

The social cost of youth work cuts:

Preventing youth offending through
youth work

About this report

In summer 2023, National Youth Agency (NYA) undertook a review to explore the impact of youth work provision on young people within, or at risk of entering, the youth justice system. This review explores the current picture for young people's involvement in the youth justice system and set out the costs associated with this, alongside the costs of inaction.

We highlight a range of ways in which youth work can help to improve positive outcomes for young people and make the case for greater collaboration between youth work and youth justice settings.

We reviewed a total of 74 sources from both academic and grey literature (including a range of programme evaluations) identified through a rapid evidence assessment. Primarily we focused on material relating to England and Wales from the last 10 years.

How many young people are involved in the youth justice system?

The context in which this review has taken place has found a broadly positive picture of young people's involvement in the youth justice system. Overall, there has been an improvement, with most crime indicators falling for both adults and young people alike. The number of first-time entrants to the youth justice system has fallen by 10% since the previous year, with a 78% fall from the year ending March 2012ⁱ. However, young people remain overrepresented. Despite 18–25-year-olds making up less than 10% of the UK population they account for almost **a third of all police cautions** and **20% of convictions**.ⁱⁱ Evidence suggests that prior involvement in the youth justice system significantly increases the likelihood of further involvement. Between 2020–21, 13,800 children were cautioned or sentenced in England and Wales, of which approximately half already had a prior criminal historyⁱⁱⁱ.

Who interacts with the youth justice system?

Children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds and areas are more likely to interact with the criminal justice system.

Ethnic minority children and particularly Black children are disproportionately represented in the youth justice system, and overpoliced. And this disproportionality is growing. Black children make up 4% of 10–17 years olds, 15% of arrests and 29% of children in custody – up from 17% in 2011/12.

Risk factors related to involvement in violence present a complicated picture. The following factors are associated with higher likelihood of being cautioned or sentenced for a serious violence offence:

- Having already been cautioned or sentenced for a non-violent offence
- Having been suspended or excluded from school
- Being eligible for free school meals
- Attending school in a densely populated and/or low income area
- Being male, especially at older ages¹

The types of crimes committed by young people have shifted and are **more likely to be associated with violence and drugs**. Taking knife crime as an example, over the past 10 years, incidents of knife crime and serious violent offences have increased considerably. Convictions for offences involving knives remain over 30% higher than in 2014/15^{iv}. However, in recent years, there have been more encouraging signs. Since 2017/18, there has been a similar fall (29%) in the conviction rate for crimes involving knives and offensive weapons (REF). It is worth noting that data on arrests only shows us who has been caught. Hospital data provides an independent measure to help us understand how young people are affected by knife assaults. Here we find that there were 478 child hospital admissions in 21/22 – a reduction of around a quarter since the peak in 2018/19^v.

How many young people are involved in youth custody?

There is a clear trend towards fewer custodial sentences being passed. In the year ending March 2022, 30% of convictions resulted in a custodial sentence, marking the lowest proportion since 2014^{vi}. The overall numbers in youth custody over the last ten years have decreased by nearly 60% from 2565 to 1049^{vii}. When looking over a longer timeframe, the youth custody population is now only 17.5% of what it was 20 years ago. This means that currently, for every 1,000 children in England, 4.6 are within the youth justice system.^{viii}

However, the average length of child custodial sentences has increased by six months compared to the previous year, now standing at 22.8 months^{ix}. Furthermore, the needs of those within the secure estate are becoming increasingly complex. Recent research indicates that around a quarter (24%) of young people in custody have a disability, almost a third (32%) have a mental health problem, and almost half (47%) have a substance abuse issue^x. Furthermore, the research points to increases in incidences of violence and self-harm, highlighting the growing need for additional, specialist support from skilled workers.

What do young people think?

There are not many surveys that explore children's self-reported involvement in violence. The Youth Endowment Foundation (YEF) conducted a nationally representative survey of 2,025 children and young people in 2022 which found that...

- 14% of teenage children have been a victim of violence in the last 12 months.
- 39% of children have been directly affected by violence as a victim or witness. This increases to 46% for teenage children in receipt of free school meals.
- 66% think gangs are a major factor in why teenage children commit violence. This rises to 76% for victims of violence.
- 65% of teenagers said they'd changed their behaviour to keep themselves safe from violence in the last 12 months.
- 14% have been absent from school because they felt they would be unsafe.
- 15% want more activities for young people or youth clubs to prevent violence.

What are the costs of young people's involvement in the youth justice system?

The costs associated with crime and criminality are well-documented and are staggering. When considering the cost of serious violence alone, recent estimates place **the total economic and social cost of serious youth violence at £11 billion between 2009 and 2020.** Within this period, the annual cost has been at least £780 million, with costs rising significantly in every region of England and Wales over the past four years^{xi}

The economic and social burdens of young people entering the youth justice system are huge and are getting worse. It costs four times more for a young person to enter the youth justice system at the age of 16 (£200,000) than it does for them to avoid it (less than £50,000)^{xii}. The costs incurred by those that go on to reoffend are extremely high at £1.5 billion. Interestingly, only a minority of these costs (£52 million) were attributed to reoffending by children and young people who had received a custodial sentence^{xiii}.

What is the policy response to reducing the number of young people involved in the youth justice system?

In 2018, in response to the surge in serious violence, including knife crime, gun crime and homicides, the Home Office published its Serious Violence Strategy^{xiv}. The strategy focuses on early intervention and prevention to empower young people to make positive choices. The government allocated £22 million over a two-year period for initiatives delivered through partnerships with Police and Crime Commissioners and community safety organisations.

In 2019, The Home Office announced funding for 18 police force areas to establish Violence Reduction Units (VRUs). These units are aimed at leading and coordinating a preventive whole-system approach to violence reduction in the areas most affected by serious violence. **Each VRU brings together key partners including youth workers to reduce local violent crime and address the underlying causes.** Early evidence points to VRUs reducing violent crime. In the 18 months following April 2019, 41,377 violence without injury offences and 7,636 violence with injury offences were prevented in VRU areas, in comparison to non-VRU areas^{xv}. However, they are not without their critics. Despite being praised by inspectors for their good relationships with voluntary and community partners, there's a perception of inconsistency of approach, training and communication.^{xvi}

In recent years, successive governments have shifted the approach towards children and young people coming into contact with the youth justice system. In 2019, the Youth Justice Board adopted a 'Child First' approach as the central guiding principle of a new national youth justice strategy. This approach was designed to ensure that services prioritise the best interests of the child, recognise their needs, build on their strengths and capabilities, and collaborate with children to encourage their active engagement to promote prevention, diversion and intervention. These principles closely align to the principles of youth work. The body of evidence of Child First's efficacy is growing and a range of programmes are showing how supporting young people in adopting a pro-social identity is reducing their likelihood of reoffending^{xvii}.

Case study: Collaboration between youth work and partners within a Violence Reduction Unit

Nottingham and Nottinghamshire Violence Reduction Partnership (NNVRP) recognises effective support for young people as a vital tool for addressing violence reduction, and in 2020 enlisted the NYA's help to develop a 'Youth Work Strategy' to build capacity amongst voluntary and community sector organisations in the area. The strategy consists of a Youth Charter, bespoke Quality Mark, and a training framework for upskilling workers in youth services across the city.

Programme impact

The Youth Charter was launched in June 2023 and, even in its infancy, has had over 40 organisations sign up. NNVRP now also offer VCS organisations free JNC recognised training through local provider Base 51. Detached youth work programmes in the Nottingham City area have increased over the last few years; hotspot analysis carried out by Nottingham Trent University shows that crime is trending down in areas where detached youth work is present.

Key success factors

The NNVRP believe that several factors influence their success in Nottinghamshire, including backing from a youth work focussed Police and Crime Commissioner, evidence from academic research partners (NTU) and the pre-existence and support of local organisations like the Ending Youth Violence partnerships.

What is the financial impact of youth work towards supporting young people from entering the youth justice system?

Understanding the financial impact of youth work interventions on youth justice measures is challenging and this area remains relatively under-researched. A recent study exploring the economic value of youth work suggests that it saves £500 million annually by preventing incidences of knife crime, anti-social behaviour and other associated criminal justice costs^{xviii}. This research implies a social return on investment ranging from £3.20 to £6.40 in savings for the taxpayer for every pound invested.

Case study: Impact of open access youth work on crime reduction

Linx Youth Project works to support vulnerable and disadvantaged young people in some of England's most deprived communities. It delivers open access youth clubs every evening across different parts of Middlesbrough. The open access youth clubs enable young people to drop in and take part in arts and creative activities and learn a range of skills.

Programme impact

Linx saw a **significant reduction in crime** amongst young people supported through the service. The number of first-time entrants to youth justice decreased by 79% over four years. This was alongside a wealth of other positive outcomes, including increased self-confidence pro-social behaviour, physical and mental wellbeing, and more.

Adopting an Social Return on Investment (SROI) approach to evaluation, they estimated the social impact value for the Linx youth project as £5.50 for every £1 invested.

However, our review found a **clear association between reduced funding for youth provision and an increase in some crime rates for some young people**. This is particularly concerning given that youth service expenditure in 2019 experienced a real-terms decline of 70% since 2010^{xix}. Since 2019, rising prices and increasing inflation rates are likely to have exacerbated this shortfall. Our own research found that open access youth service expenditure has been disproportionately affected, with expenditure levels just over half of that spent on targeted services.^{xx}

There are far too few volunteers to bridge the gap left by qualified youth workers, whose numbers have dropped by 4,500 since 2010.^{xxi} Indeed, the 2020 Youth Violence Commission identified serious problems with the provision of youth services, writing that:

“An extraordinary number of third sector organisations are being forced to compete for small pots of short-term project funding leading to the closure of many organisations and a ‘toxic climate of inadequate and ineffective services’.”

– Youth Violence Commission

One of the most robust studies to be undertaken found evidence that **providing after-school activities in deprived areas can be effective in crime prevention for school aged children**. The study, undertaken by University of Warwick PhD economics candidate Carmen Villa-Llera, found that **closure of youth centres in London led to a 10% increase in crime amongst 10-15-year-olds**. The study is the first research to establish a causal relationship between youth centre closures and crime participation. The research also provides an assessment of how a combination of leisure elements in youth centres might help in crime prevention. The author calls for future research to explore which type of activities yields higher benefits.

Case study: The impact of youth centre closures on crime rates in London

In 2023 Carmen Villa-Llera, a microeconomist and PhD candidate in Economics at the University of Warwick, undertook a study into the impact of youth centres on crime rates in London. Using administrative records from the London Metropolitan Police alongside freedom of information (FOI) requests to 32 London local authorities the research set out to demonstrate the causal impact of youth centres on crime.

Using a quasi-experimental data analysis approach, the research found that:

- Between 2010 and 2019 almost a quarter (24%) of youth centres in London closed against a backdrop of 71% in youth service expenditure in the city
- Resident's crime participation for young people aged 10-15 increased by 10%
- Incidence of crime rose by 8% for those aged 10-15. This is driven by drug crimes. A small incidence (2%) of violent crimes happening near youth centres also increase after closures
- Youth centre closures impacted youth centre attendance. After closures in London, young people were 14% less likely to attend any youth centre in the city.

The All-Party Parliamentary Group for Knife Crime focused on the impact of youth centre closures in 2020, specifically examining incidents involving knife-related offenses. A FOI approach to local authorities in England was undertaken and results compared against police force administrative data on the number of offences involving a knife between 2014 and 2018. Once more, there was a strong negative association between closures to youth centres and increasing knife crime, signifying that each reduction in **the number of youth centres corresponds to an increase in knife crime**.

How is youth work helping to prevent young people from becoming involved in the criminal justice system?

Around two million young people in England engage with a youth work organisation at least once a week. This equates to 35% of young people aged 11 to 19. As of 2010, 41% of young people aged 10-15 attended youth centres at least once a month, and one in ten attended nearly every day^{xxii}. Most youth provision is place-based and focused on delivering support within a specific community or neighbourhood. However, youth work and youth work approaches are operating within the secure estate and at most levels of youth justice engagement.

Youth work as an approach

Youth work has the capacity to make a huge impact on young people's lives. It not only addresses the likelihood of offending before it occurs, but also helps to rebuild lives and identities for those who have already offended. By offering young people specialist support, on a voluntary basis which focuses on their individual needs and personal development, youth workers are well-placed to develop positive relationships that have the potential to lead to transformative change.

Providing positive activities

The concept of offering diversionary activities to prevent offending by providing alternative pursuits and facilities for young people is not new. Research has long shown that ‘hanging around on street corners’ is predictive of offending behaviour^{xxiii}. Providing programmes of education and skills training offers young people opportunities to move on to positive futures whilst mitigating potential conflict. However, it is not enough to simply introduce young people at risk of offending to leisure activities to reduce criminality. The effectiveness depends on whether they achieve some, if not all, of the following outcomes:

- Improvements in cognitive and social skills
- Reductions in impulsiveness and risk-taking behaviour
- Raised self-esteem and self-confidence
- Improvements in education and employment prospects.

The youth work process, with its person-centred dynamic approach, enables this to happen through situational experiential learning opportunities driven by the young people themselves.^{xxiv} An unintended or indirect, yet positive, consequence of this is a reduction in engagement with criminal activities and a reduction in harm.

Reaching the hardest to reach young people

Detached youth work, involving engagement with young people where they choose to meet, has been shown to be effective in building positive relationships with some of the ‘hardest-to-reach’ young people. It has been found to help young people in making safer choices and reducing the likelihood of their involvement in risky, dangerous or violent situations, whether as perpetrators or victims. It is also noted that 24% of young people surveyed by Onside said they do not have a safe space where they feel belonging^{xxv}.

Case study: Essex Violence and Vulnerability Unit listening project

In 2020, over 600 young people took part in the listening project which concluded that youth violence is an issue in their local area and they felt unsafe and wanted more places to meet up.

Working with a range of local voluntary youth organisations with experience of youth work, the project provided detached youth work and safe activities for 2324 vulnerable young people in Essex. The project targeted those aged 10 to 14 years old who may have been at risk of exposure to youth violence and gang activity.

As well as providing young people with positive activities and trusted adults to talk to, the project has facilitated conversations about knife crime and safety, and helped young people think about their education and mental health. In some cases the project was able to signpost to other support services including forming positive links between young people and the local police.

Programme impact

The project is considered a resounding success and led to the VVU and Active Essex providing funding for a further 12 months and expanding to neighbouring areas.

Youth work and multi-agency working

Any strategies for tackling youth crime must consider a wide variety of interventions and require partnership across a number of agencies, both statutory and voluntary. A multi-agency approach, operating through a whole systems framework, is better placed to ensure that a spectrum of services and support is available, and is responsive, adaptable and sustainable.

“ No single agency can provide all the necessary support for children in conflict with the law to find their way to healthy, pro-social and fulfilling lives.”¹

Within the secure estate, the Youth Justice Board (YJB) has long acknowledged the need for an effective mix of targeted, specialist and mainstream services to support young people. Our review finds that although there are occasional conflicts between the worlds of youth work and the secure estate, there is evidence of the application of youth work and its methodologies within the secure estate. In some instances, the strength of the relationships between youth workers and members of HMYOI staff has been commended in HMIP inspection reports.

Case study: youth work in the secure estate

Many young people struggle to engage with formal education within the secure estate due to complex and multiple barriers. Kinetic Youth, a registered charity, uses youth work methodologies to engage with these young people to reduce their barriers to engagement, supporting them to access wider offers and opportunities.

Kinetic uses youth work approaches and respectful relationships to provide informal education for young people excluded from their education offer. They focus on emotional education and skill development based on individual wants and needs and create the space for young people to understand how to navigate difficult relationships, make positive choices, and develop skills for life outside of their period of imprisonment. The programme encompasses all aspects of the youth work curriculum, determined by the needs of the young people involved at any one time.

Beyond the secure estate, this review found instances where youth work is part of a multi-agency approach to help tackle violence. There is a growing recognition of the effectiveness of youth work in hospitals as away to tackle youth violence and our review identified a range of examples. Typically, trauma-informed youth workers provide emotional and practical support to young people while they are in hospital which may continue after their discharge. Indeed, the Labour party has committed to expand funding for youth workers in Accident and Emergency units if they win the 2024 general election.^{xxvi}

Case study: youth work in hospitals

Between 2014 and 2017, Redthread youth workers were placed in the emergency department (ED) of St. Mary's Hospital in North-West London. The aim was for these qualified staff to assist healthcare workers, specifically engaging young people attending the ED following violent incidents and helping them to access further support.

Redthread workers created action plans for almost all (95%) of the young people involved, and engagement with follow-up services and agencies increased through the Youth violence Intervention Programme (YVIP).

Programme impact

Support resulted in widespread positive outcomes for the young people involved:

- 59% had a reduced involvement with violence, either personally or by association
- 37% had a reduced involvement with crime, either personally or by association
- The reattendance rate at the ED dropped from 1 in 21 to 1 in 35 since the introduction of YVIP

Key success factors

“Patients require so much more time than we can offer in ED. Also ED is not a very conducive environment in which to explore such sensitive and emotional subjects. Added to that the immaturity of the person involved makes these patients so very complex and vulnerable. The Redthread team play such a vital role in these individuals lives at a time of crisis.”

– Emergency Department staff member

Case study: youth work in a multi-agency setting

ENGAGE is a custody-based intervention for under 18s to reach children and young people at a 'reachable moment' to support access to statutory services and reduce the risk of reoffending. The programme has received over £5 million over three years from the Greater London Violence Reduction Unit. Engage is a partnership involving local authority children's services, the Metropolitan Police and NHS England.

The programme involves embedding youth workers in police custody to help support young people arrested in relation to violence offences. They work with the young person following arrest at what is known as a 'reachable moment'. They work to prevent violence and support young people with ongoing, long-term support and guidance that can lead to education, training, apprenticeship and employment opportunities.

Programme impact

Over the last two years, coaches have helped nearly 1,900 young adults with ongoing support, information and guidance, while almost 450 directly took up opportunities in education, training or employment. Others continue to be supported while on remand or in prison.

“Young people have told us about the importance of a trusted, adult relationship and that's why we're so invested in supporting youth workers and boosting capacity across London, because the role they play can be literally life-changing.”

– Lib Peck, London Violence Reduction Unit Director

Conclusions and recommendations

Our review highlights that while the trend of declining crime rates continues, the costs associated with young people's involvement in the youth justice system remain staggering. Youth work already makes a powerful contribution towards reducing these costs, producing a social return on investment of up to £6.40 in savings to the taxpayer for every pound spent. This is despite the halving of youth service expenditure over the last 10 years. Nonetheless, these cuts are counterintuitive. We have found **clear evidence that reductions in funding for youth provision and the closure of youth centres lead to an increase in crime rates among some young people.**

Additionally, while this review identified many examples of good and innovative practice, highlighting the role of youth work within the youth justice system, **it could and should therefore be more widely embedded within the system.** This is likely due to a lack of understanding of the distinct role youth workers play outside of the youth sector. Youth workers provide a vital connection to young people and their communities through the trusted relationships they build. We have demonstrated that innovative multi-agency partnerships can maximise the impact of the holistic and preventative approach that youth workers provide for young people.

While evidence points towards a significant socioeconomic benefit of youth work in and around youth justice services, there is a lack of robust evidence that demonstrates the link between high-quality youth work and positive outcomes for young people within or at risk of entering the youth justice system. Whilst we found ample evidence of youth work supporting young people at risk of entering or indeed already within the youth justice system, robust evaluations for these interventions tend to be either missing or relatively basic. **If we want people to make evidence-informed decisions about how best to support young people, this needs to change.**

Recommendations

Government should:

- restore the £1.2 billion investment in community-based youth work out of schools. This will ensure that young people have access to diversionary activities to prevent offending and offer young people opportunities to move on to positive futures.
- include the youth work sector and statutory youth justice services in integrated commissioning partnerships, recognising and working in partnership with the third sector and non-statutory services to support young people through multidisciplinary teams.
- encourage cross-sector workforce development by prioritising activities designed to increase understanding and mutual trust between the youth work and youth justice sectors.
- prioritise and invest in youth work research to evidence its impact within the youth justice system. This will require better and more joined up data collection within the youth justice system, particularly within the secure estate. Funding bodies should support this by ensuring that programmes they fund adopt a consistent approach to impact measurement.

Endnotes

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