (2025), *Diversion practice guidance*.
210. Home Office (2025), *Case management guidance: how to use out of court resolutions*.
211. Ibid. See also: Home Office and Ministry of Justice (2026), *Government guidance for child knife possession offences*. Access to evidence-based support within four weeks depends on policing and partners. Police should prioritise prompt referral and decision-making, while YJSs will usually commission support. In some areas, police forces or OPCCs may play a greater role. Effective approaches include social and emotional skills programmes, therapies, sport and mentoring. See the YEF Toolkit for further information.
212. Youth Justice Board and NPCC (2023), *The role of the Youth Justice Service Police Officer*.
213. HMIP and HMICFRS (2025), *The effectiveness of diverting children from the criminal justice system*.
214. Brodie et al. (2025), *Exploring racial disparity in diversion from the Youth Justice System*; Rahal et al. (2025), *Secondary data analysis of youth diversion in London*; YEF (2025), *YEF formal pre-court diversion toolkit*; YEF (2025), *YEF informal pre-court diversion toolkit*; Youth Justice Board (2026), *The use of diversionary outcomes in England and Wales 2025*.
215. Ibid.
216. Rahal et al. (2025), *Secondary data analysis of youth diversion in London*.
217. Home Office (2026), *Outcomes for recorded crimes. Guidance for frontline officers and staff*; YEF (2025), *Racial disproportionality in violence affecting children*.
218. Ibid.



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