

Broke, but not broken

What the academic literature and young adults tell us about the interplay between poverty, inequality and repeat contact with policing



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**LEADERS
UNLOCKED**

Acknowledgements

This report was written by Lauren Bennett, Burcu Borysik, Rose Dowling and Tracy Shildrick.

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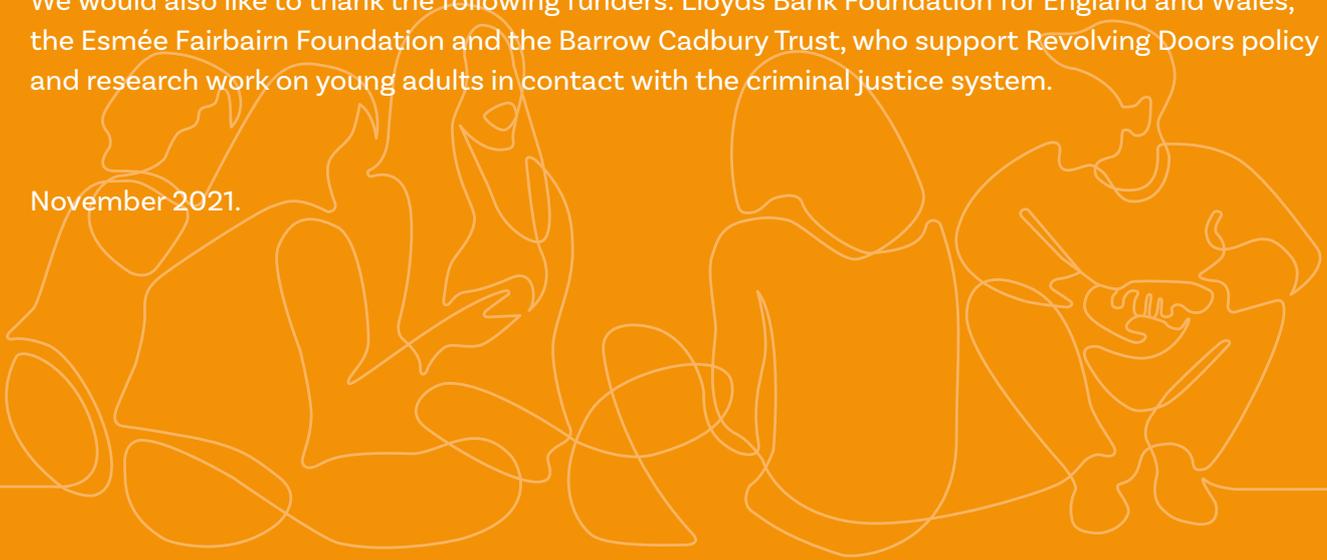
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About Revolving Doors Agency

Revolving Doors Agency is a national charity that aims to change systems and improve services for people 'in the revolving door' – people who come into repeat contact with the criminal justice system due to multiple unmet needs such as mental ill-health, substance misuse, homelessness, poverty and other traumatic life events.

We work to create a smarter criminal justice system that makes the revolving door avoidable and escapable. We do this by working alongside national and local decision-makers. We combine lived experience insight, robust research and system knowledge to drive effective policy solutions.

About New Generation Policing

New Generation Policing is delivered by Revolving Doors Agency and supported by three independent funders: the Barrow Cadbury Trust, the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, and the Lloyds Bank Foundation for England and Wales. It is a three-year programme supporting police and crime commissioners and police services to develop and implement new interventions to stop young adults being caught in the cycle of crime and crisis.

About Leaders Unlocked

Leaders Unlocked enables young people and underrepresented groups to have a stronger voice on the issues that affect their lives. In education, justice, policing, health and other sectors, we help organisations across the UK to engage young people effectively and shape decision-making for the better.

About Professor Tracy Shildrick, Newcastle University

Tracy Shildrick is Professor Inequalities and Head of Sociology at Newcastle University. Most of Tracy's research has a focus on young people, with a particular interest in youth transitions. Tracy is also interested in issues around employment, low pay and welfare reform. She has a specific interest in the North East and much of her research has been conducted in Teesside.



Serena Kennedy
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Foreword

My extensive experience in policing in the North West of England, in Greater Manchester, Cheshire and more recently, Merseyside, has shown me repeatedly that we need to tackle the underlying poverty and inequality that drives crime. This is particularly true for the young adult cohort – those between the ages of 18 to 25. This is a critical age group for whom, if we recognise the impact of poverty, and invest in effective preventative strategies, we can significantly decrease their involvement in crime.

This report makes a strong case for recognising the impact of inequality – the literature review shows the long-term and damaging effect poverty has on a young person's life chances. Once in contact with the criminal justice system, reoffending becomes more, not less likely and young people have less chance of receiving the help and support they need.

This position has only worsened as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The closure of schools and confinement at home has had multiple impacts on children and young people in terms of education, social isolation, wellbeing and child protection. Children from poorer families have fewer resources, may be reliant on school meals and playgrounds for exercise, are less likely to have appropriate access to the internet/sufficient space to allow learning, or have access to additional resources to support other activities for mental or physical wellbeing.

People aged under 25 were more likely than others to be employed in sectors that were shut down by the UK wide lockdown and are more likely to have lost their jobs since then. The economic repercussions of COVID-19 threaten to disrupt the career progression of young workers which tends to suggest the negative economic impact of COVID-19 may last into the future.

The contribution of young people themselves to this report, through peer-led qualitative research, gives a much-needed insight into the impact of poverty and inequality on their involvement with the police. Their experiences support emphatically the recommendations of this report and show the important role the police have with partners, the voluntary sector and communities in breaking the connection between poverty and crime. It is also very welcome to see how much young people want to work constructively with the police to see their recommendations implemented.

I know we can break the cycle of crisis and crime for young adults if we tackle the root causes together and invest in prevention and support.

Contents

Acknowledgements	2
About Revolving Doors Agency	3
Foreword	4
1. Executive summary	6
Key findings	8
Recommendations	8
2. Methodology	10
3. What the literature tells us	12
Introduction: why focus on young adults?	13
Limitations of risk factor approaches	14
Rethinking the impact of poverty	15
Policing, poverty, trauma and inequalities	16
Moving away from the criminal justice system	21
Summary	23
4. What young adults told us	24
Inequalities are at the heart of young adults' experiences of the criminal justice system	25
Lack of money, lack of opportunities and problematic relationships drive young adults into a cycle of crisis and crime	25
Young adults feel routinely discriminated against because of who they are, who they are friends with, and where they live	29
Young adults believe that police contact can make or break their future	30
Young adults, particularly young men, may not easily accept support from the police, even if it means they can avoid going to court	32
Young adults in the criminal justice system feel let down by people and services	33
Young adults feel optimistic about their chances of breaking the cycle of crisis and crime, but they are impatient for change	33
5. Conclusion	36
6. Appendix 1: Interview schedules	39
7. Appendix II: Interview sample	42
References	44

The number of children and young adults entering the criminal justice system has been falling in recent years (Ministry of Justice 2019). However, once young people are drawn into the criminal justice system, the lack of consistent means to divert them away into effective support results in at least a proportion ending up with extensive convictions in their adult lives, for often minor and mostly non-violent crimes (Farrall et al 2011; Case 2021).

The shifting profile of young people and young adults in the criminal justice system is sometimes described as a ‘thickening soup’ (Brewster 2019: 223). This means those who are drawn into the justice system are often facing multiple challenges and severe, cumulative, and often very complex problems. These are all too often not properly understood or addressed. Particularly, young adults who frequently and interchangeably present to police as victims, witnesses and suspects of crime are shown to experience more challenges, more severely and for longer than any other young adults within the criminal justice system (Borysik 2020). They are also less likely to be assessed for their needs and subsequently access any support in the community.

The criminal justice system appears to be the bottom of a gaping hole created by the structural inequalities and systemic underfunding of community provision, drawing in more and more young adults with heightened unmet health and human needs, with lives built on trauma, poverty and inequalities. Yet, the criminal justice system is often ill-equipped to deal with severe and multiple disadvantages (Anderson 2021). Standard responses based on enforcement and punishment are shown to turn young adults’ lives from bad to worse and make reoffending more rather than less likely (Agan et al 2021).

To date, much of the policy response towards offending amongst young people and young adults has tended to rely almost solely on what is known as ‘risk factor approaches’. Risk factor approaches focus on particular adverse circumstances or behaviours as predictive of increased likelihood of offending. They advocate intervention, often aimed at individual behavioural change, as a way of diverting young people from offending (Farrington and Welsh 2003). The over-reliance on these approaches is particularly problematic because they tend to ignore wider structural conditions.

The current policy narrative based on risk factor approaches often prioritises individual-level explanations at the expense of assessing the ‘risks’ presented by the structural conditions young adults grow up and live in. In return, it perpetuates the idea that the lasting damage of long-term and persistent multiple disadvantages is the responsibility of individual young adults or their families (MacDonald et al 2020).

The literature review presented in this report challenges risk factor approaches to understanding how young adults are drawn into the criminal justice system. It argues that there is significant scope to extend our understanding of how different aspects of inequality combine in young adults’ life stories and biographies, and how these relate to offending and relationships with the police.

The peer-led qualitative research presented in this report brings together important, close-up, lived experience accounts to demonstrate the complex interplay of the various dimensions of inequality that impact young people’s lives, engagement in crime and interaction with the police.

Key findings

Young adults who took part in this research highlighted that:

- Inequalities are at the heart of their experiences of the criminal justice system.
- Lack of money, lack of opportunities and problematic relationships drive them into a cycle of crisis and crime.
- Young adults in repeat contact with the police feel routinely discriminated against by police and other public services because of who they are, who they are friends with, and where they live.
- Young adults believe that police contact can make or break their future.
- Young adults, particularly young men, may not easily accept support from the police, even if it means they can avoid going to court.
- Young adults in repeat contact with the police feel let down by people they know and services they (try to) access.
- Young adults in repeat contact with the police feel optimistic about their chances of breaking the cycle of crisis and crime, but they are impatient for change.

Recommendations

This report also brings together four key recommendations to improve young adults' experiences of policing and the wider criminal justice system so that they can achieve their aspirations. These were developed by young adults who attended a workshop, facilitated by Leaders Unlocked, where we discussed the findings and the implications of these.

Young adults need police services and the wider criminal justice system to understand the root causes of crime.

Young adults we spoke to consistently wanted police and other criminal justice agencies to take into account their life circumstances and particularly their challenges with mental ill-health. They talked in-depth about their desire to have police officers take the time to speak to them, even when they had committed a crime, so they could tell their side of the story. They saw police officers as potentially the first, and the most important person to hear their story before their lives take a different turn. It was clear that young adults need more time and a calm space to speak and be heard, and they felt the current processes do not meet their needs. Young adults often felt that needs assessments were 'done onto them' rather than with them.

Young adults want police officers to receive specialist training on communication and de-escalation.

Many young adults who took part in the research wanted the police to improve how they communicate with young people and young adults. In particular, they felt that the police should be more empathetic when working with young people and young adults and recognise the range of needs they are likely to face. Therefore, it was felt that there could be specific training to address this. It was also suggested that the police should make efforts to recruit people with lived experience, who would understand what people they were in contact with were going through.

Young adults would like to work with police services to keep policing to a high standard.

Workshop attendees emphasised that the police have the power and ability to help children and young adults because of their presence in communities and the contact they have with this age group. It was felt that individuals working for the police need to hold themselves to a higher standard as they are not just in an 'average' job. Others also wanted partner organisations and their staff to advocate for young adults in contact with the criminal justice system, for example by making them aware of their rights and supporting them to make complaints about police conduct to their Police and Crime Commissioner where relevant. Partner organisations could also support young adults to provide feedback on their experiences through consultations and local forums.

Young adults would like police services to partner with community organisations that can support young adults.

Lastly, young adults highlighted the role of community organisations that are able to engage young people and young adults through outreach activities, and develop positive, trusting relationships with them. They recommended a more multi-agency approach to supporting young people and young adults, involving organisations that are trusted and embedded in the community. Linked to this, workshop attendees also spoke about the benefits of diverting young adults into community support services, rather than prosecuting them, to increase individuals' ability to achieve their goals.

The findings included in this review are based on two interrelated strands of research.

Firstly, we reviewed the pertinent literature. The literature on young people and crime is enormous so we concentrated on the issues of poverty, trauma and policing. The review included relevant academic literature and research reports.

Secondly, we adopted a peer-led qualitative research approach to bring a unique insight of young adults' experiences of poverty, trauma and policing. Young adults with their own experiences of the criminal justice system were able to:

- frame the research questions to get more rich and relevant responses
- be a relatable and authentic interviewer, helping respondents feel comfortable sharing their views
- draw on their own experiences of the criminal justice system
- shape the recommendations so they are more meaningful to those affected.

The interview was designed to open up a safe and non-judgemental space for an open conversation between the peer researchers and the interviewees. We wanted the interviews to be a positive and empowering experience for the young adults involved.

We designed a semi-structured topic guide for the interviews in collaboration with a group of peer researchers from the Young Justice Advisors project who are young adults with lived experience of the criminal justice system. The interview covered 15 questions. These explored future aspirations, early and later experiences of police contact and the factors surrounding these, the impact of police contact, what would have helped, and ideas for change (See Appendix 1).

29 interviews were conducted in March and April 2021 (See Appendix 2 for sample). We identified young adults to take part through four routes:

- Leaders Unlocked's existing network – particularly from the Young Justice Advisors and Young Advocates projects (both groups have lived experience of the criminal justice system)
- friends/family of Leaders Unlocked members
- community groups including Hackney CVS, Waltham Forest Streetbase, SPEAR youth homelessness, Brighter Futures Reading and P3
- Probation Services in the North West.

We analysed interview data using NVivo software, enabling us to identify key themes.

Leaders Unlocked then collaborated with Revolving Doors to design and facilitate a 'test and confirm' workshop in early June 2021, attended by a mix of New Generation campaigners and young adults who had taken part in the interviews.

Introduction: why focus on young adults?

The number of children and young adults entering the criminal justice system has been falling in recent years (Ministry of Justice 2019). However, once young people are drawn into the criminal justice system, the lack of consistent means to divert them away into effective support results in at least a proportion ending up with extensive convictions in their adult lives, for often minor and mostly non-violent crimes (Farrall et al 2011; Case 2021).

Brewster likens the shifting profile of young people and young adults in the criminal justice system to a 'thickening soup' (2019: 223) This means those who are drawn into the system are often facing multiple challenges and severe, cumulative, and often very complex problems. These are all too often not properly understood or addressed. Anderson (2021) argues that the criminal justice system creates and worsens severe and multiple disadvantage, and makes it more likely that young adults will stay in the criminal justice system for longer.

What happens in young adulthood can have repercussions and scarring effects into adulthood, the effects of which, for some, can last throughout their lives (MacDonald and Marsh 2005; Shildrick et al 2012a; 2012b). For example, the Teesside studies of youth transitions clearly show that early childhood disadvantage can trap young adults in a cycle of low paid and insecure work, that is often interwoven with other disadvantages, such as ill-health of either themselves or those around them (MacDonald and Shildrick 2013).

The academic literature is consistent with the government's own analysis, which consistently shows that people in the criminal justice system experience poorer physical and mental health, and more persistent poverty and long-term unemployment, homelessness and social exclusion compared to the general population. 'Prolific offenders' are nearly three times more likely to access free school meals, three times more likely to be permanently excluded from school, and twice as likely to spend their working age claiming out of work benefits compared to all people in the criminal justice system (Borysik 2020). They also have the highest levels of combined needs around homelessness, problematic substance use and mental ill-health in the criminal justice system (Ministry of Justice 2019b).

There is still much we do not know about how poverty, multiple disadvantage and wider experiences of trauma relate to young people's experiences of the 'revolving door' of crime and crisis and it is here that this project makes a contribution.

Addressing young adults' needs can significantly reduce the demand on police and the criminal justice system. In addition, young adulthood is increasingly protracted and insecure (Furlong and Cartmel 1997; Furlong 2009). The traditional markers of independence are increasingly difficult for young people to attain, as many find the path to things like independent housing and a steady job difficult to achieve, sometimes well into their thirties or later.

Young adulthood is also a period of transition (MacDonald et al 2001). The twists and turns of young lives means that there are opportunities to make positive changes of direction, whereas this becomes more difficult as life experiences become more established and entrenched. As Roberts argues, 'youth is the most critical of all life stages for fixing long-term life chances' (2021: 267). Thus, young adulthood is a crucial time to engage those who are at the cusp of entering the revolving door of crisis and crime. The cost of inaction is high, especially when we consider the impact on not just the individual but also on wider communities, families and victims.

Limitations of risk factor approaches

To date, much of the policy response towards offending amongst young people and young adults has tended to rely almost solely on what is known as ‘risk factor approaches’. Risk factor approaches focus on particular adverse circumstances or behaviours as predictive of increased likelihood of offending. They advocate intervention, often aimed at individual behavioural change, as a way of diverting young people from offending (Farrington and Welsh 2003).

The over-reliance on these approaches is particularly problematic because they tend to ignore wider structural conditions. Case (2021) argues that ‘the hegemonic empirical evidence-base created by youth justice research and its application in policy development processes over the past two decades has been partial in scope, completeness and focus’. This means we are only seeing part of the picture, which can only be detrimental to our understanding of the root causes of offending. The *Cambridge Study of Crime and Delinquency* (Farrington and West 1990) outlines factors closely associated with repeat offending:

Among the most important individual factors that predict offending are low intelligence and attainment, personality and temperament, empathy, and impulsiveness. The strongest family factor that predicts offending is usually criminal or antisocial parents. Other quite strong and replicable family factors that predict offending are large family size, poor parental supervision, parental conflict, and disrupted families. At the environmental level, the strongest factors that predict offending are growing up in a low socioeconomic status household, associating with delinquent friends, attending high-delinquency-rate schools, and living in deprived areas. (2006: 2)

This predominantly individual-focused approach has largely been accepted with little question or critique. It has frequently underpinned policy developments, reproducing the tendency to locate the causes of criminality within the problematic and deviant behaviours in families. However, any individual-level intervention is only ever likely to have limited, if any, impact, if the wider social context in which young people’s lives are lived is not considered. As Case argues:

Across Westernized youth justice systems, risk has become the main conceptual lens through which evidence is generated to fulfil neo-liberal responsabilising and correctionalist objectives, with “risk factors” becoming the central “explanatory” concept for the hegemonic, risk-focused youth justice evidence-base. (2021: 1)

Even when the wider structural conditions are taken into account, risk factors such as poverty do not determine a young adult’s life chances, and cannot be used to predict the next steps in young people’s lives (MacDonald 2006; MacDonald et al 2011; Webster et al 2004). MacDonald and colleagues’ longitudinal in-depth qualitative research, based on a large sample of young people growing up in deprived neighbourhoods, shows that while many young people may face the realities of poor opportunities and harsh economic circumstances, young people’s lives are largely characterised by ‘contingency, flux, indeterminacy, and the power of unpredictable “critical moments”’ (MacDonald et al 2011: 138). Based on the same research and questioning risk factor approaches, MacDonald argues that:

In a context of deep, collective disadvantage, most research participants shared many of the risk factors associated with social exclusion in early adulthood. Yet the majority did not pursue full-blown criminal or drug-using careers and the research struggled to

identify background factors that seemed to play a causal role in separating out more 'delinquent' transitions from more 'conventional' ones. Youth biographies were marked by flux; they did not roll on deterministically to foregone conclusions. Unpredictable 'critical moments' turned transitions in unpredictable directions; sometimes towards crime, sometimes away. (2006)

MacDonald concludes that there is danger in both criminal career research and studies of youth transition that prioritise individual-level explanations at the expense of an assessment of the 'risks' presented by socio-spatial and historical context (2006: 371) that young people find themselves facing growing up.

Bellis and colleagues (2018) suggest that a range of protective factors, many of which are in fact structural interventions and solutions, can mitigate against the poor health and social outcomes of individual exposure to adversity. Through population-level surveys, they demonstrate that resilience to developmental harms and consequently better health and social outcomes can be achieved through cultural engagement, community support, opportunity to control one's personal circumstances, and access to a trusted adult throughout childhood who can provide sanctuary from chronic stress.

Rethinking the impact of poverty

Poverty is widespread in the UK and the situation is getting worse. It is not just that life on a very low income makes it harder to meet everyday essential needs, but that the problems that often arise from poverty are frequently cumulative (Shildrick et al 2012b). We know that poverty is increasing amongst children and young adults. Over a decade of austerity measures have added additional strain, with widespread changes to out of work benefits and the knock-on effects on all aspects of people's lives. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these problems (Shildrick 2021). Children and young adults from Black and minority ethnic families are thought to experience a disproportionate socio-economic and psychosocial impact, with research examining the effects on mental and emotional health and wellbeing, and the psychological and social implications (UKRI 2021).

Poverty leads to restricted life chances and opportunities (Shildrick 2018). For example, young people growing up in poverty consistently do less well in education, experience more negative health events, and struggle to access the life-enriching opportunities for leisure that their better-off counterparts are able to. These all have implications for their longer-term life chances (Shildrick 2018; Roberts 2021).

For some young people, particularly young men, it is these restricted educational, vocational and recreational opportunities that lead to extended engagement with what MacDonald and Shildrick (2006) describe as 'street corner society'. Research highlights that boredom-led recreational drug use and engagement in petty crime have become common in some deprived areas where young people lack the resources to access the more expensive, often town centre-, pub- and club-based activities that most young people transition to as they move towards adulthood (MacDonald and Shildrick 2006, 2010; Hollands 2002).

Through biographically-oriented interviews with middle-aged parents and young adults from families facing severe disadvantage, MacDonald and colleagues (2020) show the lasting damage of long-term multiple disadvantages cannot be reduced to the responsibility of individuals or families:

The persistent, recurrent troubles of families like those we interviewed might not be the outcome of internal processes of intra-family learning and dysfunction but similar and recurrent responses to common (and sometimes new) conditions of class disadvantage. These conditions – we argue – limit chances of mobility, perpetuate poverty and, in turn, are implicated in the re-creation of the multiple, complex, cumulative troubles of these families. (2020: 18/19)

While the list is not exhaustive, the following emerge from this analysis as elements of the lasting and ‘common social environment’ that faced the 20 families interviewed:

- pre- and post-16 education and training systems that persistently fail the working class
- persistently high unemployment and limited opportunities for good-quality jobs
- a punitive and less generous social security system
- living in neighbourhoods that have experienced social decline and loss of services
- the destructive impact of a local criminal economy
- the negative impacts of a local drug economy and drug and alcohol use
- a punitive criminal justice system
- socio-spatial concentration of health inequalities.

It is known that ‘these factors interact and combine to create the local set of conditions – a milieu of hardship and trouble – in which these working-class people have lived and grown up’ (Shildrick 2020: 19). For example, a study on multi-generational life trajectories of people in Glasgow and Teesside highlighted that the impact of heroin is linked to the time within which heroin was introduced to the local area. In Glasgow (where heroin arrived much earlier than it did in Teesside) the impact was most visible among middle-aged men, whereas the impact of heroin on Teesside was more likely to be felt amongst the younger generation. This is just one small example that alerts us to the importance of looking at the wider and historical context in which people’s lives are located.

Policing, poverty, trauma and inequalities

It is not that the police (at least in respect of their training documentation) are unaware of the problems of poverty and the importance of its place in their day-to-day work. In fact, the growth of economic inequalities is front and centre in The College of Policing’s recent report *Policing in England and Wales: Future operating environment 2040*. This report notes rising inequality and social fragmentation as the first of 10 important trends that will impact on policing over the next two decades:

Inequality within countries is rising. Even in the world’s most developed nations, living standards have fallen, wage growth remains low and the gap between rich and poor has reached record levels. In the UK, already high levels of income and wealth inequality are likely to continue to rise out to 2040, with implications for poverty rates, levels of violence and social cohesion. (2020: 15)

At the same time, Policing, Health and Social Care consensus (2018) recognised a clear social gradient to both health and criminal justice outcomes and argued that collaborations to address

health and social inequalities will also prevent crime and keep communities safe:

Health outcomes are influenced by a complex interaction between the physical, social and economic environment we live in; our lifestyles; and our individual characteristics. There is also a clear social gradient to health: the better our social status, the better our health is likely to be. The social determinants of health such as housing, education, work and income overlap with the social determinants of crime. Key risk factors for poor health align closely with risk factors for offending; and those who are at risk of offending as a group are more likely to suffer from multiple and complex health issues, including mental and physical health problems, learning difficulties, substance misuse and increased risk of premature mortality.

Despite this recognition, there is still limited evidence on strategic and operational practices that can effectively untangle the interrelationship between poverty, inequalities and policing. Indeed, research consistently shows that crime, as well as the most intensive policing efforts, tend to be concentrated in the most deprived localities (Wieshman et al. 2020; Francis-Devine 2019). Yet more police presence does not yield increased trust and confidence in policing. ONS (2015) reports that although confidence in local policing has remained stable overall, people who live in the most deprived neighbourhoods are less likely to feel that the police can be relied upon, or that the police would treat them with fairness, respect and understanding in dealing with local concerns. Overall confidence in the police is 80% in the least deprived areas, but just 69% in the most deprived.

Revolving Doors' report *Understand us* (Borysik and Bennett 2021) also reflects on this wider trend. For example, seven in 10 young adults surveyed thought that the police would treat them differently if they lived in a deprived area. Revolving Doors' previous research (Borysik and Corry-Roake 2021) found that individuals who had grown up in some of the most deprived areas of the country felt that because of their local area's reputation the police treated them differently from elsewhere. For example, participants explained that police officers were 'always' on their street or estate patrolling, but not necessarily engaging with the residents. They also reflected that policing of deprived areas was about increased surveillance or target hardening (for example, installation of fences and cages where young adults gather), and that growing up under suspicion resulted in outbursts of anger and resentment.

Research suggests that attitudes towards the police are more positive (or at least less negative) in the early teenage years, but tend to deteriorate with more exposure to policing responses. A survey of school-age children in London (The Youth Voice Survey 2018), aimed at gathering their views on crime and the police, showed that most young people felt safe in the areas where they lived. While views on the police were more mixed and nuanced, around half of those who responded to the survey had a 'good opinion' of the police.

Other research (Borysik and Corry-Roake 2021) shows the changing nature of police interaction once people transitioned from childhood to adulthood. While arrests and cautions for low-level and minor offences in childhood were rare, these increased sharply when people turned 18. For example, half of the people interviewed highlighted 20 or more arrests, a third 10 or more arrests, and the remainder five or more arrests during the ages of 18-25. Other research into young people facing severe disadvantage shows that the problems they face become more apparent in their early teenage years, with many reporting more positive views of earlier school experiences, for example. (Shildrick et al 2012b).

Young adults who experience poverty and housing insecurity are more likely to have contact with the police in the context of mental health crises, safeguarding, victimisation or presenting as suspects of crime (Borysik and Corry-Roake 2020). Young adults who took part in this research clearly acknowledged that poverty causes ill-health (including mental ill-health and problematic substance use), and ill-health simultaneously increased their likelihood of future poverty due to unemployment or low-paid work. Furthermore, significant underinvestment and cuts to community health provision has meant that police officers routinely respond to mental health crises. This could result in people unnecessarily entering the criminal justice system and/or cause further distress if people have previous negative experiences with the police.

The Edinburgh Study of Youth Transitions and Crime has gathered over 20 years of data from their sample of 4,300 young people who started secondary school in 1998. Its key findings stress that the longer a child or young person is delayed from being in contact with the criminal justice system the less likely they will be drawn into longer-term offending. The study highlights four important factors:

- 1 Persistent serious offending is associated with victimisation and social adversity
- 2 Early identification of at-risk children is not a water-tight process
- 3 Critical moments in the early teenage years are key to pathways out of offending
- 4 Diversionary strategies facilitate the desistance process (McAra and McVie 2010).

There is an inverse correlation between the number of times a young adult has encountered a policing response (including welfare, crisis and criminal justice responses) and their perception of the effectiveness and fairness of police services. Every encounter with police, regardless of welfare, crisis or criminal justice context, appears to exacerbate trauma and perceived and real inequalities faced by young adults who are caught in the tangle of poverty, trauma and structural inequalities. In a recent survey with 689 young adults (Borysik and Bennett 2021), respondents with experience of multiple police contacts (including mental health crisis or being a victim, witness or suspect of crime) almost always gave more negative responses about the police. For example, four in 10 young adults with more than six police contacts did not think police were there to help them or their peers, compared to two in 10 young adults who had no prior police contact.

For some groups, poverty intersects with other aspects of structural disadvantage, such as race and gender. Borysik and Corry-Roake (2021) highlight the significance of deprivation and poverty resulting from systemic racism and discrimination. Their retrospective study based on qualitative interviews with young adults show that Black and Asian young adults in repeat contact with the police experience intergenerational poverty, often in poor quality accommodation and with poor access to services, and frequently face barriers in accessing education, employment and support services as a result of direct discrimination because of their race, religion and accent. Their combined experiences of deprivation and discrimination often results in fear and distrust, highlighting 'a big divide between services (including police) and the local community they serve'. These build onto long-standing concerns that young people from Black and minoritised ethnic backgrounds often feel unfairly treated and targeted by the police. Emerging evidence from Revolving Doors (Borysik 2020) and the Centre for Justice Innovation (2021) also suggests that Black children and young adults are significantly more likely to receive a caution or conviction for relatively minor and non-violent offences and less likely to access diversion services, compared to their White peers.

Research has also shown that the reasons for committing crime are often very different for young women. Pemberton and colleagues talk about the 'lexicon of harms' (2019) that relate to women. Although successive governments have committed to the cross-departmental Female Offender

Strategy which was published in 2018, progress has been slow, and the level of investment in alternatives to custody remains small. Pemberton argues that:

The Corston Report in 2007 is seen by many as a policy landmark, shifting the ways that we think and treat criminal justice involved women in the UK. The report clearly stated the ways that women differed from men in terms of the reasons that they commit crime and the 'vulnerabilities' that characterise their home lives (domestic violence, childcare), personal circumstances (mental health, substance misuse, eating disorders) and socio-economic position (poverty, isolation, and unemployment). Moreover, the report challenged the use of prison for these women as a means to deal with their offending and recommended a series of community interventions that were holistic and women centred, including the championing of Women's Community Centres as key to a radical shift in approach.

The work by Pemberton and colleagues shows very clearly that crimes committed by women often relate to trauma and poverty. They argue that 'women frequently have their first encounters with the law as juveniles who turn to crime in order to escape violence and physical or sexual abuse' (2019: 13). They go on to point to three key pathways and experiences, often inter-connected, into crime for young women:

- violence, trauma and mental distress
- substance use and self-medication
- social exclusion: poverty, homelessness and marginalisation.

MacDonald and colleagues also reported that in their studies with young people in marginalised situations, only a very small number of those who become involved in crime (often associated with dependent and problematic drug use) were women. Their journeys into crime were most often associated with abusive relationships and sexual exploitation, street prostitution and heavy end drug use (MacDonald et al 2011). Research by Sharpe has demonstrated that stigma can be particularly damaging for young mothers. In research with young mothers who had been criminalised as children, she found that they faced 'intense forms of gendered surveillance, social censure and stigma across multiple domains of identity, regardless of whether or not they are currently involved in crime' (2015: 407). As other research has shown, parenthood itself can often be the trigger to move towards a life without crime, but the effects may remain. Stigma can be very strongly felt and experienced by young women, particularly if they also need to access the out of work welfare system, which is shown to label and stigmatise claimants.

If society is to create the social conditions which insulate women from harmful health inequalities, poverty and substance use, protect against re-victimisation, build positive social relationships and allow people to have a stable family life, addressing the accommodation problems of women who offend (and preventing their homelessness initially) is an important cornerstone. The literature points towards a phenomena of the cycling of women who have offended between homelessness, housing instability, recidivism and incarceration for women, but no one source has yet compellingly established a cause/effect relationship between the two variables, or definitively unpacked the circumstances which mediate the complex concurrence of homelessness and recidivism with health inequalities, substance use, survival sex and mental health service need in different circumstances over time. (Pemberton et al 2019)

Further, a literature review carried out by Agenda and the Alliance for Youth Justice (2021) found that young women in contact with the criminal justice system tend to have a greater number of support needs than young men, suggesting they face additional vulnerabilities which can lead to behaviour that is then criminalised. Their review found clear connections between young adult women's vulnerabilities and their offending, including experience of violence, abuse and exploitation in relationships with family members, intimate partners and peers, mental health problems and alcohol use, exclusion from education, experience of being in care, early parenthood, poverty and economic inequality, and poor responses to young adult women with learning disabilities. Their review highlights that the support needs of young adult women are also distinct from those of older adult women, including having more recent experiences of child criminal and sexual exploitation, leaving care, and exclusion from education. While older adult women in contact with the criminal justice system may also have faced these challenges, the impact of these experiences as they play out in young adulthood means that young women are likely to present with more immediate needs or 'in crisis' as a result of them (2021: 7). The prevalence of mental health and alcohol problems are higher among young women at the prison reception compared to older women (HMIP, 2010). Young women are more likely to report developing a drug problem in prison, although are less likely to arrive with one (2010b).

Revolving Doors' research (Borysik and Corry-Roake 2021) found that young women in repeat contact with the criminal justice system often felt they were frequently stereotyped by police and other services as 'single mothers of the estate' and felt under constant scrutiny for not being in employment, experiencing poverty and their supposed 'inadequate parenting', particularly of their sons. Their research found that young women involved in sex work were found to face additional challenges and discrimination as a result of institutionalised prejudices against sex work and put themselves at greater risk of victimisation just to avoid further police contact. For example, some moved into isolated and dangerous work locations or did not report sexual and violent offences committed against them.

Conversely, there is little research that explores how the police view young people and young adults. Research in Australia confirmed this paucity of research and undertook qualitative research with police officers. It showed that the police often perceived young people as a problem 'to be managed', particularly in terms of their use of public space (Richards et al 2018: 365). The data also revealed that police officers were often troubled by their own assumptions that young people saw them in a negative and problematic light. In respect of the police, research shows how they often deploy popular myths or tropes about young people, particularly those from deprived backgrounds. In the research by Richards and colleagues (2018) police often used popular descriptions of young people from poorer backgrounds drawing on stereotypical understandings of the poor (that they come from families who have never had paid work, for example). This tendency feeds into the widespread habit of labelling or stereotyping young people from poorer backgrounds for their choice of clothing (Archer et al 2007; Nayak and Kehily 2014). For example, the negative labelling of particular branded sports clothing and hoodies, which are the clothing of choice for many young people, has become an outward symbol of poverty and attracts negative stereotypes within society more broadly, leading to stereotypical labels, such as 'chavs'. So, we can see how this general and widespread stereotyping and stigmatisation of poor young people can be amplified and exacerbated when young people come into contact with the police or others in positions of power within the criminal justice system.

Moving away from the criminal justice system

Research shows that young people and young adults overwhelmingly want to move away from the criminal justice system. The extensive *Edinburgh Study of Youth Transitions and Crime* concludes that:

Our findings indicate that the key to reducing offending may lie in minimal intervention and maximum diversion: that doing less rather than more in individual cases may mitigate against the potential for damage which system contact brings. (2011: 99)

This reflects recommendations from Revolving Doors' previous work, which shows that using the lowest criminal justice disposal, alongside non-coercive, personalised and long-term support, is the most effective way of diverting young adults with histories of repeat offending linked to multiple unmet health and human needs (Corry-Roake and Bennett 2021). Further international evidence from the Let Everyone Advance with Dignity programme demonstrates that diverting people who commit repeat low-level crimes as a result of multiple health and human needs can effectively reduce frequency and severity of future offences (Collins et al. 2019), improve housing, health and employment outcomes (Clifasefi et al. 2016) and address some of the racial disparities by bringing reconciliation to police and community relations and delivering an evidence-based public health model.

Diversion away from a justice response towards a more welfare-based approach is already built into the system and largely responsible for the downturn in young people entering the system. However, as outlined at the start of this report, this means that those who remain tend to have multiple needs and require wide-ranging support, particularly to address child sexual and criminal exploitation and intimate abuse. For example, the recent *Punishing Abuse* report (Chard 2021) demonstrated that out of 80 children in the criminal justice system studied, nine in 10 were known or suspected to have been abused and seven in 10 were known or suspected to have been a victim of violence. The study recommends that local and regional analysis of service provision supporting the critical ages of young adulthood, particularly how to improve educational and social inclusion, can help reduce the number of young adults in the criminal justice system.

In respect of women in the criminal justice system, Pemberton argues that:

The literature often uncritically adopts the language of the criminal justice system and in particular the binary of victim/offender. This is an erroneous basis for discussion, when many criminal justice-involved women, as our review demonstrates, simultaneously fall into both categories yet we continue to treat these categories as distinct and warranting differential treatment. Once we step outside the lexicon of the criminal justice system, we can begin to more clearly articulate the injuries and exclusion that characterise these women's lives, as well as to be clear about the ways that the criminal justice system compounds and exacerbates the harms that they have experienced. (2019)

Bottoms and Shapland (2011) undertook extensive research in their *Sheffield desistance study*, and reported that most respondents were likely to admit that they wanted to stop but that they were 'unsure if they could' (2011: 56). Tying in with the idea that many children and young adults will mature out of crime as they transition to adulthood, they found that interviewees talked about 'becoming more responsible' and 'growing up now' (p.57). This was linked to conventional aspirations for the future (to live in a small house or flat in a working-class area of Sheffield, a partner, a steady

job). Even when many social and economic pressures bear down on their lives and opportunities, virtually all young people cling on tightly to traditional working-class lives, practices and goals in respect of employment, family and community life (MacDonald et al 2011: 137). Bottoms and Shapland conclude that:

Even in this highly criminal sample, the great majority wish to desist, though not all regard it as practicable. Over time, however, a growing proportion do regard it as practicable, and their ambitions for the future are both modest and conventional. These findings seem to be closely connected to the realisations that, in the early twenties, it is desirable to re-adapt one's lifestyle to face the demands of adult life. (2011: 66)

They also point to the importance of taking a life history approach with individuals who move away from crime so that it is possible to 'ask offenders to trace retrospectively how they have reached these destinations' (2011: 68) and to also pay attention to the 'development and maintenance of a crime-free identity' (ibid). Bottoms and Shapland (2011) argue desistance requires the individual to navigate the continued importance of criminal history and habits and the desistance-inducing potential of other activities, such as fresh employment and personal ties - with the difficulty being that the 'individual agent must attempt to negotiate a new way of living, breaking old habits with the past' (2011: 70).

MacDonald and colleagues argue that 'purposeful activity', such as parenthood or employment, can provide the necessary trigger to push forward on the path to desistance (MacDonald et al 2011: 146). Research also shows that developing a 'redemption script' (Farrall et al 2011) is key, and it is the difficulty of achieving this that proves so difficult for people who have been involved in long-term offending and whose lives have revolved around the criminal justice system and multiple (often short) prison sentences. Farrall and colleagues argue that a 'redemption script' is a vision of one's life that allows them to re-narrate their pasts in order to become consistent with the present and the futures they hope for (ibid). Nugent and Schinkel talk about the 'pains of desistance'. Using research undertaken with young people who had brief spells of involvement in crime, and a different project with men on licence after a long period of incarceration, they point out that similar feelings were associated with desistance in both groups (2016).

For young adults, desistance produced feelings of isolation and loneliness, along with feelings of goal failure and hopelessness. Isolation was deemed necessary as returning to the same friendship groups would in most instances mean they had to associate with people in contact with the criminal justice system. Disassociating with negative social networks often means moving to a new area, compounding the difficulties associated with desisting from crime (MacDonald et al. 2011). As Nugent and Schinkel report, lives before were often very full and while they were not full of positive things, they were nonetheless full (ibid).

In the Teesside studies of youth transitions various factors came into play when young people moved towards desistance:

The forming of new partnerships, fuller engagement with employment, the coming of parenthood (or step-parenthood), and access to effective, non-punitive drug treatment programmes were all, in different combinations depending upon the individual case, described as important in these processes. Most critical, however, was a process of social - and sometimes geographic - distancing from previous peer networks. All of those with the most intractable experiences of crime, dependent drug use and social

exclusion were unanimous on this point. Leaving careers of crime and dependent drug use behind meant leaving behind the social networks and leisure careers which had sustained them and a normative re-orientation away from the prevailing values of ‘the street’ (MacDonald and Shildrick 2006: 349).

Hazel (2018) argues that a pro-social identity can replace the need to maintain status and peer respect through negative behaviour. He argues that a pro-social identity, which empowers individuals to make different choices and gain status and security from these new choices, can help them exercise agency over their future behaviour, notwithstanding the structural hardships and vulnerabilities of their past. For example, becoming ‘a construction worker’ through finding a labouring job may provide status and security that replaces the need for a young man to prove their masculinity by getting involved in crime.

More recently, the Beyond Youth Custody programme was designed to adapt the pro-social identity principles to support sustainable resettlement of young people after custody. The framework includes five key characteristics for support to enable this shift in identity to happen:

- 1 Constructive: centred on reinforcing a positive identity; future-focused and strengths-based as well as motivating and empowering
- 2 Co-created: inclusive of the young person and their supporters
- 3 Customised: individual wraparound support that recognises the range of diversity in young people’s support needs
- 4 Consistent: delivering seamless support that focuses on resettlement from the start, bridges the divide between custody and the community, is enhanced at transitions and includes formal stable relationships
- 5 Co-ordinated: involves widespread partnership across sectors

Summary

There is significant scope to extend our understanding of how different aspects of inequality combine in young people’s life stories and biographies and how these relate to offending and relationships with the police. Case argues that criminological theories on youth offending have tended to look to quantitative data rather than qualitative or so-called ‘hard data’ over ‘soft data and stories’ (2021: 2). By listening to young people’s accounts as we have in this study we can see the importance of close-up, lived experience accounts to help us better understand the complex interplay of the various dimensions of inequality that impact young people’s lives, engagement in crime and interaction with the police.

Inequalities are at the heart of young adults' experiences of the criminal justice system.

At the beginning of interviews, we asked young adults to think of three words to describe their experience of the criminal justice system and/or police. Their answers were largely negative (as shown in Figure 1), and the most common response was the word 'unfair'. When explaining their choices, young adults reflected on their experiences of being stopped and searched and/or arrested, and how they felt police officers too often took a generic approach rather than thinking about their needs and individual circumstances, and how professionals did not care about the individuals they encountered. Many young adults were concerned about racism and police brutality, for example, several respondents referenced Black Lives Matter and George Floyd.

Where respondents used positive words to describe the criminal justice system, such as 'help' and 'understanding', this was because they had good experiences with the later stages of the criminal justice system, such as a judge taking into account someone's wider circumstances or being offered psychological support in police custody which proved beneficial.

Figure 1: Words young adults used to describe their experiences of the criminal justice system



Lack of money, lack of opportunities and problematic relationships drive young adults into a cycle of crisis and crime.

One of the main topics discussed in the interviews with young adults was the reasons behind their contact with the police and the wider criminal justice system. We identified negative social influences, poor education outcomes, mental ill-health (including traumatic experiences), a lack of finances and a lack of opportunities as the major drivers for repeat criminal justice contact.

Negative influences were a common theme. Young adults spoke about factors such as peer pressure and hanging around with older people who encouraged behaviours that got them into trouble.

“I used to hang around with the wrong crowd otherwise I wouldn’t have been in trouble...” (Jack, 22)*

Some respondents also spoke about family members committing crime, which meant that they grew up in an environment where this was normalised and/or which meant that police contact was more likely. Young adults who attended the test and confirm workshop also discussed being surrounded by a culture in which criminal activity was normalised. They felt that the networks surrounding people (including friendship groups, family members and professionals) were a key influence – positive or negative – on young people and young adults’ lives.

“My dad was in prison, my brother has been in and out of jail. I didn’t come to trouble, trouble came to me.” (Aaliyah, 25)*

In addition, many of the young adults interviewed recalled **bad school experiences**. For example, some respondents explained that they rarely went to school, but that nobody challenged this. Others discussed being excluded and being in Pupil Referral Units. Some spoke about being bullied and/or behaving badly and getting involved in fights.

“I didn’t behave in school, so it kind of became that outside of school I was a bit naughty too...” (Connor, 21)*

Some respondents reflected that their anger in school was often linked to their situation at home and other stresses in their life. Young adults whose Special Education Needs were not diagnosed in time had particular difficulties accessing the support they needed to remain in school. In the test and confirm workshop young adults also spoke about young people and young adults desiring attention, which could lead to activities that result in police contact.

Another cause of police contact that came up regularly in the primary research was **mental health and/or trauma**. For example, some young adults described traumatic experiences linked to their household situation and/or relationships, such as domestic violence, parental neglect and dealing with the death of family members or friends. There were also examples of trauma resulting from exploitation.

“Throughout my childhood I had anxiety of people leaving me because my dad left me. It’s affected my entire life the trauma from a young age.” (Sophie, 21)*

We also heard from one young woman that being involved in criminal activities gave a false sense of control to them, which they lacked in other parts of their lives.

Some young adults reported that their mental ill-health resulted in risky or violent behaviours that led to police contact. Others said they turned to drugs and alcohol to deal with mental health problems. Substance use then created financial pressures which resulted in young adults getting involved in acquisitive crime, or spending time with negative influences who could provide drugs for them.

“I would get angry very quickly and end up fighting a lot, that’s why I got my first cautions and warning, I used to react aggressively based on everything around me.” (Charlotte, 24)*

“I just took drugs for escapism, to escape what I was going through. And then I sold drugs to get money to enable me to keep taking drugs.” (Lewis, 18)*

A **lack of finances** was another factor that came up numerous times. Where this was discussed, young adults spoke about their parents not being able to afford to give them money, which resulted in them trying to find other ways to be able to participate in activities or buy certain things. Growing up in poverty also created pressure on young people and young adults to be able to support their families financially.

“Literally went from the number one poorest borough to the number two poorest borough. That is one of the first things that gets people into crime. It starts with smallest things. It’s ingrained into your mind. It was those little things that led me to end up doing what I was doing in the end. Not having enough to get school dinners on a Friday or to go on a school trip. You can’t go and ask for a tenner from your mum because you know she hasn’t got it. The turning point for me I was 14 and my parents didn’t want to pay for a school trip (but the reality was they couldn’t afford it)... so I decided to find a way to make money.” (Aaron, 25)*

Respondents also explained that a lack of money resulted in boredom which then led to activities that increased the probability of police contact, especially in the school holidays.

“When you don’t have money, you get bored, and you do things so you can get money.” (Connor, 21)*

Furthermore, some young adults referenced generational patterns in how financial pressures had similarly influenced family members’ behaviour that resulted in police contact. Where individuals could not get financial support from family members they sometimes went to negative influences who they knew would be able to get them access to nice things.

“If I had money, [I] wouldn’t get arrested, my dad wouldn’t have got arrested if he had money...drug dealers will spoil you more.” (Aaliyah, 25)*

Others discussed **lack of opportunity**, at school and in terms of employment but also positive activities more generally, which they felt increased the likelihood of them doing things which could have resulted in police contact. Similarly, in the test and confirm workshop attendees discussed the issue of young people and young adults not having work and education opportunities and gave examples of college and apprenticeships. It was felt that many young people and young adults do not see their potential and are not given any support to build on their strengths and explore their future options.

“I would say lack of knowledge around where to go to get opportunities. I was never shown where to go and how to access things. There was a lack of direction.” (Jaden, 24)*

“We had no space to explore, when we were growing up it was dull and grey, there was no community projects, and if there were they were full of old people, all playgrounds were run down and full of older young people.” (Mohammed, 25)*

Some young adults felt that having a sense of purpose was key to giving young adults direction while also enabling them to stay away from the criminal justice system. For example, a young man believed that he would have benefited from a paid job or volunteering opportunity to keep him out of trouble.

“I was not academically bright, and I was never sporty, I couldn’t get a job, and that left me very bored. felt like I had no purpose, purpose for being on this planet, purpose was what I was looking for. I think a lot of kids are searching for purpose...” (Lewis, 18)*

Some young adults who spoke about the lack of opportunity growing up felt this was linked to the area that they were living in, and the lack of investment and community support available or the limited number of local work opportunities for young people and young adults.

“No one gives us opportunities because of where we come from, there’s nothing on the estate, people stereotype us.” (Sam, 25)*

“There was a lack of opportunity for work in the area and I think young people would get involved in anything that would bring them a quick change.” (Kofi, 20)*

Related to this, some young adults explained that there was a lack of role models in the local community growing up, as motivation or examples to aspire to.

“It probably would have helped to have someone there to do the things I enjoyed, or help me try new things. That’s normally the stuff you do with your dad, brother or stepdad. I didn’t have a positive male role model except for my uncle and then I left.” (Adam, 23)*

“The system is already stacked against the community and their role models are just not there.” (Jaden, 24)*

There was also a perception that when respondents were younger, youth centres were available and that the closure of such venues was linked to young people and young adults getting involved in crime.

“All of the youth centres were taken away before we hit secondary school. There was nothing to do...” (Mohammed, 25)*

“A lot of places have got shut down like youth clubs and youth centres, just something to do. The place I used to go in summer to go and play football I’m pretty sure that’s shut down.” (Rhys, 18)*

Young adults feel routinely discriminated against because of who they are, who they are friends with, and where they live.

Lastly, many young adults felt targeted by police because of factors including what they look like, where they live, and who their friends are. Young adults felt that police officers routinely assumed they were affiliated with a gang, because of where they live. They also felt that they were regularly stopped and searched because they are Black, or because they wore the wrong type of clothing. We heard from many young adults who made efforts to dress differently or avoid certain areas to reduce their likelihood of police contact.

“Black people [are] seen as aggressive, sometimes I’m perceived like that. The way people perceive us when we’re in a group, when I’m hanging out with my friends, they [the police] think it’s suspicious.” (Liam, 25)*

“The discrimination aspect has definitely got worse over time. Discrimination on the basis of what I was wearing and my past. I usually dare not to wear a tracksuit. They are definitely 100% treating me differently due to my past. I want to have a different relationship now I’ve changed, but they actually seem annoyed that I have changed.” (Lewis, 18)*

Some also explained that they were targeted by the police due to their family members. For example, a young man believed that the police treated him differently when he was arrested with his friends because his brother was known to the police officers. Experiences of stigma and discrimination were not limited to experiences with the police or criminal justice system. There were examples of teachers making assumptions about respondents too, which led to bad school experiences and influenced behaviour.

“When everyone started telling me I was the same as my brother, I look like him and sound like him. It was always from teachers, and that turned me into my brother eventually. When you’re being taken out of lessons and being searched, it then backfires and turns me into my brother.” (Emily, 21)*

As well as racism, a few respondents also reflected that they experienced discrimination and assumptions being made about them based on their sex and physical and mental ill-health. For example, one young woman explained how the police assumed that she was being exploited by a county lines gang, when she was a young woman making her own decisions.

“I’m seen as a young black girl, and by that I can be misunderstood, like a troublemaker who is always on road, on the street, seen as hood rats. But when people get to know me, I’m not that kind of person.” (Jade, 20)*

In the test and confirm workshop, young adults highlighted that discrimination was not just about increased police contact, it was also about what happened during that contact and how individuals were treated by the police. For example, a young man recalled a time when he felt that the police treated him differently because of his accent, which left him feeling humiliated.

Young adults believe that police contact can make or break their future.

Respondents recognised many practical impacts of police contact on their lives. Most often young adults interviewed spoke about the effect of having a criminal record on their **job prospects**. For example, some young adults had tried to get jobs in education or social care to help others like them and faced many barriers or found it was not possible. Other instances of young adults having to seek different career paths included individuals who wanted to work for the emergency services (for example, as a firefighter or paramedic) and someone who wanted to join the army. Many of those who had not directly experienced an impact on employment worried about this happening in the future as they sought opportunities.

“I wanted to do a bit of work along social services but my DBS got in the way, I could never get a full-time job with them, I really wanted to be able to make a difference to people in care. In terms of the career aspect, then definitely the justice system has got in the way.” (Adam, 23)*

“Before my contact with the justice system, I wanted to be a paramedic and I knew my convictions wouldn’t allow me to do it. It makes you feel limited because people just read what’s on the paper when it’s a DBS.” (Kofi, 20)*

Responses were not wholly negative. Some were motivated by their experiences of the criminal justice system and wanted to create change. Others were grateful for how their experiences had led to certain opportunities, such as working with Leaders Unlocked.

“The pathway I end up taking now is because of my experience of the justice system. I wouldn’t say they helped me to get where I’m at, but the experience I had within the justice system allowed me to make that decision for myself.” (Aaron, 25)*

“Without that experience of the CJS I don’t think I would have wanted to choose that profession. Without being in care, I don’t think I would have decided to either. I never understood why young people were thrown aside, I don’t want this to happen to me and I don’t want it to happen to the people after me. It’s ignited that passion.” (Molly, 24)*

Another impact often discussed was how respondents’ contact with the criminal justice system had affected their relationships with family and friends. For example, a young man explained that his family home was raided which affected his relationships with family members present. A young

woman recalled her friend's parents not wanting their children to spend time with her. Another young woman felt that people were 'scared' of her because of her past and current circumstances.

"It's affected my relationships with others massively, I have to explain that I'm on probation at the moment and I have a lot of shit in my past. A lot of people think it's scary I'm on probation and I've been in a mental hospital." (Megan, 19)*

The emotional impact of police contact was also evident. For example, being rejected for jobs because of their criminal record impacted individuals' confidence. This issue was highlighted in the test and confirm workshop with young adults, where respondents spoke about how such rejection impacted their self-esteem and created fear about having to explain themselves to employers and relive their past.

"Contact with the CJS had affected my self-esteem quite a bit, thinking I'll never be able to do what I want to do, getting rejections based on DBS is kind of heart breaking. Then self-doubt kicks in. With my initial contacts and getting knocked back and getting stuck in shit jobs, then that plays into mental health never being fully happy." (Charlotte, 24)*

In addition, young adults discussed feeling paranoid or anxious about the police watching them when they were going about their daily lives. Where young adults had previous negative experiences of police contact, even just seeing them on the street made them uneasy and worried about being targeted.

"I feel bad when I go into a shop because I feel like I'm getting watched and I feel bad." (Bradley, 23)*

"Police make me feel paranoid regardless, say if there's a police helicopter going round the city, I automatically think they are coming for me!" (Jack, 22)*

Some respondents discussed the trauma of being arrested and/or being in a police cell. For example, one young adult interviewed was arrested at school in front of their classmates which they found humiliating. Another spoke about being 'so scared' when immigration services came to the police station to check their citizenship.

Young adults' experiences had influenced their perceptions of the police. Bad experiences had created resentment and distrust whereas young adults who felt that they were treated fairly or were helped by a particular officer explained that this made them more positive about the police.

"To be constantly stopped over and over can have a tremendous effect on your mental health and you start to develop some negative feeling towards the police. My friends would say they hate the police for that reason...In a subtle way, my experiences have influenced how I see the police, I'm not completely hating on the police system." (Liam, 25)*

Linked to this, where distrust had been created some young adults explained that they would not go to the police if they needed help and/or were a victim of crime. Reasons given for this included that they were not confident about getting the support needed or because they worried about what would happen next. For example, one respondent had recently been stabbed but chose not to speak to the police about this because they did not want previous bad experiences to happen again.

“They scare me a little bit. I feel intimidated by them. I would rather suffer than ask them for help.” (Chloe, 21)*

Young adults, particularly young men, may not easily accept support from the police, even if it means they can avoid going to court.

There are currently different schemes operating in police services throughout England and Wales whereby young people and young adults can be diverted away from the criminal justice system, into support, either pre-arrest or pre-court.

Young adults who took part in this research had varying opinions on police-assisted diversion. Their views were divided on whether they would accept support from the police at the time. Some reflected that although they could see the benefits of this, realistically at the time of their initial contact with the criminal justice system, they would not have accepted it. Reasons given for this included that they were stubborn or worried about how their peers and/or family would have reacted to this. For example, one individual said that they would have worried that accepting this was a sign of ‘weakness’.

Others explained that they would not have accepted a diversion offer if it was presented by the police. One respondent emphasised that they would have only been interested if this was delivered by a partner organisation who could engage with young people and young adults.

“I don’t know if I would have accepted it coming from the police. Would anyone take advice from the police, don’t know about that...” (Michael, 24)*

For those who believed that they would have accepted a diversion offer, a reason for this was because it would have got them away from negative influences and ‘kept them out of trouble’, something that they were keen to do at the time of their early police contact.

“Of course, I would have accepted it. It makes sense. The thing is that certain youths when they are getting charged when they are literally just trying to protect their lives. Get them doing something for the community and taking them away from the negatives, that’s actual rehabilitation.” (Bradley, 23)*

Other reasons given for being likely to accept a diversion offer were because respondents did not want a criminal record, did not want to go through the courts process or thought that this would help improve the outcome of their case. A couple of respondents thought that they would have accepted a diversion offer but probably not then engaged with the support provided.

Looking at differences in opinions about diversion by different characteristics, a greater proportion of young men said they would not have accepted a diversion offer compared to young women. A greater proportion of White respondents said they would have accepted a diversion offer compared to other ethnic groups, where views were more mixed.

Young adults in the criminal justice system feel let down by people and services.

Young adults were asked about whether they had any particular sources of support when they first came into contact with the police. Very few referenced being supported by friends. Instead, many spoke about being supported by family members (either immediate or wider family such as cousins, uncles, grandparents) who had 'stuck by' them and who they could talk to. Wider family members appeared particularly important for young adults when there had been a relationship breakdown with their parents.

Others referenced different types of professionals. These included teachers and school staff and staff at wider support services, including hostels and criminal justice and young people's charities.

"I almost had no one to turn to, the only person who came to mind was my RE teacher, he was concerned about what was happening at home and he came down [to the police station]." (Liam, 25)*

Many individuals did not access appropriate support until later in life. They discussed their frustrations with not being able to speak to anyone about their situation and/or get the help they needed at the time from social services, mental health teams and/or youth offending teams.

"I got helped with housing and work – by the time I was 20 or 21..." (Aaliyah, 25)*

"I got help from Shelter after sleeping rough and they referred me to the crash pad, and then I met Leaders Unlocked. Not until 19 or 20 that I started to get support." (Mohammed, 25)*

Young adults feel optimistic about their chances of breaking the cycle of crisis and crime, but they are impatient for change.

The interviews ended with a discussion about what young adults would like to change to help other young people and young adults avoid getting caught in the cycle of crisis and crime and achieve their aspirations. There was a common view that young people and young adults need **positive influences and role models** to motivate them and help steer them in the right direction.

"I also would have benefited from a mentor like the one I have now. They could have helped to introduce me to other people who would be a positive influence." (Lewis, 18)*

“They need to understand their own skills and you have to feel inspired. Highlighting that things are achievable and help young people set goals that are realistic. The system is already stacked against the community and their role models are just not there.” (Jaden, 24)*

Linked to their frustrations with not receiving suitable support, others highlighted the need for young people and young adults to have **people to talk to** about their circumstances and feelings.

Many people suggested more **activities to keep people busy and out of trouble**. This included physical activities (boxing, for example) as well as learning new skills and ideas to make money ‘honestly’ as a lack of finances was seen as a ‘driver’ of crime. There was also a desire for safe spaces for people to spend time in.

“Maybe if I had other people to hang out with, or activities to take part in...” (Jack, 22)*

Respondents also spoke about the need for **system change**. This included a greater focus on prevention and support being available to young people and young adults in the community and when they first had contact with the police. Some also desired changes in the school system to increase the focus on life skills and reduce exclusions, which were seen as a problem that made things ‘worse’. Many respondents also desired a greater understanding of wider issues in people’s lives from the police and school staff

“Prevention is always better than cure, targeting young people at the start of age of criminal responsibility, or first arrest – rather than a caution or a charge, a plan should be put into place. Whether it be a police officer or independent organisation, interview the young person and find out what support each individual needs on an individual basis – whether it be financial, or other support.” (Molly, 24)*

Young adults were also asked about whether anything could be done to improve relationships between the police and young adults. Some respondents did not think it was possible to improve this relationship due to the behaviour of police. Others felt that police services need to make efforts to **build positive relationships** with young people and young adults in the community through ‘meaningful engagement’ and opportunities to work together.

Many respondents felt that the police could **improve their communication skills** when interacting with young people and young adults. In particular, they wanted officers to be less aggressive and intimidating, by changing their ‘tone’ and thought it would be helpful if training was available on this.

“They could find different techniques and different ways of speaking to people, they have a very narrowed down way of speaking, I feel like they could have training in communications skills and techniques.” (Connor, 21)*

Young adults interviewed thought that police services could learn from the police officers who are good at engaging young adults and have more young adults in the police force. They also suggested that police services should **work with and learn from people with lived experience** of the issues that young adults in contact with the criminal justice system are facing, such as mental health issues, problems with drugs and homelessness, including through collaborative training.

“If people who have been in my situation could go into the police [as a career] that might help.” (Chloe, 21)*

Other suggestions that the police could learn from when it comes to engaging and working with young adults included involving staff and volunteers working for charities and in the youth sector, who were good at listening to and engaging this group. **Better engagement with local communities** was also considered important in changing perceptions amongst the police about young people and young adults in specific areas.

This report has combined a literature review with findings from peer-led interviews with young adults to explore the relationship between poverty, inequality and repeat contact with the police.

We know that young adulthood is a period of transition that influences future life chances and that young people who are in the criminal justice system often have multiple needs that are rarely understood and addressed.

This literature review provides an alternative to ‘risk factor’ based assumptions about why young adults are drawn into the criminal justice system and shows the wider structural conditions and the context of young people’s lives that are often the drivers of involvement in the criminal justice system. The review discusses the wide-ranging, detrimental and long-lasting impact of poverty on life chances and opportunities. It also highlights the link between police contact and attitudes towards the police and the link between deprivation, crime and intensive policing efforts. The review demonstrates that we should extend our understanding of the different aspects of inequality, and how they combine in young adults’ lives, and how they relate to offending and relationships with the police.

The peer-led qualitative research demonstrated how different types of inequality interact and impact young people’s lives, engagement in crime and contact with the police. The interviews showed that inequalities are at the heart of their experiences of the criminal justice system and that lack of money and/or opportunities, and problematic relationships drive young people into a cycle of crisis and crime.

Young adults believe that police contact can play a key role in their future. Young adults in repeat contact with the police feel routinely discriminated against by police and other public services because of who they are, their friends, and where they live. This is one reason why young adults may not easily accept support from the police, even if it means they can avoid going to court.

Those in repeat contact with the police are optimistic about their ability to break the cycle of crisis and crime, but they are impatient for change. They feel let down by people they know and services they (try to) access.

Young adults made the following recommendations to improve young adults’ experiences of policing and the wider criminal justice system so that they can achieve their aspirations.

- 1 Young adults need police services and the wider criminal justice system to understand the root causes of crime.** They want police and other criminal justice agencies to consider young adults’ life circumstances and for police officers take the time to speak to them in a calm space, even when they had committed a crime, so they could tell their side of the story before their lives take a different turn.
- 2 Young adults want police officers to receive specialist training on communication and de-escalation** to improve how they communicate with young people and young adults, and to make sure they are more empathetic. Recruiting people with lived experience was also suggested to improve understanding.

- 3 Young adults would like to work with police services to keep policing to a high standard** because it is not just an 'average job'. It was recognised that police have the power and ability to help children and young adults because of their presence in communities and the contact they have with this age group. Workshop attendees also wanted partner organisations to advocate for young people in contact with the criminal justice system and to help them provide feedback on their experiences. For example, by making them aware of their rights, informing them about local forums and consultations and supporting them to make a complaint about police conduct to their Police and Crime Commissioner, where relevant.
- 4 Young adults would like police services to partner with community organisations that can engage and support young adults.** They recommended a more multi-agency approach to support involving trusted organisations that are embedded in the community. Workshop attendees also discussed the benefits of diverting young adults into community support services, rather than prosecuting them, to help them to achieve their goals.

6

Appendix 1: Interview schedules



Criteria for interviews

- Young adults aged 18-25 in England or Wales
- Have experienced multiple arrests, cautions or convictions
- These should be for low-level crimes like theft, minor drug charges etc

Introduction

Thanks for agreeing to talk to us today. We're talking to young adults across the country, because we want to understand their experiences that led to coming into repeat contact with the justice system. And what could have helped to prevent that, or to help young people to move on with their lives.

I am part of a group of peer researchers with lived experience of the justice system. We're here to listen to your views and not to judge you. There are no right or wrong answers, we are just interested in your views.

You do not have to answer any questions you don't want to – if you let me know we can just move on. It will take around half an hour, depending on how much you have to say (happy to take a break, just let me know).

We will treat your views confidentially. We will take notes of what you say but we will not link these to your name and we will only use anonymous quotes in the reports. Are you happy to take part, and do you have any questions?

Part 1: Introductory questions

- 1 Just to get us started – what are the first 3 words that come to mind when thinking about your experiences with the justice system or the police?
- 2 Can you tell us a little bit about yourself – what are your interests and aspirations?
- 3 Do you think your aspirations have been affected by being involved with the justice system?

Part 2: Your contact with the police

- 4 Thinking about your early interactions with the police - what was happening in your life that may have led to this?
- 5 Do you think any of these played a role, and why?
 - Lack of money;
 - lack of opportunity;
 - bad school experience;
 - mental health or trauma;
 - negative influences or peer pressure; (if so, who?)
 - discrimination (if so, what sort?)
 - any other factors (explain)
- 6 Thinking about more recent interactions with the police - do you feel these factors have changed over time, and how? *(Peer researcher to give an example from their own lives)*

Part 3: What would have helped

- 7 Thinking about when you first got arrested – did anyone ask you what was happening in your life, or offer you an alternative?
- 8 Was there anyone in your life who was a good source of support for you? (What was good about them?)
- 9 If you had been offered an alternative by the police, e.g. a diversion or support programme, would you have accepted it, and why?
- 10 What sort of support do you think would have helped you the most? Who would be best placed to offer you this support?

Part 4: The impact of these experiences on you

- 11 How would you say your contact with the police/ justice system has affected you? (e.g. self-esteem, mental health, your plans for the future, relationships with others)
- 12 Do you think you face any stigma because of your experiences? (If yes, what type of stigma and how do you feel about it?)

Part 5: Ideas for change

- 13 What changes would you want to see in the future, to enable young adults to reach their potential and not get stuck in a cycle of crime?
- 14 What could be done to improve trust and relationships between young adults and the police in the future?
- 15 How could the police learn from other ‘more trusted’ adults and services to improve what they do?
- 16 Is there anything else you would like to add?

Part 6: Demographic info

Local area	
Age	
Gender*	
Ethnicity*	

* Self-described

7

Appendix 2: Interview sample



In total we interviewed 29 people for this research. Each interviewee was asked to describe their characteristics so that we could keep a record of diversity. The characteristics included in the table below are self-described.

Research participants were from different parts of England including Cheshire, Kent, London, Merseyside, Nottingham, Suffolk, Sussex and Wrexham.

We have used pseudonyms to label the quotes in order to keep data anonymous and to protect participant confidentiality. The table below outlines the characteristics of the different people interviewed against the pseudonyms used.

	Name*	Gender	Age	Ethnicity
AB	Chloe	Female	19	White
AM	Lewis	Male	21	White British
BN	Jack	Male	22	White British
CL	Liam	Male	25	Black British
DK	Reece	Male	26	Black British
DN	Bradley	Male	19	Black Caribbean British
FD	Aaliyah	Female	25	Somali
FN	Michael	Male	24	Black Caribbean
JB	Aaron	Male	25	Mixed Race
KN	Jamal	Male	25	Black British
LM	Rhys	Male	18	Mixed Race
NM	Jasmine	Female	24	Mixed Race
JA	Jaden	Male	24	Black African
JE	Connor	Male	21	White British
JI	Ella	Female	25	Black British
JK	Kofi	Male	20	Black British
JL	Daniel	Male	18	Black
JN	Brandon	Male	18	White
JY	Sam	Male	25	White Irish
KI	Bradley	Male	23	Black British
LC	Jade	Female	20	Black British
LE	Molly	Female	24	White Welsh
LZ	Megan	Female	19	White
MT	Adam	Male	23	White British
SB	Mohammed	Male	25	Mixed Race
SH	Charlotte	Female	24	White British
SS	Jessica	Female	19	White British
TA	Sophie	Female	21	White British
YS	Kamal	Male	20	Mixed Race

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