

Young Advocates for Youth Justice

A youth-led report from children and young
people with experience of the system



Alliance
for Youth
Justice

**LEADERS
UNLOCKED**

Background

Alliance for Youth Justice

The Alliance for Youth Justice (AYJ) works to drive positive change in youth justice in England and Wales, for the benefit of children, young people, and society. The AYJ brings together over 75 diverse organisations ranging from grassroots community groups to national charities, providing a powerful and member-led voice. The AYJ aims to amplify the views of children and centre their interests, promoting widespread understanding about the underlying causes of children coming to the attention of the criminal justice system and championing approaches that enable them to reach their full potential. This involves advocating for systems, services and support that are underpinned by children's rights and social justice.

Leaders Unlocked

Leaders Unlocked is a social enterprise that works to put young people at the forefront of discussions and decision-making on the topics and systems they are most affected by. Leaders Unlocked enables young people and underrepresented groups to have a stronger voice on the issues that affect their lives. Leaders Unlocked takes a youth-led approach to partnership work, meaning that all work is co-produced with young people from the outset. In education, policing, health, justice and elsewhere, they help organisations to involve the people who matter and shape decision-making for the better. Leaders Unlocked enhances organisations' ability to effectively embed youth participation within their work and culture; while enabling young people to directly influence change; offering networking and collaboration opportunities and developing a variety of leadership skills.



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About the project

The Young Advocates project is a youth-led project delivered by the Alliance for Youth Justice and Leaders Unlocked, with the generous support of BBC Children in Need. The project is led by children and young people between the ages of 14–20 who have lived experience of the youth justice system, and who want to be part of a movement to drive positive change in youth justice around issues that are important to them. The project supports the Young Advocates to play a leadership role and represent children and young people across the country.

The Young Advocates project aims to:

- **Enable children and young people to use their unique expertise to inform changes in policy, service design and practice**
- **Supporting personal and professional development including leadership, facilitation, research and public speaking skills, taking part in shadowing or mentoring, and gaining AQA qualifications**
- **Take a peer-led approach to gather and represent the views of children and young people with similar experiences**
- **Produce youth-centred reports capturing the views of children and young people on different themes relating to youth justice**
- **Present insights and recommendations to decision-makers and professionals working within the youth justice system**
- **Act as a sounding board to inform the work of the Alliance for Youth Justice**

From the start, the project has been driven by the Young Advocates, enabling them to lead the research, gather the findings and put forward solutions to the issues they identify.

Acknowledgements

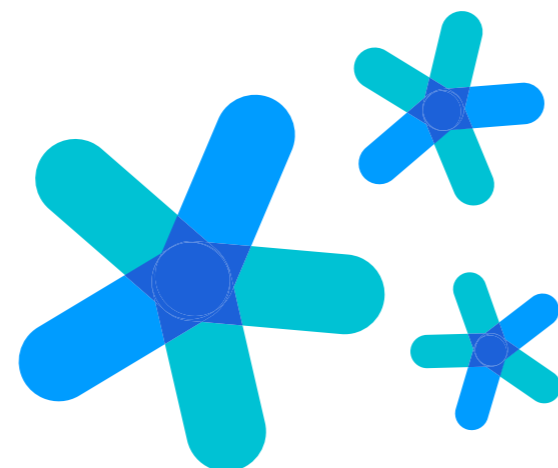
This co-authored report brings together the instrumental work of the Young Advocates: Adam, Dajon, Jake, Jamie-Lea, Joshua, Leilah, Leon, Jarrel, Jodie, Tranai and Zach. A special thanks goes to all of the other children and young people who participated in the peer research and shared their views and experiences.

We would like to thank BBC Children in Need for their continued, invaluable support of this project.

We are grateful for the support of a wide range of national partners who have supported the project, including in the recruitment and promotion of the project in the early stages of the pandemic. We extend particular thanks to those who have been involved in directly supporting the Young Advocates and facilitating consultation with the children and young people in their organisations: Art Against Knives, Breaking Barriers Building Bridges, Centrepont, Haringey Learning Partnership, The Howard League for Penal Reform, Juvenis, Kinetic Youth, The Pythian Club and Reach Every Generation. Thank you to Vinney Green Secure Children's Home, Cookham Wood Young Offenders Institution (YOI) and Parc YOI for allowing us the opportunity to engage with children within their settings and to undertake peer research with others in their care.

We are grateful to colleagues at the Manchester Centre for Youth Studies at Manchester Metropolitan University for accrediting the 70 AQA qualifications received by the Young Advocates.

Thanks also go to HMI Probation, the Youth Justice Board, the Ministry of Justice, IMPRESS, the Commission on Young Lives and the Education Select Committee for offering the group opportunities to contribute to their ongoing work.



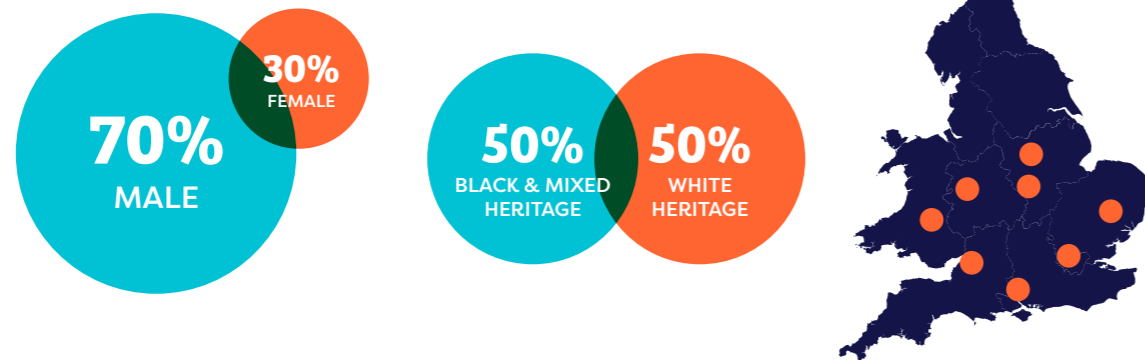
About this report

This is the first report from the Young Advocates Project, which has been co-produced by children and young people with first-hand experience of the youth justice system, with the support of the Alliance for Youth Justice (AYJ) and Leaders Unlocked. The report presents findings and recommendations from engagement with over 120 young people across England and Wales.

About the Young Advocates

In the Summer of 2020, 15 Young Advocates were recruited through the networks of the AYJ and Leaders Unlocked, despite the many challenges posed by the pandemic. The project brought together children and young people aged 14–20, from across the country including London, Bristol, Wales, Nottingham, Southampton, Northampton, Wolverhampton, Suffolk and Mansfield. The group is two-thirds male and one-third female, and half of the group are from a Black or mixed heritage background.

The group has a diverse range of lived experiences of the youth justice system, including of policing, stop and search, arrests, courts, Youth Offending Teams (YOTs) and youth custody. Three of the Young Advocates joined and participated in the project while they were living in secure settings. This was made possible by increased accessibility of the sessions through remote meetings, as well as the commitment of the young people to engage in group sessions every three weeks, alongside their individual work between these sessions.



“I joined Young Advocates because I like the idea of being able to help other people from my own experiences.”

“The reason I joined was because I think a lot of the issues that young people face can be solved by having more voices for us young people communicating.”

“My motivations for joining was to gather more knowledge around the issues that young people face and how we can implement change in our communities, locally and nationally.”

What we did

Recruiting Young Advocates

Throughout summer 2020 we worked closely through partner organisations across England and Wales to recruit a diverse cohort of 15 young people aged between 14–20, with a wide range of lived experience including: school exclusion, stop and search, arrest, police custody, Youth Offending Services, community sentences and youth custody.

Choosing priorities

Following the project's launch in September 2020, the Young Advocates came together every three weeks to plan and deliver peer research into their chosen priority areas related to the youth justice system. After unpacking the different parts and assessing what is or is not working, the group chose three priority topics that were most important to them:

- **Stereotyping:** The negative ideas associated with certain groups that cause labelling and unequal treatment within the justice system and wider society
- **Education and Warning Signs:** The role education plays in spotting signs a young person is in trouble and preventing contact with the justice system
- **Jails (custody):** The experiences and treatment of children and young people in custody

Designing peer research

The aim was to identify patterns that run through society, and the education and justice systems overall, to find out what young people feel increases the chance of entering the justice system. The Young Advocates co-designed peer research materials to capture a range of responses from children and young people aged 12–21 years old, using a mixture of:

- **Group workshops** – which are interactive, involve open discussions and benefit from existing social relationships
- **One-to-one interviews** – where the one-on-one setting can create a more comfortable space to share in more depth
- **Written questionnaires** – which can be shared with a larger number, in a range of settings across the country

Personal development

The Young Advocates received training on social and peer research, interviewing, public speaking, presentation skills, workshop facilitation and data analysis. Each Young Advocate received one-to-one support, to check and reflect on progress and set personal goals, and were supported to identify individual areas for personal development and matched with professional mentors related to individual career aspirations. Guest expert speakers have also worked with the group to explore their priority topics in more detail.

Ongoing opportunities to influence decision-makers such as at policy roundtables, with the Youth Endowment Fund as Advisory Board Members, or as panel speakers at the AYJ, Ministry of Justice and elsewhere, has increased the Young Advocates' understanding of the policy landscape and developed confidence to speak on behalf of young people across the country.

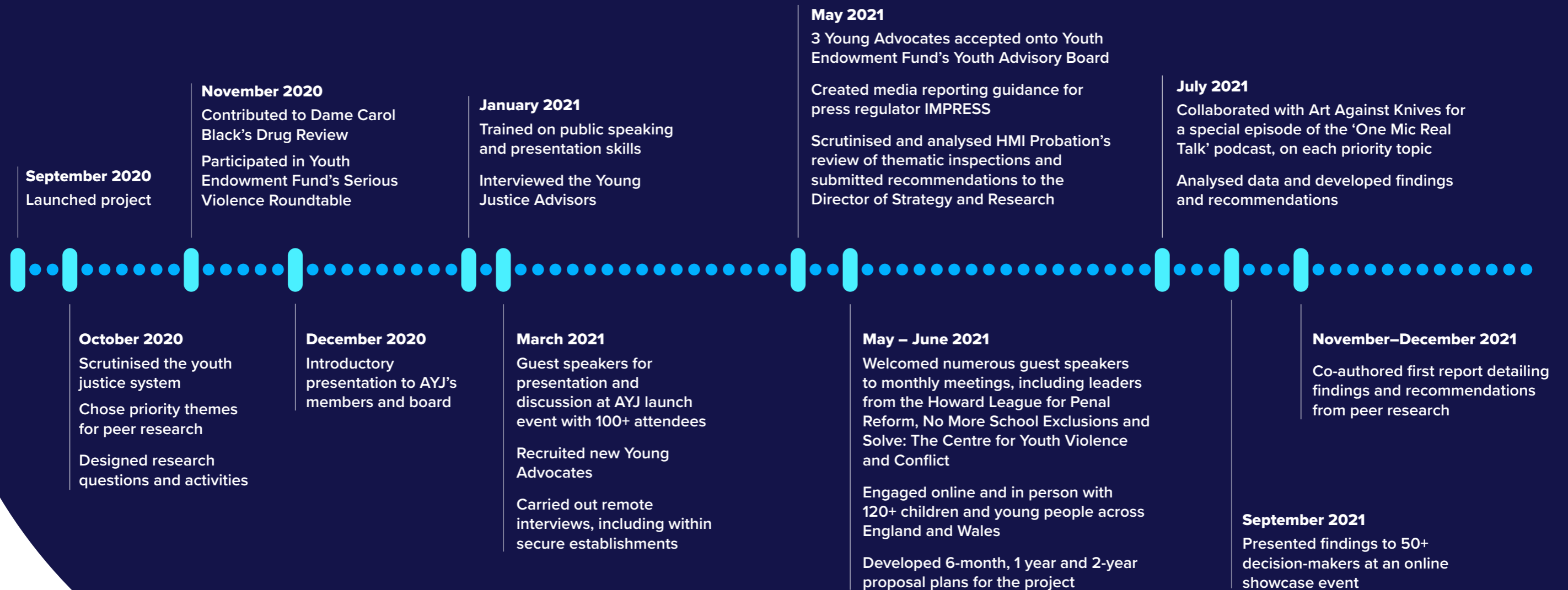
Delivering peer research

Research led by the Young Advocates began online in Spring 2021, and from June was able to happen in person. The peer research drew on all the skills developed throughout the project and reached over 120 young people across England and Wales. Manchester Metropolitan University generously accredited the work all the Young Advocates have completed on the project, resulting in a total of 70 AQA qualifications up to level three awarded across the group.

Presenting the findings and recommendations

At the end of July, we came together as a group to look at all the responses gathered, analyse the data, and discuss the biggest themes, before finally deciding on key findings and recommendations and presenting these to decision-makers at our Findings Showcase. Since then we have focused on creating this report, continued engagement and planning for phase 2.

Key activities & achievements



Stereotypes

Stereotypes are negative ideas or generalisations that others may associate with you, despite them not knowing you. This could be based on the colour of your skin, where you live, your religion, age, gender or other characteristics. In the youth justice system, this can have particularly negative impacts as police, courts and judges stereotyping can be the reason young people enter the system or can impact their treatment and outcomes in the future.

Several of the Young Advocates discussed issues around stereotyping as guest speakers at the AYJ's launch event 'Reimagining justice for children', reconsidering the typical narratives surrounding young people in the justice system. We also came up with 10 rules for reporting for press regulator IMPRESS and invited Kadeem Marshall-Oxley from No More Exclusions to one of our meetings to share about the roots causes and impacts of school exclusions, which disproportionality affect Black and racially minoritised children.

We used interviews, questionnaires, and a number of **interactive workshops** to find out how stereotyping impacts young people's contact with the justice system, as well as how each stage of the justice system sees and treats people in different ways. The next section will outline what young people told us about stereotyping, specifically, how it is seen in policing, courts, the media, education and wider society.

"I chose stereotyping because I feel like it's a big problem especially in the justice system as a whole, because a lot of people judge people based on what they see."

"Getting arrested or being in police custody especially if it's the first time, it can feel like they target, stereotype young people on purpose or for unjust and personal reasons."



Key Findings

Young people and their issues are misunderstood

Some young people told us they felt there was a lack of understanding between themselves and professionals they spend the most time with such as teachers and youth offending practitioners, adding that you come out of the system the same, if not worse. This was mostly felt where these professionals were not from the same areas or communities and therefore, unaware of the issues faced by children and young people. During workshops, some teachers and support staff shared their own experiences of stereotyping which created greater understanding and trust. The media and the press were also repeatedly mentioned as adding to negative public opinion of young people and creating an angel vs devil syndrome where the victim is often represented as the angel and the perpetrator is represented as the devil – which isn't always correct.

“ Being seen as a gang member and not as a person.”

“ Some people see us as criminals and not as individuals who need help.”

“ Police have a lot of experience with young people so they have good reason to stereotype young people but sometimes they do go over the top like stop and search they say you match a description when the description matches the whole of south London.”

“ Teachers from outside the area so they don't understand any of the stuff the kids going through.”

“ The press are making an example of these people and county lines all of these areas people in London going into, they have a whole page to name and shame people it's a mission and the public see it they're showing it off to be a manhunt this puts pressure on judges.”

“ Goves think I'm a gang member because of what they see on papers.”

Stereotyping was associated mostly with policing, but it is seen across all systems and about many characteristics

The children and young people we spoke to mostly connected stereotyping with their negative treatment and experiences with the police, particularly young Black males experiencing increased stop and searches, being labelled as a gang member or gang-associated or receiving harsher sentences. However, those we spoke to also told us that stereotyping is present across many areas and systems, and about many characteristics. These included experiences of girls and young women which are often overlooked, and those that attend alternative educational provisions. The result is that many young people feel they have to change and adapt themselves to not seem like a threat.

“ Stereotyping has made me look at the way I carry myself, I always speak properly, I don't speak in a certain way.”

“ Made me stop trusting the police why can't I walk from my house to the park without being stopped? I have no faith in the law or the education system which is also racist.”

Policing is seen as overwhelmingly racist, untrustworthy and inconsistent. It is as though stereotyping is in the job role of a police officer

Policing was the area young people felt stereotyping is seen the most. They felt that stereotyping by police has created a lack of trust which has spread throughout the whole system, resulting in an unwillingness of young people to listen at school or elsewhere. Frightening and frustrating police interactions can also cause fear and anger from children and young people that has short- and long-term impacts.

“ I feel like with police its part of their job to have stereotypes against people.”

“ Stereotyping makes them [police] look racist because while they're harassing us the real criminals are getting away with worse crimes.”

“ When I was in a police station I was asking for food and they called me a monkey and laughed.”

Young people associate the courts with injustice and their experience of court are very different

Children and young people strongly associated courts with injustice, believing that although the judge sits and listens, they have already made their decision based on stereotypes. There was specific concern that court decisions will always be biased as they are heavily informed and influenced by the media and public opinion. There was also the concern that professionals in courts are not representative of the young people they work with, which limits their understanding of cultural and other contributing factors. Some young people reported receiving poor advice from solicitors and having no idea what options are available or good for them. This lack of understanding was also believed to be higher for perpetrators compared to victims, as perpetrators experienced lack of communication and efforts to help understanding of the court process.

“ Everyone does not get the same sentence. Certain races get it worse cause of your colour they say you’re innocent until proven guilty but they treat me like I’m guilty from the start.”

“ It happens in all situations/scenarios but can be more damaging in policing and courts as this can be the turning point a young person’s present and future life.”

“ Stereotyping in courts could give young people longer sentences which may actually be damaging, as you take someone whose made a simple mistake and place them in a negative influential environment.”

“ Court system treats you like a criminal more when you’re black, white people sentences and ours are not the same we get it worse.”



[Listen here](#) to the Young Advocates in conversation with young people from Art Against Knives about experiences and impacts of stereotyping.

Recommendations

Improve representation and diversity across all professions working closely with vulnerable young people

Diversify magistrates and teachers and those in close contact with young people, by creating professional pathways and youth-led schemes to recruit lived experience groups including ethnic minorities, those that have experienced the justice system, those excluded from education, and care leavers. Provide up to date needs-based training, co-designed by local young people (e.g. unconscious bias, trauma, grief and loss awareness, anti-racist practice).

Review and update court processes so they are truly child-friendly

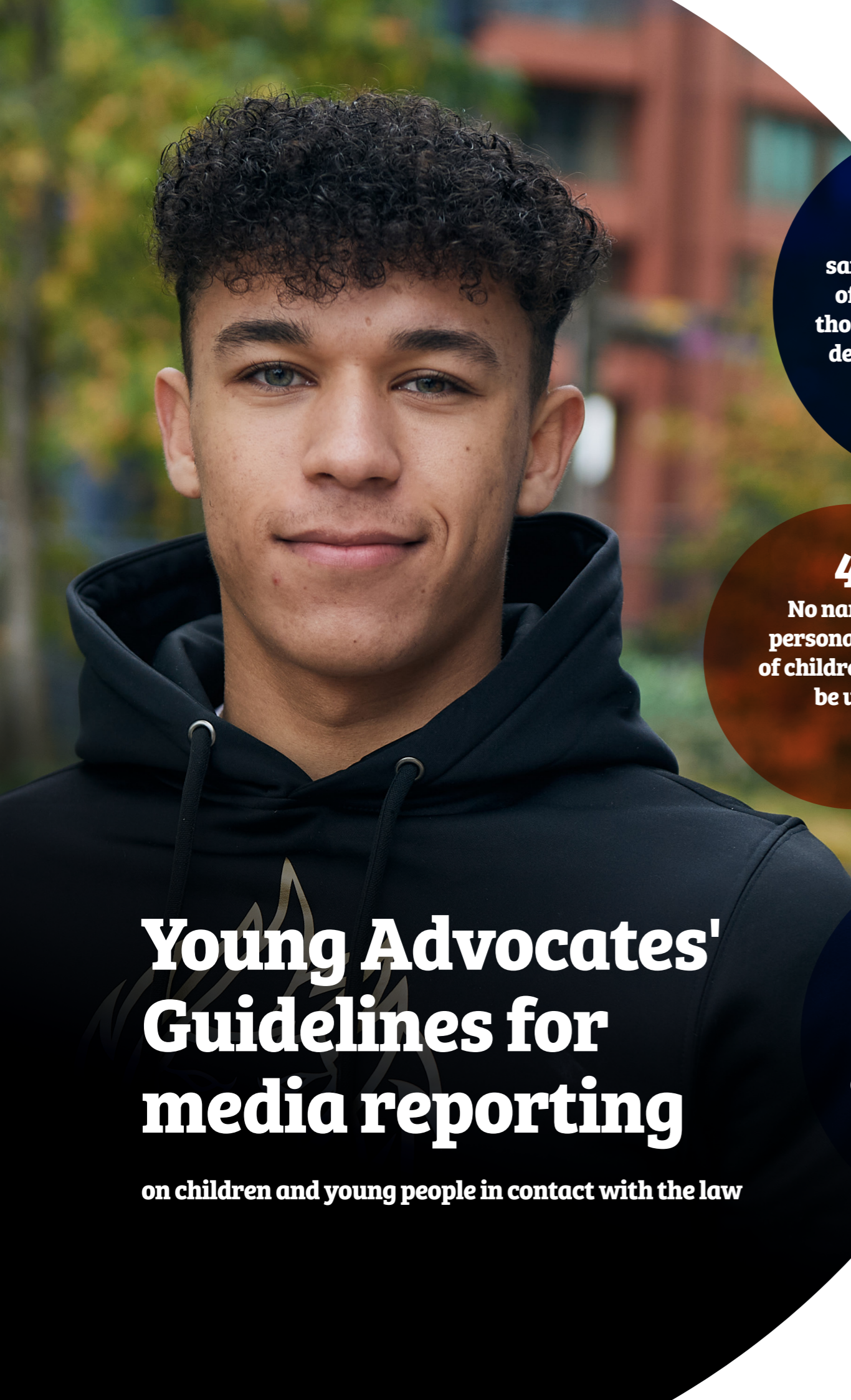
Work with young people with different lived experiences of courts to create a child-friendly process that ensures every young person appearing in court can meaningfully participate throughout the process. This should meet the needs of child victims, defendants and witnesses.

Hold the media to account for the damage reporting on children in conflict with the law has on their future

Strengthen enforceable rules surrounding publishing misinformation or personal details of a child in the media that threatens their potential to succeed in the future. Consequences should be harsher and more visible for producers of media that negatively impact a child’s opportunity to have their criminal history forgotten.

Educate institutions and professionals on how to apply the 'Child First' principle consistently

Create universal resources developed by and for children and young people on what to expect throughout the youth justice system, including at the police station and at court. Resources for professionals should also be co-produced with children and young people on how to treat a child as a child.



Young Advocates' Guidelines for media reporting

on children and young people in contact with the law

1.

There should be sanctions for violation of rules, particularly those related to personal details of children and misinformation

2.

There should be ways developed for children's offending history to be removed from online media (if it is found to no longer be in the public interest)

3.

Seek consent from the young person or their family before using any labels, titles and affiliations in the media

4.

No names or personal details of children should be used

5.

Presentation of facts must be as neutral as possible

6.

People should have a universal right to request their information to be removed

7.

There should be a blanket ban on using 'GANG MEMBER' to describe a child in the media

8.

Reporting of context such as family background or living situations affecting young people should be done only when necessary, accurate and presented non-judgementally

9.

Images of under 18's should not be edited, altered, cropped or manipulated to push a particular narrative in the media

10.

The family of a young person in conflict with the law should always be asked to approve pictures of their loved ones before they are printed



Education & warning signs



This priority is about experiences of education that impact a child's chance of having contact with the justice system. This could be in primary or secondary school, college, alternative education and pupil referral units (PRUs). 'Warning Signs' are the signs or signals that might suggest a young person might be starting to head down the wrong path – as well as awareness around these general topics.

Many of the Young Advocates have experienced school exclusion and associate this with feeling they weren't listened to and having no one around to talk to about their issues before they escalated. The Young Advocates identified a lack of communication between schools and the police and wider justice system, particularly after a child or young person has been arrested for the first time, which is a key moment for intervention to happen. They also identified that county lines and other forms of criminal exploitation of children are issues that are getting worse and increasingly affect younger age groups.

The Young Advocates agreed that teachers and parents spend the most time with children and so should be most aware of the warning signs that a child is at risk of getting in trouble with the law. But unfortunately, many do not realise when young people are beginning to go down the wrong road, may not know how and when to intervene, and by the time they do, it can be too late.

This priority sought to get opinions on experiences of school, school exclusions, personal views on warning signs and what support should be offered. We also wanted to consider any links between experiences in school and having contact with the youth justice system.

Through a series of workshops, focus groups and interviews with other children and young people, we have explored these issues and collected views and experiences to develop recommendations at the local, regional and national level.

“I have been through the whole (education) system and sadly I know I’m speaking for many, many people that the system is failing.”

Key Findings

Mainstream education is not consistently meeting the needs of children and young people

Most discussions we had with young people about education highlighted some first-hand negative experiences in primary and secondary school, these were mainly: Feeling necessary support was lacking; school exclusions and the impact of being sent to alternative education; early labelling and categorising of those struggling academically.

There were also feelings of disappointment that this lack of support has had negative impacts on their trust, and sense of self. On the other hand, many young people mentioned memorable sources of support and specific individuals that had positively impacted their lives. A key component of these relationships was a deeper level of understanding of personal and cultural contexts.

“I had a lot of support that I was very ignorant to and took it for granted because I could be better off right now in terms of qualifications, I had some supportive teachers but most of it came from home.”

“I was aware (of the racism) I just saw that teachers would pick on man for no reason I was just baffled I wouldn't even get angry I'd just laughed.”

“School is harder if you're not naturally academic.”

“It wasn't fun and I never got the help I needed.”

“It was boring and not easy to interact, and I never got the help I needed.”

School exclusion is harmful, particularly considering the strong link with criminalisation and going to prison

Exclusion from mainstream education, including isolation and placements in alternative education were repeatedly mentioned as being used too quickly by staff and causing long term damage, due to the loss of learning time and peer-to-peer contact. The downfalls of placing a group of children who have struggled in mainstream education together was also frequently mentioned, as it limited the attention staff were able to offer and created connections and associations that supported negative or anti-social behaviour. Most young people we spoke to also highlighted being excluded as a major warning sign if not a direct link to future contact with the youth justice system but emphasised an individual has the power to change.

“Getting kicked out of school is like being pasted onto the roads.”

“I felt let down by the school for not supporting me through my situation.”

“Getting excluded made me hate authority more and lose hope.”

“If I didn't go to PRU I would put money on it, I would not be in here in prison – I would still be playing football. I stopped playing football when I went to PRU and I lost my old friends from mainstream and made new ones that were negative influences. You have to fit in with them and put on a front.”

“If you show weakness at PRU you get bullied.”

“Being excluded I was thinking clearly I'm not that intellectual guy I was gravitating towards children that were doing that sort of stuff.”

“The worst thing (about school) was they didn't listen. They isolate you and they only give you a few chances. They would punish me but that would make things worse and I would kick off. But then they would punish me again. Isolation was really awful.”

“They'd rather protect the name of the school than the actual student representing the school.”



Young people see teachers have the most responsibility to pick up on the warning signs, but feel they are not equipped to respond to them

The majority of the young people we spoke to viewed teachers as holding the most responsibility for recognising and responding to signals that a child might be struggling with things outside of academia, as a result of how much time they spend with their students every day. Others disagreed and placed main responsibility on parents, carers and family members, seeing teachers as not having a role or resources outside of teaching.

“ Education on grooming, county lines, exploitation, abusive homes so many signs are going unmissed.”

“ Those are the people young people spend the most time with, every young person needs to bond with that one teacher, you need to love your job.”

“ Teachers can’t help at all.”

“ Most teachers don’t know what its like to be in a situation or go through this and that but there is that one teacher that knows. Make sure that one teacher speaks to you on a level and tries to put you on the right path.”

“ Some people see school as a safe zone, teachers can’t see that.”

“ I think teachers understand the warning signs but the solutions are not working.”

“ PRUs are good because they cater to their students but the stigma around it lowers their self-esteem and labels them.”

“ They should teach us to love our life and not our lifestyle.”

Young people told us that warning signs can be spotted early on and stated that 12 to 16 years old is the age that these warning signs are most visible. Some of the main warning signs shared by children and young people are highlighted on the next page.

Early Warning Signs

These are the main things young people told us might be a sign that a child or young person is struggling and may need some additional support.

DIFFICULTIES IN EDUCATION

- Misbehaving in school
- Not being able to sit down in class
- Bunking off school
- Answering back
- Not doing work
- Arguing with teachers
- Getting sent to PRUs and units
- Not being accepted into college because of permanent record

HOME AND LIVING SITUATION

- Difficulties and stresses at home
- Young refugees or asylum seekers being particularly vulnerable
- Poverty

BEHAVIOUR

- Changes in behaviour
- Bullying
- Denying help
- Starting to act bad around 12–13
- Boredom around age of 15/16
- People talking bad for no reason
- Fighting around age 12
- First time they get arrested

SOCIAL

- Acting differently depending who they're around
- Hanging around the wrong crowd and/or gangs around 14
- Someone forcing you to do things
- Youngers chilling with elders
- Coming in/staying out late
- Group fights at a young age
- Gangs, drugs, peer pressure
- With girls it's love and grooming

Recommendations

Reduce school exclusions, with a target to eliminate them completely

Acknowledge the significant, long term impact educational exclusion can have on a child's future. Every school should have a process of intervention that recognises and targets the 'school to prison pipeline' – the higher chance of disadvantaged children ending up in prison, because of unequal treatment in education.

Increase teachers' awareness of how to responsibly support children outside of academia

Educate professionals on how to recognise and respond to national, regional and local level issues affecting young people including child criminal exploitation, domestic abuse in different contexts/cultures, online harms and substance abuse.

Establish an official body that is only responsible for children in trouble in education

Establish an independent body specifically responsible for reducing educational exclusion, responding to this group as vulnerable and advocating for school-excluded children's rights to education.

Update national curriculums to reflect the current demands in the world of work

Offer more hands-on teaching, practical knowledge, and money-making skills throughout the school curriculum, to ensure education is engaging, relevant, accessible for children and young people entering a world of 'work' that has changed, and reduce the initial incentive to commit crime.



Listen here to the second instalment of the podcast series with Art Against Knives, focusing on the early warning signs and opportunities for education to play a part in supporting young people.



Jails (custody)

When we talk about jails here, we mean the secure settings and experiences of children and young people that have been placed in custody. This includes being remanded or sentenced to a secure setting and being placed in a Secure Children's Home (SCH), Secure Training Centre (STC) or Young Offenders Institution (YOI).

The Young Advocates wanted to know more about young people's views about jails, experiences of different secure settings, and how to break the cycle of young people returning to jail over and over again.

Several of the Young Advocates have been affected by or experienced jail in the past. They emphasised that jail can 'make or break' young people and for most young people it doesn't work so they keep coming back. Even though going to prison is supposed to rehabilitate, it can be very isolating, fear-inducing and feel like an inhumane, emotional punishment, especially for a child or young person. Treatment and experiences at secure establishments also varies from site to site, meaning where you are placed has a big impact on your overall experience. On top of this, complaining is difficult and takes a long time, which causes stress and impacts upon mental health without creating any change.

The Young Advocates wanted to know whether jails are currently working and what can be done to stop children and young people returning to them. This included learning about establishments that have been recently shut down due to poor treatment of children placed there. We hosted Craig Pinkney from the University of Birmingham to learn about the 'school to prison pipeline', as well as Dr Laura Janes from the Howard League for Penal Reform to hear about how the law is being used to advocate for children and young people in prison.

The peer research involved online interviews, questionnaires shared with 3 secure facilities, and a collaborative group interview. Recommendations have been developed to improve experiences and outcomes after spending time in youth custody.

"I chose this priority because of my own experience with people going to jail and I want to help young people with not reoffending."

"Right now all jails are (functioning) way below expectations and they set us up to fail because different jails do, and are good for, different things."



Key Findings

Jail impacts different young people in different ways, partly because treatment is not consistent across sites

The children and young people we spoke to mentioned a number of different ways that jail can impact young people, including changing their mindset - positively or negatively, providing a space for learning or support, or in some cases deepening their involvement in criminal activity. We also heard of instances where children and young people do not want to leave jail for reasons such as lack of accessibility to certain resources, structure and stability in the outside world. Although some young people shared positive experiences of staff, and shared ways they were supported, experience of and access to this was not reported widely.

“I am currently in a YOI...I'd like it to be easier to access staff.”

“My first time in jail I was causing trouble but now I'm older so am more mature and now is the time to sort out my life.”

“I didn't wanna leave... if anything it makes people wanna stay there more.”

Dajon's Reflections



“I think they need to be realistic with education in custody... We need things that you can use on the outside rather than just a hobby, if you don't like those lessons you're just sat there for an hour for no reason.”

There's no point in complaining because it just takes too long. By the time I'm done with the whole process I'll be back on the regime.

Some staff are qualified but they don't like their job, their job is quite easy but they find things to complain about, we need people that actually want to help, if you don't want to help then there's no point.”

Racism and abuse in jails are major issues and the media shows no or an unrealistic version of children in custody

Within interviews and workshops, verbal, physical, and racist abuse was highlighted as a major issue in child custody settings, particularly by those who were not currently in a secure facility which may suggest the problem is bigger in reality. The harms of isolation and restraint were also repeatedly mentioned. There was a perception from some of the children and young people we spoke to that prison staff have low self-esteem, are seeking power, and take this out on young people they work with. Concerns were expressed about the realities faced by children and young people in jail rarely being shown in British media, which hides how bad things can get for children in secure settings.

“This one prison officer he literally took me downstairs to the laundry room and I watched him take off his belt and he said 'I don't like you so we're gonna do something about it', I swear to God he punched me up... they should go to jail for that.”

“In the YOI, the white officer would say to the black kids 'I'm not letting you out of your cell you n*gga.'”

The children's secure estate does not consistently treat children as children or reflect the 'Child First' principle

Many of the responses we received from young people highlighted feelings that for children and young people when they are in secure settings, restraint is often the first thing staff jump to, to resolve disagreements. This can cause long term physical and mental harm which could be avoided by prioritising de-escalation for children in secure settings. Additionally, although rehabilitation is supposed to be a priority, across all the sites we spoke to, education was mentioned as often inadequate and feeling like it won't be transferable or useful when back in the community which impacts the perceived chances of returning.

“Training is needed...prison officers need to understand you're working with kids.”

“They have the funding but they don't do anything with it it's like they refuse to do anything good for the young people, they even undersell training that is available.”

“I would like more time out my cell and different things to do in my cell to keep me busy.”

“Teach us skills and knowledge we would actually use on the outside.”

Young people come out of jail in the same or a worse place than they were before

The overwhelming feeling among the young people we spoke to was that a range of unaddressed social problems such as poverty, abusive households, educational inequality and employment and housing challenges, cause people who have been to prison to keep returning. We know that many of these challenges contribute to young people getting involved in crime initially, so being placed back in the same environment feels like being set up to fail. There was also mention of increased chance of being remanded back to jail because of restrictive licence conditions, which brings stigma, suspicion and extra supervision.

“The thing that needs to change is their environment...you’re not gonna fix problems by sending people to jail...there’s no options...you’re setting them up to fail.”

“There is a stigma people have around prisons, its seen as a reward. To go for a short time and be talking about it is seen as weak... if I went for 4 months I know I’d be told ‘you didn’t even do that much time’, but still be treated like a hero, when that 4 months could’ve changed me.”

“Once you’ve been jail once it could be the smallest mistake you make when you go to court you’ll get remanded or get a prison sentence for whatever you’ve done.”

“When you’re on probation it’s hard to make a living legally.”

“Young people return to jail when they’ve been placed back in the same situation as last time.”

Recommendations

Improve the quality of education offered while in custody

Education offered in secure facilities should be accredited and relevant to success in the community, and specifically planned with the young person from the beginning of their placement to offer opportunities to fill gaps from previous education. The quality and level of education and resources available should also be improved and should be consistent and transferable across sites.

Commit to more conscious consideration of who is being hired

Involve young people with lived experience of custody in the hiring processes of prison staff. Specific efforts to attract candidates from diverse backgrounds as well as those with an education or therapeutic based history would change the experiences of those in child custody.

Introduce an independent system for complaints

We recommend an independent process or Board specifically for complaints of children in secure settings. The process where a young person can only complain to internal superior staff members about abuse or other misconduct allows such behaviour to go unrecognised and creates a perception for staff members that its acceptable or at least not worth mentioning.

Make consequences for staff that harm children in custody harsher

Disciplinary actions and consequences for staff in secure settings found to have caused unnecessary physical or psychological harm to a child in custody must be harsher and made more visible to address and discourage this behaviour, and to change the culture that allows abuse to go unreported. This should reflect an increase in the accountability of those working directly with children.

Prioritise training on using de-escalation over restraint, and rehabilitation over punishment for children in custody

Training upon entry and retraining of current staff should be reformed and co-produced with young people with lived experience and should emphasise the 'Child First' principle and re-establish de-escalation as the primary method of resolving conflict as well as rehabilitation as being at the heart of youth justice.



Listen here to the third and final instalment of the three-part series, focusing the impact of jail with the crew at Art Against Knives.



Leon's Reflections



"I was getting advised by a lot of people to apply for the project, at the time I was in a lot of trouble. It was a tick box to show who I actually am, prove people wrong really.

At the beginning I used just sit on the call but then I started to like it and engage a bit more. It has felt like the experience has built structure to do certain things, it does look good cos other professionals are talking about it. During COVID I was doing online speaking, so when I went into my job, other people had never done it before but for me I wasn't stressed because I was a couple steps ahead.

It's built my confidence. I was gassed, we started talking to like 20 people, then it got to where we're speaking in front of 150 people and it's professional presentations, it's all different. The biggest change is I've got a job, I'm not the same but I'm still the same, my behaviour changed. A lot more things are in place so I have to move a certain way, and not let things affecting me the same way they would when I was younger, just growing up really."

What's next?

In September 2021, almost a year to the day of the project's first meeting, the Young Advocates welcomed over 50 guests to a showcase of these findings and recommendations. The showcase brought together insights, experiences and personal reflections from the peer research, and was a chance to share recommendations for change directly with those who can make a difference. The audience included a wide range of professionals from across the youth justice sector, including AYJ member organisations, frontline practitioners, lawyers, police officers, civil servants, and current and prospective funders.

We are grateful to BBC Children in Need for enhancing their support for the Young Advocates project over the next two years, enabling us to grow the reach and impact of the project. Our aim is to establish the Young Advocates as an influential and sustainable voice for change in the youth justice sector at a national level.

We are actively seeking collaboration with policy-makers, organisations and other changemakers. It is an important time for young people to be involved in speaking truth to power and shape decision-making and we hope the Young Advocates project will provide a national platform for children and young people's voices, to reach a variety of audiences including policy-makers, the public, AYJ members and the wider society. To build on the learning and achievements of the pilot year, and establish the Young Advocates as an influential and sustainable voice for change in youth justice we will:

Build awareness and understanding of the issues impacting young people with experience of the justice system

The Young Advocates will focus on more deeply exploring the issues highlighted in each priority and increasing wider understanding on a deeper level about the issues in specific areas such as prisons, alternative education and care settings that are typically harder to access. We will share our findings, design and deliver resources, training and presentations, and collaborate with leaders from across the justice system.

Directly shape the development of priorities, policies and practices that are better for children and young people

By building relationships with professionals leading positive change in youth justice, the Young Advocates will be engaged in changing the services and systems that directly affect their lives, by embedding youth voice in work as representatives and experts by experience.

Focus on skills and personal development

Opportunities for individual Young Advocates' personal and professional development, including transferable skills for work, active citizenship and increased leadership, facilitation, research and public speaking will strengthen the group overall while demonstrating the importance of having youth voice at every level.

Reach more children and young people through peer-to-peer engagement, advocacy and influencing

The youth-led approach of the Young Advocates will continue to put children and young people in an influential role, setting their own priorities and positions on issues, taking the recommendations forward and enabling a larger number of underrepresented young people to feel listened to.

Increase empowerment and ownership

Building on the successes of the project, children and young people involved in the Young Advocates will be encouraged to celebrate their achievements and supported into positive opportunities beyond the project, including volunteering activities, apprenticeships and jobs.

Thank you for taking the time to read our report. We are passionate about continuing this work and are seeking more collaborative work with policy-makers, sector and community leaders and our peers that will play a significant role in this.





Watch:



Listen:

The Young Advocates travelled to Art Against Knives in London to meet the young producers of the One Mic Real Talk podcast and record an insightful and powerful series of their discussions.

Each of the three episodes, on the areas of stereotyping, education and warning signs, and jail showcase lively and passionate discussions which provide thoughtful reflections on society today from the young people's perspectives. These episodes flip the usual format, and see the Young Advocates asking the questions of the One Mic Real Talk crew. Find all three episodes below!

One Mic Real Talk Podcasts July 2021:



Adam's Reflections



“I was interested in the opportunity to meet like-minded people, have influence on some sort of change, and to learn and gain experience. As a whole project it's been amazing, at the start it was a bit nerve racking, but it being lockdown and on the computer was very beneficial for me. It made it very easy to get used to it, and it very quickly became obvious it was quite an exciting project! I quite like how it puts you out of your comfort zone, it taught me a lot and to be able to talk to older people that are professionals that didn't talk down to me, listened to me, it was reassuring.

My highlights were doing the interviewing and having the chance to speak to like-minded young people, to see that they became better, stronger people. Meeting my professional match/mentor has been absolutely amazing and it's great how easy people have jumped in, we've had people join later on and everyone just welcomes everyone with open arms. The roundtables were amazing it was great to speak to such important people in high power positions, for them to want our opinions was absolutely amazing makes you feel valued important and impactful.

Being involved in the Young Advocates has definitely grown my confidence, given me better hope and opportunities for the future, and opened new doors for me, a lot of amazing opportunities that I never thought in a million years I'd be involved in.”

Stay up to date

To find out more about the Young Advocates and their work, please get in touch with Amania Scott-Samuels, Project Coordinator at Leaders Unlocked:

amania@leaders-unlocked.org

To keep up to date with all the work from the AYJ and Leaders Unlocked, including that of the Young Advocates, make sure you check out our websites and socials:



Website: ayj.org.uk

Email: info@ayj.org.uk

Twitter: [@the_AYJ](https://twitter.com/the_AYJ)

YouTube: [Alliance for Youth Justice](https://www.youtube.com/AllianceforYouthJustice)

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