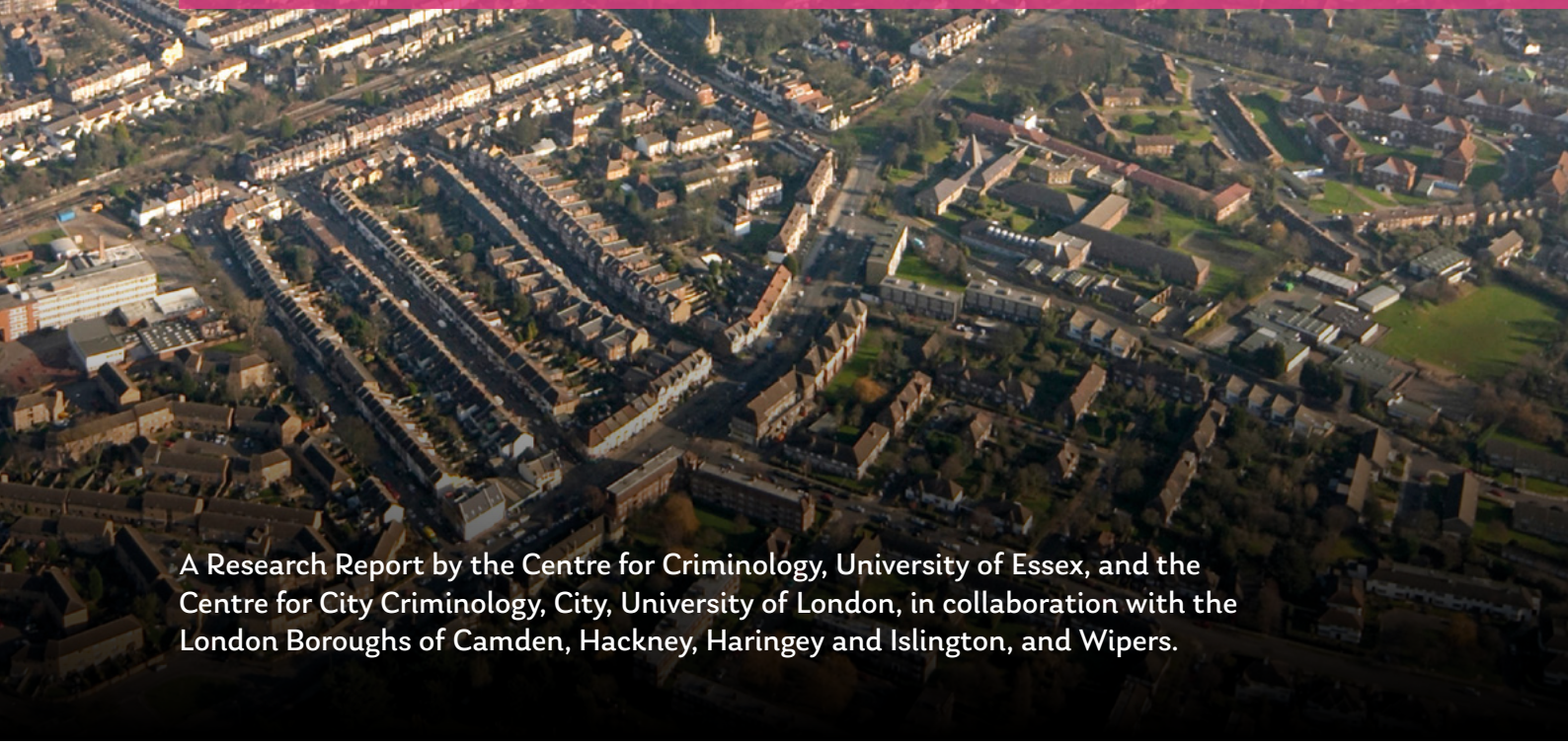
The Disproportionality Leadership and Mentoring Project:

Capturing the Lived Experience of Disproportionality among Children and Young People from Black, Mixed-Heritage and Minoritised Backgrounds across Four London Boroughs



A Research Report by the Centre for Criminology, University of Essex, and the Centre for City Criminology, City, University of London, in collaboration with the London Boroughs of Camden, Hackney, Haringey and Islington, and Wipers.

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And a huge thank you to the children and young people and their parents/carers who were brave and kind enough to share their stories about their experiences of disproportionality in the criminal justice system and other settings. Without their contributions, this research project would not have been possible.

Foreword

Ruth Bloomfield, Senior Policy and Commissioning Manager, MOPAC

Tackling disproportionality in the youth justice system is a key priority for MOPAC as we know that Black and minority ethnic children are over-represented at every stage of the criminal justice service. While the overall number of children offending, reoffending and being sent to custody has decreased over the past ten years, the proportion of children from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) backgrounds has risen significantly in each of these areas.

The drivers for disproportionality in youth justice are complex and the problem cannot be solved by the youth justice system alone. Building on existing work with justice agencies, in the Autumn of 2019, MOPAC convened a working group of partners acknowledging that policymakers and practitioners share in the responsibility to do everything they can to tackle disproportionality and ensure all children are treated equally, no matter their background.

The result of the workshop was the Youth Justice Tackling Ethnic Disproportionality Action Plan that was launched in February 2021. This action plan is intended to focus minds and drive improvement across the criminal justice service in London. In support of the delivery of the action plan we made a total of £500,000 available through the Disproportionality Challenge Fund, specifically for Youth Justice Management Boards and Youth Justice Services in boroughs identified as high needs with the intention of supporting a more localised response.

The purpose of the fund was to tackle the over-representation of children from BAME backgrounds within local YJS cohorts. Boroughs who were awarded funding were given autonomy to assess and respond to their local need through collaboration with statutory partners as well as voluntary and community organisations. They were required to engage children and young adults in the development of the project either through consultation, co-design or co-production. The fund encourages innovative practice that contributes to the evidence base of what works to tackle disproportionality in youth justice. The development of the challenge fund projects will therefore contribute to building local partnerships and fostering collaborative work towards shared outcomes aimed at tackling local disproportionality.

The Disproportionality Leadership and Mentoring Project embodied the purpose of the fund by providing a leadership and mentoring programme to support BAME children across four North London boroughs to achieve positive outcomes. It also captured their voices and experiences and contributes to a future understanding of the drivers of disproportionality in the youth justice system.

I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate those children and young adults who took part in the project and give a special thanks to those who contributed their experiences to the research project, and to their parents/carers and professionals from the Youth Justice Service and WIPERS who supported them to do so. Thank you also to Danielle Dewsbury for co-ordinating the project, and to the academics who produced this report.

Curtis Ashton, Director of Young Islington, London Borough of Islington

There have been some important national successes and achievements in the youth justice arena in recent years – such as the reduction in first time entrants, the curtailment of the number of children and young people in custody and improvements in reoffending rates - and all four boroughs involved in this project have experienced this. However, the picture is not as positive when it comes to the issue of disproportionality. Children and young people from Black, mixed heritage and some other racially minoritised communities are still more likely to be affected by the youth justice system and this position has not improved. In fact, the data shows that the opposite has occurred. For instance, for the year ending March 2022, 39% of 18-to-24-year-olds in custody were from Black and minoritized backgrounds, with the disproportionality being even more pronounced for those under the age of 18 – 48% for children and young people from Black and minoritized backgrounds (MoJ 2023).

Recent studies of the issue, such as David Lammy MP's review and the Youth Justice Board funded project led by Islington and Haringey Councils back in 2020, have explored the reasons for this in more detail. Due to the need to make more progress in the area, the Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime (MOPAC)'s announcement that it was allowing ten local London areas, with high rates of disproportionality, to bid for funds to establish an innovative project focussed on the area was welcome. The London Boroughs of Islington, Camden, Hackney and Haringey were pleased to have been successful in securing funding for a joint project with Wipers as the provider, that focuses on mentoring and role model-based principles for children and young people from Black, Mixed heritage and minoritised communities.

The additional benefit of this project was to its ability to ensure that we could hear the voices of a large cohort of children and young people from these backgrounds. This is crucial if long term change is to be achieved. Utilising the expertise of researchers from the University of Essex and City, University of London has been significant here, as we now have rich qualitative data from children and young people themselves to help in our pursuit of fairness and equality. This is subsequently one of the UK's largest ever studies of disproportionality pertaining to children and young people in the youth justice system.

A big thank you to those who have contributed to this project, especially the children and young people who were interviewed, their parents/carers and the professionals from the Youth Justice/Offending Services of Camden, Hackney, Haringey and Islington. Thank you also to Chris Greer, James Rosbrook-Thompson and Alison Sleet for leading on the research and producing the report, staff at WIPERS, Laura Norton, Ruth Bloomfield and MOPAC for funding the project and to Danielle Dewsbury for being the Project co-ordinator.

Executive Summary

This report presents the research findings and recommendations from the most recent in a continuing series of partnership projects involving London Borough of Islington (LBI) Council and criminologists at the University of Essex and City, University of London. The project extends the partnership with Islington to three other London boroughs – Camden, Hackney and Haringey – and seeks to capture the lived experience of disproportionality in the words of crime-affected children and children and young people from minoritised backgrounds (primarily Black and mixed heritage), their mentors, and their parents/carers.

The project was co-designed and co-produced with representatives from the four London Boroughs and Wipers, the VCS partner, a Black-led organisation with extensive experience working directly with socially excluded children and young people with complex needs and from diverse communities.

In depth interviews/focus groups were conducted with 20 children and young people from minoritised backgrounds (mostly Black and mixed heritage), seven mentors, five practitioners and three parents/carers. Prioritising the voice of young mentees gave them a stake in the research with a view, alongside the intensive mentoring programme, to enhancing self-confidence, social and leadership skills by providing direct experience of involvement in a research project aimed at tackling disproportionality.

In total, more than 200,000 words of first-person accounts was collated and analysed by the research team. The aim was to examine participants' lived experiences of disproportionality. The analysis of this material generated research findings and discussion which are organised under six headings in this report: General reflections on disproportionality; Locality and local services; Education, skills and training; Police and Policing; the Courts and the Youth Justice System; Mentoring and it's Impact on Outcomes.

The research findings form the basis of a series of co-produced recommendations aimed at addressing some of the key drivers of disproportionality and improving the lived experience of children and young people from minoritised backgrounds.

These Recommendations are gathered below.

Recommendations

Locality and Local Services

Recommendations

- Develop a more devolved and multi-faceted approach to community engagement to ensure it is representative and includes the most disadvantaged and vulnerable residents in decision-making about their place.
- Explore different approaches to co-design with children and young people and families before commissioning services.
- Enhance the understanding of intergenerational trauma on both child and family as part of a whole family approach to intervention.
- Strengthen practitioners' cultural competency to help establish 'tackling disproportionality' as an organisational principle, increase confidence when discussing it, and enable better engagement with children and young people and families with complex needs.

Education, Skills and Training

Recommendations

- Continue working to reduce school exclusions, which could involve trialling programmes such as the innovative, but rare 'No School Exclusions' approach in Dunraven school in Lambeth.
- Provide families with clearer signposting about the support they can access when children and young people are facing difficulties at school.
- Continue working with teachers to optimise awareness of conscious and unconscious biases and how these might contribute to disproportionate outcomes for at risk children and young people.
- Encourage more local businesses to create training, education and employment opportunities for children and young people from Black and minoritised communities, including those who have graduated from the mentoring programme.

Police and Policing

Recommendations

- Maintain continuity of staff in community policing to optimise relationship-building with local residents and children and young people and mitigate the negative impacts of high levels of staff changes.
- Each police Borough Command Unit should have a Youth Engagement Strategy, which should be co-produced with children and young people of all backgrounds and reviewed at regular intervals.
- MOPAC should consider commissioning a London-wide youth engagement strategy, focussing on the needs of all children and young people and including specific reference to children and young people from Black and minoritised communities.
- Youth Justice/Offending Services should be afforded the opportunity to offer training to all new police recruits in their local area to strengthen cultural competence and the ability to interact effectively with children and young people from Black and minoritised communities.

Recommendations

The Courts and Youth Justice System

Recommendations

- Increase the ethnic diversity within the judiciary and of lay benches at court.

Mentoring and its Impact On Outcomes

Recommendations

- Ensure local authorities are able to offer children and young people from Black and minoritised communities access to mentors when they need it, particularly supporting early intervention.
- Create more opportunities for peer support for children and young people from Black and minoritised communities.
- Extend the Wipers intensive mentoring and leadership programme, making it available to more at-risk children and young people from Black and minoritised communities.

Issues for Future Research

Future research should:

1. **Explore in greater depth how place and mental health interact with key risk, promotive and protective factors to influence pathways into and from antisocial and criminal behaviour.**
2. **Examine how place-based thinking can help improve the multi-agency response to youth offending to produce better outcomes for crime-affected children and young people.**
3. **Co-produce with London boroughs and community partners an inclusive, sustainable and citizen-centric research agenda to address disproportionality and wider inequalities and contribute value to people's lives.**
4. **Examine the role of exploitation and 'county lines' as a contributor to gang affiliation and SYV in Camden, Hackney, Haringey, Islington and coastal communities.**

Introduction

Introduction

This report presents the research findings and recommendations from the most recent in a continuing series of partnership projects involving London Borough of Islington (LBI) Council and criminologists at the University of Essex and City, University of London. Previous collaborations have examined the work of the Islington Integrated Gangs Team (IGT), since renamed the Islington Collaboration Action Network (Greer et al., 2019); multi-agency efforts to tackle key issues and outcomes relating to the disproportionate representation of Black, mixed-heritage and minoritised children and young people in the Criminal Justice System (Greer et al., 2020)[1]; and the complex interdependencies of serious youth violence (SYV) and ways of enhancing the local multi-agency approach to addressing and preventing it on one of Islington's most disadvantaged estates (Greer et al., 2021, UKRI).

The Disproportionality Leadership and Mentoring project extends the partnership with Islington to three other London boroughs – Camden, Hackney and Haringey – and seeks to capture the lived experience of disproportionality in the words of crime-affected children and young people from minoritised backgrounds (primarily Black and mixed heritage), their mentors, and their parents/carers.

Project Outline, Aims and Objectives

The Disproportionality Leadership and Mentoring Project is an integrated intensive mentoring programme (designed and delivered by WIPERS) and research analysis (co-produced by the research team, mentors, young mentees and practitioners) across four London boroughs – Camden, Hackney, Haringey and, as lead borough, Islington. It aims to contribute to sustained systems change by developing a new approach to strengthening multi-agency partnership working to address the local drivers of disproportionality.

Across the 12-month funded period from October 2022 to October 2023, the intensive mentoring programme engaged with 46 Black and mixed-heritage children and young people involved in the criminal justice system (CJS) across the four boroughs. The programme was delivered over a minimum of 12 weeks and mentoring support included ETE (education, training and employment) opportunities via WIPERS' community and corporate partners.

Children and young people involved in the intensive mentoring programme were invited to participate in the research project. Those children and young people who agreed were included as an equal voice in the research analysis. By capturing their expert voices, this research report seeks to create a deeper understanding of the lived experience of disproportionality from the perspective of those most directly affected. Children and young people's views, alongside those of mentors and practitioners, in turn, informed the development of new, context-specific ways of tackling disproportionality, locally and more widely.

1 The Disproportionality Project was included as an example of effectiveness in Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation (HMIP) Black and Mixed Heritage Boys Effective Practice Guide (2021, https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmiprobation/effective-practice/diversity-equality-and-inclusion/bmh-ep-guide/)

The approach adopted in this project is unique. The Disproportionality Leadership and Mentoring Project is the first in the country to use a multi-borough collaboration that prioritises the voices of minoritised children and young people to develop an in-depth qualitative analysis of disproportionality in the context of an intensive mentoring and leadership programme.

The project seeks to add value by establishing a step-change in collaboration between four London boroughs (with high levels of need) and diverse community stakeholders resulting in the co-production of:

1. **an intensive leadership-mentoring programme for Black and minority ethnic children and young people across the boroughs, where the recommended provider (Wipers) will act as role models;**
2. **a qualitative analysis of the lived experiences of disproportionality at cultural, structural, and institutional level (interviewing 20 children and young people, seven mentors, five practitioners, and three parents/carers), highlighting experience, need and practice across the four boroughs, and the complex interdependencies between ethnicity and other social / structural factors (Lammy, 2017);**
3. **an enhanced practice agenda, showcasing good practice and centring on needs based multi-agency partnership working seeking to tackle the local drivers of disproportionality and reduce crime;**
4. **recommendations for addressing the drivers of disproportionality at local, regional and national level.**
5. **an inclusive, sustainable and collaborative research and innovation agenda to continually develop the evidence-base on disproportionality and support further applications for large-scale funding.**

Operating Model

46 children and children and young people from black, mixed-heritage and minoritised backgrounds were invited to participate in the intensive mentoring programme in collaboration with the four boroughs and a cross-borough Project Co-ordinator. Consent to partner in the research analysis was sought at that point. In depth interviews/focus groups were conducted with 20 children and young people from minoritised backgrounds (mostly Black and mixed heritage), seven mentors, five practitioners and three parents/carers. Prioritising the voice of young mentees gave them a stake in the research with a view, alongside the intensive mentoring programme, to enhancing self-confidence, social and leadership skills by providing direct experience of involvement in a research project aimed at tackling disproportionality.

The University of Essex, City, University of London, and the London Borough of Islington (as the lead local authority) are committed to embedding EDI alongside ethical and safe practice. The project was subject to ethical oversight by the Ethics Board of the University of Essex. A protocol was agreed to protect the data held by the partners and to prevent harm to any research participants / organisations. Fundamentally, the *Disproportionality Leadership Project* was about systemically 'including' some of north London's most disadvantaged children and young people.

Report Structure

The report is structured as follows:

- A review of the relevant literature on disproportionality as it relates to children and young people, involvement with crime, the criminal justice process, multi-agency partnership working and placed-based research, including academic studies and landmark policy documents at national and local level.
- An overview of the methodological approach, including a discussion of how co-production was embedded in the research process.
- Qualitative analysis of in-depth interviews/focus groups with research participants, including children and young people, parents/carers, mentors and practitioners.
- Findings and Discussion
- Recommendations and associated actions, based on the report's findings.

Literature Review and Policy Context

Literature Review and Policy Context

Disproportionality in the Youth and Criminal Justice Systems

Though the issue of disproportionality along ethno-racial lines has only recently entered mainstream political debate in the UK – largely as a result of 2017's Lammy Review (see below) – systematic studies of disproportionality have been conducted in the United States for forty years. In 1982, American criminologist Alfred Blumstein lamented what he called 'grossly disproportionate race-specific incarceration rates', seeking an explanation for the fact that while Black Americans comprised roughly one-eighth of the US population, they represented about one-half of the country's prison population. 'This disproportionality has been a source of major concern', Blumstein remarked, 'largely because it suggests the possibility of gross injustice in the criminal justice system (1982: 1259).

Statistics on the ethnic background of UK prisoners began to be collected in the mid-1980s, with disproportionality being identified at that stage and becoming more pronounced over time. This led researchers to focus on disproportionality at all stages of the criminal justice process, including searches, crime reports and arrests, and develop explanations for the over-representation of Black, Asian and minority ethnic people across these stages. For example, in 2004 Marian FitzGerald, along with colleagues Chris Hale and Jan Stockdale, constructed a model which sought to account for long-standing ethnic differences in criminal statistics. The resulting model focused on street crime in a number of London boroughs, identifying two overriding explanations for area differences: deprivation and population turnover. In elaborating this model, the researchers stressed the need to be vigilant regarding possible amplification of pre-existing disadvantages via the criminal justice system (CJS) and, more specifically, the unequal exercising of discretion by those working within the CJS.

Disproportionality is widespread and is not restricted to young Black men. Though 'Gypsies', Roma and Irish Travellers represent just 0.1% of the population, they account for around 5% of the male prison population, while Muslims are represented in the prison population at three times their proportion of the general population. As Jolliffe and Haque (2017) point out, 'ethnic and cultural characteristics' aren't a feasible explanation for the dramatic increase in the number of Muslim prisoners, from 5,500 in 2002 to 13,200 in 2016. As they point out, 'the rise in prison numbers (128% increase of Muslims) does not reflect the rise in the general population (74% increase of Muslims from 2001)' (2017: 3).

After being commissioned by the then incumbent prime minister David Cameron to investigate racial discrimination in the CJS, Tottenham MP David Lammy's subsequent review was published in 2017 (Lammy, 2017). Though the report and its findings pertained to the over-representation of Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) individuals in the CJS, in presenting his review Lammy stressed that understanding the roots of such disproportionality required wider consideration of the complex intersections between racial and ethnic background and other forms of social division and structural disadvantage. As he put it (2017): 'poverty, lone-parent families, school exclusions, and growing up in the care system. And what more is there left to say about stop and search?' The review itself contained a litany of damning statistics:

41% of young offenders in custody in 2016 were from Black and minoritised backgrounds (up from 25% in 2006).

Despite only **3%** of the general population being Black, **12%** of adult prisoners and **24%** of children in custody are Black.

41% of Black and minoritised defendants plead not guilty in Crown Court, versus **31%** of white defendants.

Black and minoritised people comprise **25%** of the prison population.

19% of children and young people offending for the first time in 2016 were from Black and minoritised backgrounds, up from **11%** in 2006.

The estimated cost of the over-representation of Black and minoritised people in the CJS is **£309m per year**.

In seeking explanations for these statistics and ways to address disproportionality in the CJS, Lammy outlined three principles. Firstly, since fairer treatment is achieved through transparency, decision-making procedures must be subject to external scrutiny. Second (and relatedly), work must be done to improve trust in the CJS among Black and minoritised communities. As things stand, a trust deficit partly accounts for the disproportionate number of Black and minoritised defendants pleading not guilty, and thereby foreclosing the possibility of reduced sentences and any intervention strategies which are contingent on a guilty plea. In relation to reoffending rates, research shows that prisoners who believe they are being treated fairly are more likely to respect rules in custody and less likely to reoffend on release (Beijersbergen et al. 2016). Finally, people and agencies outside the CJS – including parents and local communities – have a responsibility to support those who have entered the CJS. These principles informed a set of 35 recommendations, including:

- If CJS agencies cannot provide an evidence-based explanation for apparent disparities between ethnic groups, then reforms should be introduced to address those disparities. This principle of 'explain or reform' should apply to every CJS institution.
- A 'deferred prosecution' model should be adopted which provides interventions before pleas are entered rather than after.
- The system for sealing criminal records employed in many US states should be adopted. Individuals should be able to have their case heard either by a judge or a body like the Parole Board, which would then decide whether to seal their record. There should be a presumption to look favourably on those who committed crimes either as children or young adults, but who can demonstrate that they have changed since their conviction.
- The Ministry of Justice (MoJ) and Department of Health (Doha) should work together to develop a method to assess the maturity of offenders entering the justice system up to the age of 21. The results of this assessment should inform the interventions applied to any offender in this cohort, including extending the support structures of the youth justice system (YJS) for offenders over the age of 18 who are judged to have low levels of maturity.

There have been various statutory responses to the report. In 2018 the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) published fresh statistics on race and the CJS (Ministry of Justice, 2018). These statistics reinforced the picture painted in the Lammy Review, with Black and minoritised groups being over-represented at many stages throughout the CJS.[2] The greatest disparity was evident for stop and search, arrests, custodial sentencing and the prison population, with Black people being over-represented most acutely. Another update was published by the MoJ in early 2020. *Tackling Racial Disparity in the Criminal Justice System: 2020 Update* sought to directly address the principles and recommendations of the Lammy Review. It reported on the formation of a trust working group within the Home Office and the Cabinet Office Race Disparity Unit (RDU). This group commissioned the Cabinet Office's Open Innovation Team, which promotes closer relationships between policy and academia across government, to survey the existing evidence on trust. Furthermore, Edward Agar, the Minister with responsibility for race disparity at the time, held a two-part roundtable with external stakeholders from Black-led and -focused organisations, including those with lived experience of the CJS, to listen and record any examples of best practice in restoring confidence.

The working group found that trust in the ability and intentions of CJS staff and representatives was key, though sounded a slightly defensive note in contending that, however well-intended or progressive a set of processes may be, many people will still be unhappy about their experiences in the CJS because of their association with negative experiences and outcomes. Strategies for boosting levels of trust included 'explaining in simple terms what is happening, why, and what to expect next' (2020: 10) and increasing the number of human interactions (including a greater number of restorative 'human behaviours' such as apologising and admitting fault).

As well as wider efforts to respond to and implement the recommendations contained in the Lammy Review, individual services have developed their own programmes addressed to the issue of disproportionality. For example, in 2020 Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) launched a Race Action Programme that focused on five key tasks:

1. **Creating safe spaces and support for staff and service users.**
2. **Reviewing and enhancing the HMPPS learning and development offer.**
3. **Reviewing Diversity and Inclusion structures and policies**
4. **Improving recruitment and career progression**
5. **Greater engagement and consultation with Black and minoritised-led third sector partners.** (HMPPS 2020)

Despite these various strategies, a number of the agencies and services responsible have fallen short of fully implementing Lammy's recommendations. In 2023, the Prison Reform Trust (PRT) published 'Lammy Five Years On', highlighting a number of shortcomings in official responses to Lammy's recommendations. More specifically, while Lammy's third recommendation called on the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) and CJS agencies to publish all available data pertaining to ethnicity, there has been no significant change in the volume of ethnicity-related data regularly published. This shortcoming has been attributed to incomplete and/or unreliable data, as well as differences in how data are interpreted. Additionally, the PRT found that one of Lammy's most noteworthy recommendations, referred to simply as 'explain or reform', had been responded to unevenly and inconsistently. The recommendation asked all

2 For more on the disproportionate representation and experiences of diverse groups as victims and offenders, see: Davies et al. (2017); for more on the resistance of the criminal justice system to reform, see Greer and McLaughlin (2023, 2018, 2014).

CJS agencies to offer 'an evidence-based explanation for apparent disparities between ethnic groups'. In the absence of any such explanation, 'reforms should be introduced to address such disparities'. Despite a full commitment from the MoJ, the PRT argues that the inconsistency of CJS agencies in following the recommendation, epitomised by the failure of the UK government to identify a single criminal justice policy that has been amended in response to an equality impact assessment, amounts to corporate negligence (PRT 2023: 7).

Unsurprisingly, with key recommendations implemented in an inconsistent, uneven and unsystematic way, official responses have had little impact on levels of ethnic disproportionality in the Youth Justice System (YJS) and Criminal Justice System (CJS). For example, for the year ending March 2022, 39% of 18-to-24-year-olds in custody were from BAME backgrounds, with the disproportionality being even more pronounced for those under the age of 18 – 48% for children and young people from BAME backgrounds (MoJ 2023).

Place-Specific Challenges Across the Four London Boroughs

Child Poverty and Deprivation

Much research refers to the correlation between poverty and the increased likelihood of involvement with the criminal justice system. People from Black, Asian and minoritised communities are more likely to reside in impoverished areas and those characterised by a high level of need. The Child Poverty Action group has suggested that the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these issues. Islington is the most deprived local area in London for child poverty and the 6th most deprived local authority area in London (for all ages) (Indices of Deprivation, 2019). Hackney has the highest proportion of areas within the most deprived 10% nationally (11% of its LSOAs). It is ranked as the 78th most deprived authority in England. Two-fifths of all children in Haringey were living below the poverty line in the lead up to the pandemic. These new statistics, published by End Child Poverty (2021), also reveal that this was one of the highest rates in the country during the period between April 2019 and March 2020.

School Exclusions

Children who are excluded from schools are more likely to have poorer longer-term outcomes. They are also more likely to become involved in the criminal justice system. Black and minoritised children are more likely to be subject to school exclusions. In Haringey, Black children and children with Special Educational Needs and/or Disability (SEND) are disproportionately affected by exclusions, the risk of exclusion and alternative provision as confirmed by the review 'Alternative Provision in review Haringey 2020-2023: A Model for Change'. In Hackney, its permanent exclusion rate stood at 0.13 per cent of the school population according to 2018-2019 data, higher than all its neighbouring boroughs. There is also much focus on the reduction of exclusions in Camden and Islington. In Camden Black children are 1.8, and mixed-heritage children 1.6, times more likely to face permanent exclusion. In Islington, in 2019/20, the rate for Black pupils was 1.8 times the average for all pupils.

Involvement in the Youth Justice System

Local data shows that in Camden's Youth Justice Service (YJS), Black children are 2.5 times more likely to receive a substantive outcome and mixed-heritage children 1.8 times. Black children also have the highest rate of reoffending in Camden at 2.8. In Hackney, its data analysis illustrates that Black children are 2.6 times more likely to be arrested than White children. Between March 2019 to April 2021, 90% of those given a custodial sentence in Hackney were from minoritised backgrounds. In Haringey, Black children are 5.5 more likely to receive a custodial sentence, whilst in Islington, mixed-heritage children have higher custody rates than most other groups of children (3.5 per 1,000 10–17-year-olds in 2017/18 to 2020/21, second highest behind the Black ethnic group).

Tackling Disproportionality in the Four London Boroughs

Islington Borough Council has a strong vision to address inequalities and has designed and implemented a number of programmes with a view to addressing the disproportionate representation of the Borough's Black and minority ethnic children and young people in the CJS. Its overarching strategy for a 'Fairer Islington' focuses 'on creating a place where everyone, whatever their background, has the opportunity to reach their potential and enjoy a good quality of life'. This approach is consistent with the local authority's commitment, through its Youth Safety Strategy (2020–25) to make Islington one of the safest boroughs in London, where children become neither victims nor perpetrators of crime. The strategy was explicit in identifying certain groups of children – including Black Caribbean, Black African and mixed-heritage Black Caribbean/White British – as being more vulnerable due to their experiences of discrimination and due to other factors that contribute to their overrepresentation in the Youth Justice System.

In addition, Islington has led on some important initiatives to tackle disproportionality. One key example is highlighting the disproportionate use of custodial sentences in relation to Black and mixed-heritage boys, which resulted in Islington introducing a disproportionality paragraph in Pre-Sentence Reports to highlight the issue to magistrates and sentencers. This intervention contributed to proportionate reductions in custodial sentencing in the borough. Islington was the first borough in the country to adopt this approach and many other areas in London and beyond have followed its lead.

Haringey Borough Council has also made attempts to address racial disproportionality in its Youth Justice System. Recognising that 47% of the caseload for its Youth Justice Service come from the Black community, despite this group representing only 28% of the population in the borough, members of Haringey's Children and Children and young people's Scrutiny Panel were asked to conduct a review which sought to identify the reasons for the overrepresentation of specific minority groups in the YJS. The Review's aims were aligned with Haringey Borough Council's Corporate Plan and, more specifically, Priority 1 ("Enable every child and young person to have the best start in life, with high quality education") and Objective 5 ("To work with partners to prevent and reduce more serious crime, in particular youth crime and gang activity").

The subsequent report, *Children and Young People's Scrutiny Panel's 2016/17: Scrutiny Review on Disproportionality within the Youth Justice System*,[3] made 12 recommendations, including: increased partnership working; a review of processes to ensure that all duties are being performed in accordance with the Equalities Act; extra efforts to work with headteachers and school governors on the issue of school exclusions; and the introduction of a reverse mentoring scheme, whereby police officers who are new to the area are mentored by a local young person. In addition, Haringey's *Young People at Risk Strategy 2019–2029* focuses specifically on improving outcomes for young Black men, including reducing the disproportionate impact of Serious Youth Violence (SYV) on this group of children and young people.

The *Hackney Youth Justice Plan 2022–2025* includes a commitment to develop 'anti-racist practice and work to reduce the disproportionality that Black and global majority children experience' (2022). Key datasets to be monitored here pertained to Stop and Search (and use of force), Education and exclusion, plus the Children/Family Service and Looked-After Children. Another priority area in relation to disproportionality was alternatives to custody, with the local authority pledging financial and logistical support to both the London Accommodation Pathfinder Service and the London Resettlement Project. Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation (HMIP) thematic inspection report, *The Experiences of Black and Mixed Heritage Boys in the Youth Justice System (2021)*[4] flagged several examples of good practice from Haringey.

3 https://www.minutes.haringey.gov.uk/documents/s96560/Scrutiny%20Report%20October%202017.pdf

4 https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmiprobation/inspections/black-and-mixed-heritage-boys/

In November 2018 Hackney launched *Improving Outcomes for Young Black Men*, an ambitious, ten-year (phased) plan with the central objective of addressing inequalities for Black boys and young Black men. Working in partnership with key services and agencies, the plan identified three key areas around which proactive partnership working would be oriented: education, mental health (for children and adults), and reducing risk of harm. For the latter, the central objective was to work collectively to introduce new forms of governance that would lead to better rehabilitation support for offenders, fewer victims of crime among young Black men, plus reducing levels of gang involvement and rates of offending for this group.

The centrepiece of Camden's disproportionality-related initiatives is *Tackling Inequalities and Disproportionality (2020)*, a working group encompassing voluntary/community organisations, councillors and public health experts, set up in summer 2020 to examine and address the ways that structural inequalities were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.[5] The borough's Race Equality Action Plan, the impetus for which was provided by the wider Tackling Inequalities and Disproportionality initiative, included 30 concrete actions which aimed to tackle the structural, systemic and organisational barriers preventing BAME staff from accessing opportunities equally. For children and young people, the local authority entered into partnership with the Black Curriculum, who worked with primary and secondary schools in the borough to broaden curricula by including non-white, non-European perspectives. In 2020 Camden's YOS was inspected by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation and received praise for the progress it had achieved against its three-year strategic plan, including the need to address the 'disproportionality of representation by children of Black and minority ethnic heritage' (2020: 15).

Camden YJS had their anti-racist action plan signed off by cabinet in December 2020. The plan highlighted the commitment to identify, challenge and change practice that may lead to disproportionate outcomes for certain groups. Camden YJS have implemented the deferred exclusion programme for children who otherwise would be permanently excluded from schools, offering an opportunity to retain their placement if they engage with intervention. Camden YJS has also seen an increase in the proportion of black and mixed heritage children receiving out of court disposals and a reduction in the overrepresentation of black and mixed heritage children in the YJS cohort generally.

5 https://www.local.gov.uk/case-studies/tackling-inequalities-and-disproportionality-camden-council

Methodological Approach and Data Analysis

Methodological Approach and Data Analysis

The project presents qualitative findings from in depth interviews/focus groups with 20 children and young people, seven mentors, five practitioners and three parents/carers.

Underpinning Ethos – Collaboration and Co-production

The project was co-designed and co-produced with representatives from the four London boroughs and Wipers, the VCS partner, a Black-led Organisation with extensive experience working directly with socially excluded children and young people with complex needs and from diverse communities. The partnership shares a commitment to finding new ways to support children and children and young people outside of the usual youth justice model and this approach ran through and defined the project from start to finish. The collaboration remains determined to do things differently and the commitment to engaging children and children and young people and their parents/carers underpinned the project's delivery. Through co-production, co-design and consultation activities, every effort was made to support children and young people to feel empowered and more independent and in control of the services they receive.

Participant Selection and Engagement

Participants initially were selected by the boroughs for inclusion in the intensive mentoring programme. Table 1 includes the total number of children and young people who engaged as mentees with the programme, broken down by borough, gender and whether or not they completed the programme or disengaged:

Table 1

	Camden	Hackney	Haringey	Islington	Total
Engaged	11	11	7	17	46
Male	7	11	7	16	41
Female	4	0	0	1	5
Disengaged	5	3	0	3	11
Completed	6	8	7	14	35

The breakdown of children and young people who were identified as possible participants in the research project, who were subsequently engaged by the research team, and who were ultimately interviewed is included in Table 2.

It should be noted that not all of the children and young people interviewed for the research project were enrolled in the intensive mentoring programme. Parents/carers, mentors and practitioners who participated in interviews are also included below:

Table 2

	Camden	Hackney	Haringey	Islington	Total
Total YP identified	3	8	4	17	32
Total YP engaged	2	6	2	14	24
Total YP interviewed	2	4	2	12	20
Male YP	1	4	2	8	15
Female YP	1	0	0	4	5
Parent/Carer	0	1	0	2	3
Practitioner	1	0	1	3	5
Mentor					7
Total interviews					35

It is useful here to provide some detail and reflection on the engagement and interview process. Once participants were signed up to the intensive mentoring programme, mentors made a judgement – largely based on engagement with the mentoring process and self-confidence – about their suitability to participate in the research project.

The aim was to contribute to filling the knowledge gap around the lived experience of disproportionality from those it affects most. Experience from previous projects with vulnerable children and young people indicated that we would not automatically be a trusted source, and that work would need to be done to encourage children and young people on the mentoring programme to engage with the research project. We decided early on, therefore, that it would be necessary to engage through the mentors, with whom the YPs did or would have an existing trusting relationship, in order to gain access to the YPs.

Our ongoing collaboration with the Wipers mentors enabled us continually to refine our approach and co-produce a bespoke engagement plan for each young person. On this basis, we developed a three-stage engagement process, based on the principle of embedding co-production (see Appendix 1 for more detail).

Embedding Co-Production

In addition to co-producing the engagement plan for each young person, co-production activities took place throughout the research process to ensure the voices of the children and children and young people were prioritised, that questions were being framed in the right way and articulated in the right language, and that mentors and practitioners were fully on board with the research project. Through these processes the project team engaged with the following (see Appendix 1 for more detail):

1. **Interview Preparation:**
    - Interview questions were drafted by the research team and shared with Islington partners for comment and feedback
    - Amended interview questions were shared with Wipers mentors for comment and feedback, to ensure the use of young people-accessible language.
    - Agreed interview questions were shared with service leads across the four London boroughs for final comment.

2. **Interview and Analysis:**
    - 20 children and young people, 3 parents/carers, 5 practitioners, 7 mentors.
    - Interviews professionally transcribed verbatim and analysed by the research team.
3. **Reporting and Recommendations:**
    - Emerging findings presented to children and young people and practitioners from the four London boroughs at the Programme Graduation event.
    - Feedback from Graduation event incorporated into Research Report.
    - Research Report Findings and emerging Recommendations shared with Islington partners for comment and feedback.
    - Agreed Recommendations shared with service leads across the four London boroughs for final comment.

Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis

Semi-structured interviews were the principal method of qualitative data collection. Full informed consent was sought from participants and data were anonymised as quickly and as fully as possible. An open, conversational approach was employed in order to let the participant account shape the data gathered. Interviews were in depth and free-flowing and lasted between 30 and 90 minutes. Interviews were audio recorded (with the prior consent of all participants) and professionally transcribed verbatim.

In total, more than 200,000 words of first-person accounts from children and young people from minoritised (mostly Black and mixed heritage) backgrounds was collated and analysed by the research team. The aim was to examine participants' lived experiences of disproportionality. Each interview transcript was analysed thematically and coded to identify the core and axial categories that inform our empirical analysis (Cresswell 1994). A list of emerging themes and sub-themes was developed and reviewed by the research team on an ongoing basis. To optimise inter-coder reliability, transcripts were read and analysed by more than one member of the research team.

Aware of the researcher's active role in interpreting data to produce research findings, members of the research team repeatedly revisited and re-analysed data, inter-coded each other's interviews and reflected, both individually and collectively, on emergent themes and categories.

Risks and Mitigations

From the outset we knew an engagement lead would be needed due to the resource- and time-intensive nature of working with vulnerable children and young people.

Many of the children and young people involved with the intensive mentoring programme had chaotic lives and little or no trust in a 'system' they saw as profoundly oriented against them. Making it clear that the research team was not part of that system, but rather a group of professional and independent researchers who wanted to hear their stories in their words, was paramount.

Ultimately, by anticipating many of the challenges in advance, and working collaboratively with mentors and practitioners throughout the project, many risks – particularly that of non-engagement – could be mitigated.

Children and Young People's Lived Experience of Disproportionality

Children and Young People's Lived Experience of Disproportionality

General Reflections on Disproportionality

What the Children and Young People Said

In line with this project's aims and objectives, all of the children and young people interviewed were open to Children's Services within the local authorities and most were involved in some way with the criminal justice process. This was through and on the basis of some form of offending behaviour. A key concern in this project was to try and understand how the complex interdependencies of youth offending – prejudice, youth subculture, labelling, school, peer pressure, economic precarity, the police and the courts, structural inequality – interact and are experienced in the lives of children and young people from minoritised backgrounds (mostly Black and mixed heritage). To do so, the project sought to capture the lived experience of disproportionality for a group that is over-represented at every stage of the criminal justice process.

Children and young people's general reflections on disproportionality were often tied to perceived inequality and unfairness around a number of outcomes. Some of the children and young people focused on the issue of unequal rights:

> **I know it for a matter of fact that the difference between a Black person and a white person, is so different and even though Black people do have more rights compared to back then, but they will never be treated the same as a white person. I was just going to say even if they're in the same boat, a Black person will always be treated terribly compared to that white person if they were in the same boat (YP5).**

Underlying sentiments like this was a sense of being held to different standards:

> **It's like, if a couple of us make mistakes, people are going to always look down on us on our colour... (YP19).**

This difference was unpacked through comparisons with other minoritised ethnic groups:

> **I think the Asian community have it a bit better than us. Because as you know now, Rishi Sunak is Prime minister. And he's Asian. So, I feel like he's going to essentially favour his own people, if you like. You know what I mean?... It'll have positive effect on some people and very negative on some others (YP19).**

For a mentor, this inequality between children and young people from different minoritised ethnic backgrounds was reflected in the lack of attention paid to young Black men who are succeeding in their work.

> **There is a lot of people out there that are doing the job and they're doing it really, really well. We just don't get recognized for it. And I think as well, what doesn't help is when the media portrays all these young people, especially young Black men, negatively. Like, there's never a positive story. They just want to focus on the negatives and that is not good (Mentor).**

Practitioners were generally not optimistic about the likelihood of change and cautioned that simply talking about disproportionality would not be sufficient to effect real progress. As one put it:

> **It can be very fashionable to talk about race in the workplace and disproportionality around the kids. But when we are talking about implementing it, I think it's where it gets worse, because the ones with the powers... like to talk about 'Yeah we are going to do these things and this is what we want to do', while actually doing it is a completely different thing (Prac 3).**

For another practitioner, whose comments once more implicitly conjured notions of intergenerational trauma, the resignation of parents that nothing would change made envisioning that change even more challenging for their children.

> **It's very hard when you're talking to a family member and they're like, "Oh, yeah, that's just how it is," I'm like, "No, baby, it's not. No, you shouldn't accept that."... Nine times out of 10 your parents say, "oh, just shush. Just do what you're told," because they don't want the aggravation, because they've dealt with it themselves. And then the young people are not educated, so they're going to be ignorant and they're going to... I think more education needs to be done, and then maybe when they are stopped by police, they're not going to come out with their attitudes. They're going to be educated where they can actually answer them correctly, and the police are going to step back and be like, "Oh, okay" (Prac 5).**

Locality and Local Services

What the Children and Young People Said

Many of the young participants shared experiences of what they viewed as disproportionate suspicion and surveillance when using facilities and services in their community. The most routine activities like shopping could bring into sharp relief a racialised sense of mistrust from shopkeepers.

> **Mostly when I have my head up there will be a security guard following me down the aisle and stuff. Pretending like he's not after me (YP15).**
>
> **There are these times when I walk into a shop and then the shop assistant, they just have their eyes on you the entire time and they just follow you around and it's just uncomfortable. And are there other people in the shop at that time who are mostly white? This has been going on for years, but the police are in my area a lot. But it's almost like if it's someone who's not Black, then they kind of just ignore it (YP6).**

Another young person shared a specific example, where racialised mistrust while shopping was ultimately neutralised by the presence of a white friend:

> **So, I was putting the chocolate away and I think one of the shop assistants came in and said, 'why are you stealing'? And I was telling him that no, I wasn't stealing. And then he looked at the white girl next to me and he was like, leave it. And then he told us to get out. I feel like if the white girl wasn't there, it could have been worse (YP5).**

These examples illustrate how shops could be places young participants were routinely suspected of frequenting in order to commit transgressions. In some cases, the transgression was being in a shop in the first place. As the parent of one young participant put it:

> **I would say, 'we live here, he's just gone to the shop to buy something'. And they're like, oh, because he fit the description, but now on clarification, he doesn't fit the description anymore'... and this is all the time. But if you come to where somebody lives, you would expect them to be moving around doing their everyday things – going to the shop for milk or biscuits or ice pops and whatever... So, you wouldn't expect to be stopped and searched in that instance because... this is where you live. You're not in a foreign place where you shouldn't be, but you're still acting suspicious. I don't know what's so suspicious about going in a shop anyway. But yeah, so that's how it is where we live (Parent of YP18).**

Potential tensions and conflicts also arose around the use of local community spaces, where young participants felt targeted by other groups of children and young people on the basis of their skin colour.

> **I went out and a group of white kids were just screaming at me and my friends. When we retaliated, they were all confused. But as soon as we try to retaliate, everyone runs up and tries to protect these kids as if we are about to hurt them. Literally, we are not close enough to them to do anything, and we were not going to do anything, but they all come to us to leave them alone or to go home, trying to usher them and calm them down (YP7).**

The lack of community facilities in some of the areas was also raised as a challenge, though not all participants agreed on the value of, for example, a local youth club. Some viewed them as safe spaces for engaging in pro-social activities, while others recalled that internal community spaces, just like external ones, can be subject to territorialism and, as such, become sites of potentially violent conflict.

> **All I could say was just to have more youth clubs. Because I feel like the more stuff to do in youth clubs will keep young people off the streets like, in my local youth club, there's table tennis pool, there's a studio, there's a dance hall, there're laptops you can go on at that, there's a lunchroom. I feel like if every youth club has that, there's no other reason why people wouldn't go there (YP8).**
>
> **In my eyes, youth clubs don't really help ... Because if you think about a youth club, there's been mergers between youth clubs. Youth clubs is where the drama happens. Everyone wants to own the youth club. (YP12).**

A key observation, exemplified by one young participant, was that a perceived disconnect between local service providers and local service users meant that services provided were not always the services most needed. A more interactive and collaborative approach to the design and delivery of key services would strengthen relations between local authorities and residents, increase awareness of the types of services available and how to access them, and generate a greater understanding of the services that are needed the most and would have the greatest impact.

> **I feel like if a council took a day, then walked around the neighbourhood and got to talk to the actual people of the community, they'd be able to understand and handle a lot of problems better. Yeah, because realistically for all, I feel like a problem with the council, it's not something to do with our community, it's something to do with multiple communities at once (YP11).**

Case Study – importance of Early Intervention and Safeguarding Approach

I do think early intervention and response is really important in terms of trajectory and how young people enter, and whether they enter, the Youth Justice system. We have reviewed Serious Case Reviews from all across the country in relation to young people affected by youth violence and exploitation...so that we can learn from them. It's been quite shocking in that actually things weren't responded to when young people were five, six. So, for example, if there are safeguarding issues at home in terms of neglect, physical chastisement, physical abuse, sometimes it's more often than not that there might be no further action from Children's Social Care or the school haven't made a referral for a safeguarding issue. It's like you can see there's a pattern building, and then the young person gets arrested, let's say, for drugs offences and now they're deemed a criminal, when actually it's a welfare issue. What would have happened, actually, if there was intervention when it was the safeguarding issue?

Practitioner 2, Islington

All practitioners interviewed for this project talked openly about disproportionality. Most had seen the adverse impact of this, and some had experienced it directly. Nevertheless, some pointed out that local services can function quite differently, and that not all services prioritise addressing disproportionality to the same extent. As one practitioner put it.

> **Maybe other services don't work in the same way that we do. There's always space to improve, and I'm not saying that Islington is the only service to really recognise and push and do work around disproportionality. It's in our thinking and it's in our practice, but I think across society there also needs to be a lot of work around how we work and how we support young Black boys and young mixed-heritage boys (Prac 2).**

Despite the high levels of cultural competence and empathy among interviewed practitioners, there were concerns that establishing 'tackling disproportionality' as an organising principle of everyday practice remained a challenge at institutional and systemic levels. One practitioner shared their frustration that several attempts to make disproportionality matter had resulted in little change, and that more needed to be done.

> **I think we do a lot. We could always do more. When the George Floyd thing happened, we had a... BLM group at the time. And that meeting took place once a month... And it would help us look at disproportionality and the impact of racism on the young people. Very quickly, it didn't have any purpose, the meeting, it was kind of like we were just doing it because everybody was doing things after this incident. But it petered out in the end. And they put like a space for it on the end of big team meetings, so people can bring anything to do with disproportionality or discrimination, but no one ever does. I think no one took it by the horns and no one took responsibility (Prac 1).**

'Taking it by the horns' would require the development of a different mindset at institutional level. For one practitioner, a necessary first step in addressing disproportionality in a systemic and sustainable way is accepting and acknowledging that it exists and that something needs to be done about it:

> **We need to have more open conversation about the fact that this exists. Professionals in these spaces need to question it more. We need to be more curious as so why this is happening... I think that if we are not willing to understand its existence, we completely tend to back off from even trying to find a solution (Prac 3).**

Another reinforced the point that addressing the problem requires talking about it openly, and that lots of practitioners feel uneasy with discussing racial prejudice and disproportionality, which in turn limits progress in terms of addressing disproportionate outcomes.

> **I think talking about racism and race can still be awkward for some practitioners, and actually maybe they don't have the confidence in having those discussions or calling it out (Prac 5).**

So even among those practitioner groups committed to producing better outcomes for all at-risk children and young people, including those from minoritised backgrounds, reluctance or discomfort at addressing the existence and extent of disproportionality in an open and sustainable way – and 'calling it out' when they witness it – is constraining the most well-intentioned efforts to raise the visibility of the problem and to co-produce effective solutions.

Recommendations

Locality and Local Services

Recommendations

- Develop a more devolved and multi-faceted approach to community engagement to ensure it is representative and includes the most disadvantaged and vulnerable residents in decision-making about their place.
- Explore different approaches to co-design with children, children and young people and families before commissioning services.
- Enhance the understanding of intergenerational trauma on both child and family as part of a whole family approach to intervention.
- Strengthen practitioners' cultural competency to help establish 'tackling disproportionality' as an organisational principle, increase confidence when discussing it, and create 'safe spaces' to enable better engagement with children and young people and families with complex needs.

Education, Skills and Training

What the Children and Young People Said

Children and young people were very open in talking about their experiences of school and college, especially in relation to treatment which they felt was unfair. A significant proportion of these grievances concerned codes of behaviour which were either discriminatory in themselves or were applied in a partial, selective or discriminatory manner.

Case Study – Disproportionality in School Exclusions

It was an academy type school, so they had different rules for Black boys than white boys. So white boys could have long hair, Black boys had to have short hair no matter what. You couldn't have it in plaits or anything … They were excluding him constantly and he weren't allowed to go back until one of us could go in. We were all working, and they'd give us really strange deadlines to meet that we couldn't meet. 'We've excluded him today, come in at 10 o'clock tomorrow morning, how's that?' I've got to work so can we change the day? Well, if you change the day, he ain't coming back in here.

Parent of YP18, Hackney

In other instances, it was the uneven and partial enforcement of codes along racial lines that caused frustration and could lead to an escalation which may have been informed by stereotyping.

> **I was literally wearing the same clothing as another child, but they were quick to come tell me to take it off or tell me it is inappropriate … When I bugged out, it would be quick to be me being aggressive, but if it was another kid, they would try to analyse why they are upset and try to sort it out. With me, it was quick, I was being aggressive (YP7).**

This reflected a relatively common view among interviewees that they were treated according to different standards in terms of codes of behaviour and regimes of punishment when compared to their white peers.

> **Let's say a teacher tells a Black girl to be quiet but bypasses the white girls or them talking, then that Black person would be that it's probably because I'm Black because they don't see the teacher telling the white people off to stop talking (YP5).**
>
> **Yes. It was me and one of my friends, and they used to exclude me permanently and then they let him go towards the end of year 11, even though we both had the exact same behaviour, we were on the same reports, but I got kicked out and he did not … he is a tall white friend, British (YP10).**
>
> **Yeah, like there would be kids that were ten times worse than me, and they would keep them in school but as soon as I misbehaved they would send me home and they're not even allowed to send pupils home (YP15).**

Case Study – Disproportionality in School Exclusions

We got into a problem with two White girls, and this led to an altercation. And then the next day every single one of us, including the two White girls, went to school. When I went in for my meeting, I was told that I was the leader of a girl gang and that I'm very aggressive. I was the only girl out of the five girls who didn't fight, I was just there. I was just there watching, if anyone dropped anything, I was going to pick it up, hold it for them and leave… But I was the only girl that got excluded out of the five girls. Well, at the time I didn't see it as discrimination or anything, I kind of had a feeling it was going to happen because I was the loudest, the tallest and I was the biggest out of the five girls. So, I kind of had a feeling that if they're going to pinpoint anything on anyone, it's going to be me.

YP14, Islington.

Another dimension of this differential treatment was perceived profiling based on their racial background.

> **I got suspected of being a gang member in school, and then after they started searching me every morning, every break, every lunch and after school. Yeah, four times a day. (On racial profiling in relation to these incidents): The first incident, a hundred percent second incident hundred. Yeah, both incidents? A hundred per cent … With the school one, it turned out my mom didn't know for seven months. And then when my mom found out, my mom got the actual police involved and it turned out that they weren't allowed to do that (YP11).**

Practitioners reinforced the view that children and young people from Black and minoritised backgrounds were judged more harshly and disproportionately excluded from school.

> **He felt like if it was questioned and he was asked... why he was displaying such violent and difficult behaviour at school, he would have been able to explain what it was, and even understand it himself, but he said he was not given any opportunity, and was essentially just left out... Since then, he has not been back to school and he has been coming up to us half a year? ...And whenever we offer mentoring on going back to the school, he is very much like 'But it is going to be the same experience. They don't care about us'. So, he has got a very kind of strong... distrust for the school system and education because he feels like he was completely unsupported. He should have been supported. His behaviour should have been in question and not punished (Prac 3).**

When it came to treatment by peers themselves, the issues identified by interviewees tended to involve overtly racist comments and bullying.

> **...because my hair is frizzy curly, I went into school and this white girl said to me, you look like a monkey. You look like you've been electrocuted. Because I've never... bear in mind I was in year six, so I didn't know how to do my hair. I've been getting the same comments from people from my primary, my secondary school ... and that made me so insecure about myself that I've actually wanted to become white (YP5).**
>
> **In primary school, I used to get called n**ger, fat monkey. I used to get bullied and that. But then when I started to fight back and defend myself, I was always the one getting penalised for it. I was always in detention. Even though I was protecting myself, I was always getting racially bullied (YP19).**

The parent of one interviewee noted threats to the safety of their teenage son tied to the presence of gang members at school.

> **... he was targeted by gang members at school. And he didn't want to get involved – he said no. And he started receiving threats online. Saying that they were going to stab him when they see him, they have a 15-inch knife waiting for him ... 'we are waiting outside for you'. And the school weren't willing to accept it that there was a problem. So, I removed him for his own safety (Parent of YP6).**

In connection with security and safety, one young person felt ambivalent about the presence of police officers in school:

> **And now I'm sitting with a police officer and he's coming to my house, but he's meant to be assigned to the school, and he's coming to my house in his off clothes just to knock my door and talk to my mum about the situation. So, I feel like they both play a part as well. Especially because the police officer in secondary schools, they're quiet, they only come out when there's a problem, but they know every single thing about all of us. Every single problematic person that's in that place, they already know everything about you, you just don't know him. And when a situation happens, you'll see him and you'll be like, oh, I didn't even know he was here. But he's there 24/7 (YP14).**

With a number of children and young people having been permanently excluded from schools, some spoke about the impact of attending a Pupil Referral Unit (PRU).

> **I would say when I was 11, 12, yeah, 10, 11 I stopped going youth clubs because I was in year seven. So, when I got to year seven, I was in mainstream school, then got kicked out and then went to a PRU. I'd say when I went to a PRU, that's when everything changed (YP13).**

One interviewee was very aware of the negative outcomes associated with PRUs, and therefore wanted to avoid attending one at any cost.

> **But yeah, a pupil referral unit (PRU), it's not an option … I forgot what percentage, but like quite a high percentage end up in prison or something. I feel like, by sending someone to a PRU, you're literally saying 'I don't give a fuck about you'. Couldn't care less. Bye … I want to be in a mainstream school again and I feel like I'd actually get my head down this time though (YP16).**

Of the young people who did end up at a PRU, one expressed frustration at the lack of any effective recourse around their permanent exclusion from school, linking this to their racial background.

> **And he was telling me that I could appeal and speak to the MPs of my area, but nothing still happened. But I had to still go to the PRU that they sent me to. But I haven't been back to school since then. No, but the situation though was unfair. I wouldn't lie and say I was a top student in school – sometimes I was a bit bad behaved and that. But the way they kicked me out was not fair. I think the education system is unfair. Not just my head teacher. It's like that for many other Black kids, not just me… I don't know why they kicked me out (YP13).**

Another issue raised in relation to experiences at school was Special Educational Needs (SEN) provision. For the parent of child on the autistic spectrum, the grouping together of children with SEN with those with behavioural issues (which are unrelated to SEN) was problematic.

> **… if they did have schools that are supposed to be for kids on the spectrum, but those schools are also in conjunction with kids that have behaviour problems. So, I think the two should be separate – the ones that have behavioural problems and the ones that are on the spectrum. It's just not beneficial to those children. It just isn't. They limit their access to a decent education. Actually, that's what it does (Parent of YP18).**

The young person in question struggled to find an educational setting that was compatible with their needs, with their mother expanding on the kind of provision that they sought.

> **I more went to these places for trials to see if I would stay in that school and at the end I said no because it wasn't really a good fit (YP18).**
>
> **We just tried a few but it's over. We were going back from age 12 to 16 … Something that looked more like a mainstream. He always used to say that that's what he wanted. Something that was more, you sit at the table, you do your work. (Parent of YP18)**

The children and young people had lots of suggestions with regard to improving their experiences in education.

> **They're not showing you to sign up your provisional, and I try look for a little weekend job. You have to find that yourself (YP8).**
>
> **So probably build more and help invest more into places for them to learn after school or even on weekends, and holiday. Whenever they want to learn, they'll have an option to learn (YP11).**

For me, I have to see it for me to understand it. I can't sit down and write all the time; it drives me insane. I struggle, even as an adult. But I know what my learning style is. I know that I need to learn visually, otherwise I can't understand it. Or practically. I just hate people telling me what to do (YP16).

Case Study – the Impact of School Exclusion in the absence of Alternative Provision

Like you get kicked out of school, they don't put you on anything, where are you going? Where are you going? You get kicked out without your GCSEs; you are not leaving with qualifications. And I feel like the school system is mixed with the police system, horrible. Because you don't teach me how to get a mortgage. You don't teach me how to drive, you don't teach me... so what do I do after this? You don't help me apply for colleges that much. You don't do anything. So now I feel like I can't get a job. Yes, I'm going to go sell drugs because how else am I going to make money? How else am I going to have something to do? How else am I going to keep my mental health correct and on the right path? Or am I just going to stay at home every day, all day? And then on top of that, they need more safe spaces. Not youth clubs, safe spaces.

YP15, Islington

Recommendations

Education, Skills and Training

Recommendations

- Continue working to reduce school exclusions, which could involve trialling programmes such as the innovative but rare 'No School Exclusions' approach in Dunraven school in Lambeth.
- Provide families with clearer signposting about the support they can access when children and young people are facing difficulties at school.
- Continue working with teachers to optimise awareness of conscious and unconscious biases and how these might contribute to disproportionate outcomes for at risk children and young people.
- Encourage more local businesses to create training, education and employment opportunities for children and young people from Black and minoritised communities, including those who have graduated from the mentoring programme.

The aim in this project was to capture the lived experience of disproportionality amongst these children and young people. While the interviews were with the children and young people themselves, their parents/carers, their mentors and practitioners, many of their comments related to the CJS – particularly the police and the courts. In the following sections, we highlight findings relating to these areas of the CJS. Although interviewing police officers or legal professionals lay outside the scope of this research project, the findings provide a solid basis for further empirical investigation and analysis and raise important issues for consideration.

Police and Policing

What the Children and Young People Said

On the topic of policing, many children and young people's experiences of disproportionality concerned what they perceived to be unfair profiling in the context of stop and search. The following four interviewees commented on their general impressions of police decision-making around stop and search.

> **I think it is more or less racial profiling, because you could get a group of Black people and a group of white people, and they will not stop and search the white people, but they will stop and search the Black people first, if they stop and search both groups … I also think officers are more likely to use weapons on Black people (YP9).**
>
> **I feel like when they see more of a coloured person and then a white person, they are more likely to stop and search the Black guy. They just find them more suspicious for some reason, I do not know why (YP10).**
>
> **Like with a White person, I feel they ask more questions, but with a Black person it's straight away, "Oh, there was something wrong in this area and you match the description." So, if we all look the same, if that's really the case, then everyone should match the description for everything and everyone should really be arrested (YP14).**
>
> **For example, they'll see a robbery just happening in the area. Even though I'm literally walking down the street, going somewhere, just left my house. For example, they can use that to say that I match the description of the person that's just done the robbery and stop and search me and make me feel attacked and weak as seen by people just walking past looking at me like I'm a bad person (YP12).**

Other interviewees recalled first-hand experiences of stop and search, and how they felt they were treated differently because of their racial background.

> **There has been some times where I have been stopped and searched, and I was the only one and the police were dealing with me a lot longer than they did with friends. But other than that, every time I was stopped and searched, I was with some of my mixed friends or some of my Black friends is. The thing is, I am the only one getting stopped and searched out of the group, and to tell you the truth, it is pretty uncomfortable … Because the police officers were a lot more rude. That, I have gotten used to, being around my area or being around this area. It is just something you have got to go with, you know (YP9).**

As with other aspects of disproportionality and perceived unfair treatment, a sense of resignation came through during some conversations about policing.

> **I remember this one time this boy from our college was supposed to meet up with me because he broke my phone, and he got my screen repaired. And when he came out to me, because there was police in Finsbury Park, so they told him to stand against the Arsenal shop right next to the station and they started patting him down. And I was just watching him patting down and it's like when someone gives up it's like he wasn't bothered. It's like he was so used to it (YP5).**

Beyond this, a number of interviewees pointed to differential treatment in the way that stop and searches were carried out.

> **… because I'd be seeing so many shady white boys walking around my area and it's not like they get stopped and searched, they could walk past police and it's like the police bypass them and they look so shady (YP5).**

> **I don't expect they're telling them: 'every young Black person you see just to stop them'. (But) you rarely see any young white children getting stopped on the road to be honest, they have to be doing something. They don't stop them. I've been with one of my white friends and they cuffed me and not him (YP10).**

This perception of racial profiling by police extended to decisions around the stopping of vehicles, with one young person explaining how police decisions to stop Black children and young people were informed by, and subsequently reinforced, wider perceptions of Black criminality.

> **The undercover cars drove on to the pavement in front of me and my friends and said, "You, wait there." Out of all the White people I was with, they singled me out and said, "Wait there." They didn't even search the White people. I was wearing shorts and t-shirt. All my White friends, they were wearing balaclavas hoodies, full-out tracksuits. And I was wearing a shorts and t-shirt. And I still got stopped ... Do you know what I feel like? I feel like police do it out of boredom. And the reason they tease the Black people to stop is because no one's going to bat an eyelid because people think Black people are criminals. So that's why I feel like when the police are on their little patrols, they say, 'Yeah, young Black person, if we stop him, everyone's just going to think he's a criminal anyway, let's pursue it' (YP19).**

The issue of 'hard stops' by police was also raised in relation to unfair and unwarranted treatment. The descriptions of two instances, in particular, are worth quoting at length.

> **I was coming back from Oxford Street on an E-scooter, and then I got dragged off and put on the ground just for a stop and search ... But the force is unnecessary. It is the way they handle a teenager. If they just ask you to stop, I would have stopped, but they just dragged me off ... (Do you feel that unfair treatment was down to you being profiled?') ... Obviously we tried to challenge it, I have spoken to some of the officers that we knew. But again, nothing. You are never winning in that situation, I believe (YP10).**
>
> **So, I had just left my house with a friend. My friend had gone to the shop, and I am riding around. And I hear the sirens and I look behind me, I hear them zooming in front of me and I look but I have my airpods in so I'm not hearing what they are saying. I go to turn to the pavement, and they think I am going to go to the pavement and go. So, they hit the back of my tyre with their car and I fell onto the pavement. And they got out and grabbed me and done all of this stuff. But then there was a bit where there was a good cop and bad cop. One of them grabbed me and pushed me up against a wall and put their knee on my leg and all of this stuff. The other police officer was like, we don't know if he is up to anything. We can't see anything, and we don't know if he has a knife on him. So then why are you doing this? So, he actually told his colleague to calm himself (YP2).**

For one mentor, while the issue of profiling and differential treatment had improved slightly, it remained a problem.

> **I have had similar things, and I am 50+. I had that as well. Thirty or 40 years later it's still the same treatment. It is still the same biases. I think it has got a bit better because you can hold the police more accountable nowadays. Like there are bodycams. But in terms of the whole attitude, in terms of the community, if they see a community that's deprived like a certain way, it's like anything goes, you won't be treated the same as if you were in a posh area. (Mentor for YP2).**

One parent broadened this critique to encompass the entire CJS:

> **I'm not against them, I just know they do not function properly, and they work against certain groups of people: women, Black boys and all sorts of things. It was like that when I was growing up. So that's all I've ever seen from the police. And I'm quite a lot older now and I've never seen it change. They've done different types of recruitment drives and it's embedded in that. Yeah, it is a corrupt system because I don't really see how it benefits people, but we've been victims of crime. We've called them, they've done nothing. If you're a victim of crime, every victim of crime should get some level of justice. We get nothing (Parent of YP18).**

Unfair, differential treatment included, and in some cases directly gave rise to, escalations, with consequences ranging from handcuffing to being tasered.

> **... they would treat them more harshly by trying to put him in handcuffs, which will make the individual get a bit more angry. Which would make the police officer more harsh towards the individual, which lead to only the worse outcomes (YP20).**
>
> **... some police officers love to drag it, they love to say stuff ... They love escalating the situation ... You see the police and the judge and everything? It's a system ... That's how the system is. Police are all a gang ... I've seen stuff happen to kids that are Black as well. When they get arrested and stuff, the police are mad aggressive (YP13).**

Case Study - Profiling and Perceptions of Unfair Treatment

Yeah, a water pistol, it was spraying a girl, a friend, and a neighbour who has a problem with us, he doesn't really like YP 2. He rang up and said there was a Black man outside with a gun. So, we had firearms police at our door, with guns, holding the guns up to our window and YP 2 had to put his hands up and step outside. And I said he is child and they responded that they weren't told that, they were told there was a Black man with a firearm. It's like they hear that initial thing and it is all guns blazing. They have to do their job obviously but, it's upsetting that someone can just say that and they come like that. There was five cars and the way they dragged him outside the house. I was like, 'He is a kid, he is a kid. You don't need to hold him like that, it's a water pistol'. They were like, 'We don't know if it's a gun'. And they pulled him out and he had attitude because of the way they were holding him. They dragged him down the stairs.

Parent of YP2, Islington

Perceptions of unfair, differential treatment by police also existed outside the context of stop and search.

> **Yeah. Happens all the time. If they think someone Black has done something wrong, they will ... The police would drag it. They would keep him in there for hours even though you said shoplifting, you could go to jail for it. I've never seen someone get arrested for shoplifting (YP13).**
>
> **Oh yeah, my friend that's white. This is a big story. So, he got stopped with a knife innit and he got stopped with crack and he got stopped with a lot of stuff. And I think they gave him a warning or something. He didn't even get tagged or something mad like that. I was like, no, that's racist. I know if that happened to me, that's wraps ... I have a lot of friends that are white that do sell drugs and they've never been stopped. But I feel like it's because of the way they look and that they wouldn't expect it. They're still doing something illegal (YP3).**

In terms of the profile of officers they interacted with, interviewees were more likely to associate negative experiences and outcomes with officers from outside London. As one young person put it:

> **Yeah. Most police officers that are from the area, they're calm, they'll talk to you on a calm respectful level. But most of the officers that aren't from London, they'll talk to you like you're below them with no respect (YP11).**

Practitioners echoed the importance of police officers spending time in communities and getting to know the people who live there. For one, community policing was key to establishing trust, improving relationships and recognising the challenges many Black, mixed-heritage and minoritised children and young people face on a daily basis.

> **I think we don't have enough of community policing where the police really know the young people. They spend the time getting to know them and realise that they're not just thugs. I was just like, half of these boys are trying to put food on the table (Prac 3).**

With many children and young people resigned to continued unfair treatment by police officers and the CJS more broadly, some had developed strategies for coping with, and/or mitigating the impact of, this treatment. For two interviewees, the decision to leave home was impacted by possible unfair treatment by police.

> **I don't see police as something to fear, but I don't see them as saviours either because most of the time people are afraid to step outside because they're afraid of getting harassed by police. And most of the time it is Black people (YP11).**
>
> **… all my family sat down my cousins and told them, if you do not have to go anywhere, stay at home, stop going out (YP7).**

Modifying their speech was another tactic, from remaining tight-lipped to reciting their legal rights.

> **I don't want them to have anything on me. So, I'm like know whatever, bro do your thing. That's the reason why most of the time I don't challenge them. Like, you know what bro say nothing (YP3).**
>
> **I've come to like talk my way out of stuff. I knew a couple of my rights now. Like I know what they can do and can't do. Even if sometimes they do it, because they just want to, but I can just be like to them. Because if they say I have to give my name, I don't have to. Obviously, I do, but I don't have to. I'm allowed to video them, and they can't say anything about it. But it makes them more angry so I tend not to do those things. It makes it way worse (YP2).**

Some children and young people had become advocates for knowing one's rights in the context of their families and peer groups.

> **It's like I'm now having that conversation with my niece to say like, 'You've got to make sure you step out your house knowing your rights." Do you know what I mean? And that's really awful to think that you feel that the only way that you can step out your house is by knowing all your rights. Because you don't know whether or not you can trust in that system (YP14).**

Faced with so many complaints from children and young people, one practitioner disclosed how they advise children and young people to use online resources to educate themselves about their rights. The app in question is called Y Stop – a collaboration between charities, lawyers, children and young people, youth workers, community and media organisations (https://y-stop.org/). It is the result of a stop and search project for children and young people, by children and young people, and it seeks to give children and young people the tools to interact with the police safely, equipping them with all the skills and knowledge they need to handle a stop and search. This App, the practitioner explained, had provided one young woman she supports with a useful means of resistance.

> **There's an app called Y-Stop. It gives them all information on if they're stopped, what they can ask, what they can say, what the police can do if they're arrested. It takes them from the beginning right through to court process. She's read it back to back, so she gives the police a hard time and I think they just get up and get in the car and drive off. But I said to her, "It's not that you're giving them a hard time. You know your rights", I said, "And you need to share that with your friends, so you can all enable yourselves" (Prac 5).**

Two interviewees explained how the anticipation of unfair treatment made them less likely to approach a police officer, even when they felt unsafe and/or when they were victims of criminal activity.

> **I don't think they understand that how they treat us outside makes us want to run from them inside ... how I could possibly see them treat my male friends, I don't want to now come to you with a problem, because I already know how it's going to go (YP14).**
>
> **I think Black people feel a lot persecuted when police are involved in their lives and it's because they make you feel that way and they do certain things to make you know you're nothing. So, if we're treating you like this and these are the people that you go to for help, supposed to, then where do you go? (YP18).**

In line with the general air of resignation about unfair treatment, many interviewees were pessimistic about the prospect of meaningful change in police-community relations and disproportionate outcomes.

> **I don't think it's ever going to be fair to be honest ... My kids are going to go and it's going to be worse, but I need to teach them as well. Well, you can't change the system. You just have to grow and change around it. That's corrupt, can't stay in the corrupt system (YP12).**
>
> **I feel like we're too in deep now in 2023 to be telling police officers how they need to change. I feel like it's just a thing where it's just not going to change. You just have to make sure you are doing good and make sure you know your rights. I feel like it's us that needs to change, it's not them. Because if we keep going out on the streets not knowing our rights, we are asking for the police to be telling us certain things ... Because they're too far gone to even think about change (YP14).**

One young person offered a positive account of an encounter with a police officer.

> **... he was actually very cool, very fair. But the way he's approached us, it's like he was one of our friends as well, so he said, 'You all right there, guys? There's been a lot of noise disturbance in the area'. And then at this point back he is asking us to turn the music down and then I would say, yeah, that's cool, whatever. And then he hasn't argued, he hasn't raised his tone, there's no attitude and his voice and stuff and we're having that soft conversation. And then, yeah, after that he left us – just cool (YP3).**

But, as the above examples illustrate, the vast majority of stories were negative. The suggestion that police officers may not be receiving either sufficient training or the right kinds of training was raised repeatedly by practitioners. One recalled an experience of delivering training to officers in the past.

> **Years ago, I was offered an opportunity to go up to Hendon and work with new recruits. I was like, your new recruits don't know how to speak to young people, they're like spouting shit. Kids just want to be talked to – they're human beings – with a little bit of respect and restraint... I remember being there and there was a lot of defensiveness in the room (Prac 3).**

The same practitioner went on to reflect on current gaps in the training offered to police officers.

> **When I was service manager, I'm in the room with borough commanders, I was like, where's your trauma informed training for your police officers? I was like, you need to have similar training to what we have (Prac 3).**

In two of the boroughs, practitioners seek to resolve this disconnect by offering training directly to local police trainees.

> **We run a workshop and they're trainee police officers in Islington and Camden, and we have some of our young people come to the session. We had one on Monday, and one of my young people was talking about his experience of adultification, and the young people were giving advice to the trainee police officers. The hope is that when they qualify, they'll be able to remember that and bring that into their practice. So, yeah, I definitely think that's a really powerful piece of work (Prac 4).**

Recommendations

Police and Policing

Recommendations

- Maintain continuity of staff in community policing to optimise relationship building with local residents and children and young people and mitigate the negative impacts of high levels of staff changes.
- Each police Borough Command Unit should have a Youth Engagement Strategy, which should be co-produced with children and young people of all backgrounds and reviewed at regular intervals.
- MOPAC should consider commissioning a London-wide youth engagement strategy, focussing on the needs of all children and young people and including specific reference to children and young people from Black and minoritised communities.
- Youth Justice/Offending Services should afforded the opportunity to offer training to all new police recruits in their local area to strengthen cultural competence and the ability to interact effectively with children and young people from Black and minoritised communities.

The Courts and Youth Justice System

What the Children and Young People Said

Many of the children and young people's comments about the Youth Justice System (YJS) related to perceived inconsistencies regarding decisions and other outcomes. One interviewee pointed to an inconsistency in sentencing:

> **But I feel like that alone it doesn't make any sense because if you are meant to get one year for having a knife, give every single person one year for having a knife. Don't just range it like, "Oh I'm going to give you two months" (YP5).**

For a number of interviewees, inconsistencies like this were underpinned by the impact of prejudice across the Youth Justice System.

> **Because people see it as let's say for instance, it's someone's first crime, but because of the area they're from or where they live, they're judged, they'll see it as like, we've seen people come from that area or we've seen them in the crime history. They're all the same. I feel like it is prejudice. Prejudice in general (YP11).**

> **I think in terms of racial colour, more dark skinned will get a heftier charge. For example, you would get a Referral Order, or prison basically, and they will pick the highest one of what they believe is necessary … Oh 100% on the judges, 100%. They just want all mixed and coloured in prison. Obviously, that is not with all of them … I think it is just colour, racial. I think because Black people make a name for themselves in terms of drugs, etc., but it does not mean that the whole Black community is bad … That's targeting, to be honest (YP10).**

Sentiments like this were supported by one practitioner, who shared an example of disproportionate sentencing passed on by a colleague.

> **One of my colleagues… works in a YOS [youth offending service] in South London… She was writing a [Pre-Sentence] Report for two co-defendants. One was a young white boy, one was a young Black boy. They were involved in the same offence, but one got custody and one didn't, so I would say that, yeah, that's definitely an issue (Prac 4).**

A mentor reflected on their experiences of working with children and young people involved in the YJS:

> **I think when you get arrested and you get charged with something, it's a done deal. You are that criminal. So, it's not like innocent until proven guilty. That's not been our experience. It's guilty and that prove innocence. So, it's not, the system stinks anyway. It's a rough system (Mentor YP18).**

These levels of perceived and actual inconsistency impacted on levels in trust in the way the YJS operated. As one interviewee commented:

> **I know how the system is. I've been arrested before. I know how they move. But I personally don't trust police and the system, and because the way how they move with most Black people and that, like why should we trust them? (YP13).**

Concerns about prejudice extended to the support provided by Youth Justice/Offending Teams. As one parent explained:

> **So, we've had three, whatever you call them, caseworkers or whatever. We've had three. And the second one was the one that showed us that he thought that we were just a rubbish Black family without actually saying it. He said other things, skating around that and I was really offended. So, I rang him and said, "I don't want to work with this person because has assumption saying things to me like you need to do better." What are you talking about? You don't know how much I'm doing, so how much better you need to do better. It is your job to do better for each person, young person, Black, white or whatever that comes through the door. You're supposed to do better for all of them (Parent of YP18).**

For other interviewees, experiences were more positive. In one instance, the young person explained how they had benefited from a decision taken at a court:

> **So, when I went through the court and I went to court, the judge gave me a thing and then I had my tag innit. And then I'm, the whole time when I had tag, I was thinking, this is not what I want my life to be. If I went straight to jail, it would've been my life's over. I'm saying this is my life now. But now I had time to think because my friends are going out. I think it was a holiday as well. When I got it like a two-week summer holiday, some holiday two weeks miles out. It was like eight o'clock and my friends are out at nine ten and I was thinking, listen, this is not how I want my life to be, I was happy that I didn't go to jail because that would've been worse. But it was good that I had that and that was a good thing that they have. That's a good thing that they have (YP3).**

Children and young people also described positive experiences and outcomes in relation to their YOT. For this interviewee, the YOT acted as a gateway to mental health support.

Most help. I would say me getting arrested...Yeah. Like finding YOT, the good thing like... Because it was an amazing thing to find YOT, because YOT put me onto my mental health service... So, I kind of think me getting arrested that one time, kind of helped me a bit with YOT, but getting arrested the other time, they would just help (YP19).

Case Study – YJS Support as a Means of Developing Balance and Life Skills

I've learned so many different things. Like how to walk away, how to actually communicate how I'm feeling and stuff. And it's just small things. And even though it's like we don't stay on the thing for that long, I've noticed it in my everyday life. Like now I've been in situations where before I would've absolutely lost it and I was like, I'm going to walk away, even if I've been disrespected myself, I'm just going to walk away. Now I don't really involve myself in situations, I just observe it... And it's helped, I've seen it in my everyday life when I'm doing certain things. I've been in certain challenging situations, whether it's been at a club or seeing someone argue with the police and stuff, and I've just looked on... I've not been going crazy. So, I feel like being here has definitely helped and it's definitely made me, like, know more about what I want to do and like what I really want to target as well and actually like how to like help people. And there's certain things that my caseworker would say to me about the criminal justice service or whatever. And I'll be randomly just be on my phone to my friend one day and they might say something and I'll remember what my caseworker said. So, I've now said what she said and my friend thinks it's my advice, but it's actually hers. But it's just everyday life that being here has helped me with... And it's like what I didn't learn in school, my caseworker has taught me. Like in terms of helping me apply for universal credit. if I need a letter or anything done, she's there to do it, sort of thing. And it's like now I can feel comfortable sitting here saying to you, "I have dyslexia, I can't write this. Can you write it for me?", and she would do it. Instead of before in school, I didn't kind of get that support.

YP14, female, Islington

All of the practitioners interviewed for this project noted the disproportionality of sentencing outcomes for Black and mixed-heritage children and young people and, in particular, the greater likelihood of white defendants receiving out of court disposals:

I've seen two children with similar offences get treated differently in court. I would say one of the biggest things that I know is that you are more likely to get an out of court disposal if you're white or not of colour... I've seen it, and you can check the data as well (Prac 4).

Practitioners spent some considerable time talking about the production, submission and reception of Pre-Sentence Reports for young Black, mixed-heritage and minoritised people facing charges in court. For some, these reports presented the opportunity to provide background and context on the lives of the children and young people facing charges. The submission of Pre-Sentence Reports is a critical part of the justice process, yet practitioners had mixed views – based on their first-hand experience – on how these reports can be received by Magistrates. For one practitioner, Magistrates more often than not followed the recommendations being made:

Usually, we will make a recommendation to the court and, not all the time, but my experience is that usually the court will go with the recommendation of the YJS. There are cases where it hasn't happened. I would say on the majority they do, because I think they recognise that actually we know how to manage risk with our assessment (Prac 2).

For others, however, Magistrates were prone to all but ignoring the reports, reverting instead to the cultural competence training they had already received as a sufficient grounding in children and young people's experiences of disproportionality, their journey towards criminality and the complex interdependencies of youth offending.

> **We work with the courts, they're our partners. So, we ask them, will you engage in scrutiny because the police engage in scrutiny around out of court. It's healthy exercise. We pull out live cases and we fully talk openly about decision-making. Tell me why you came to that decision. Help me understand that. Yeah, so the courts don't want to do it. They've refused to do it with us. Point blank. We offered them training in unconscious bias. No, we don't need that. We're not racist. And I was just like, those are the days when I'm like, 'I don't get paid enough for this shit' (Prac 4).**
>
> **I worked with a young person for years and years. It's a really sad case, and he'd been through things you should never ever go through. He was at court for an offence and I was writing a PSR for him, and the recommendation was not the same as other children and young people who had similar offences... They were harsher with the young person that I was working with, and I did feel that racism had a play in that (Prac 5).**

Indeed, there were cases when practitioners felt obliged to challenge court decisions they felt were reinforcing the negative impacts of disproportionality on children and young people from minoritised backgrounds. This example illustrated the lengths to which the practitioners interviewed in this project would go in the interests of the children and young people they were supporting:

> **I was working with a young person, he was of mixed heritage, but he was in custody. He came to me and he'd already been in custody for three years, but he was assessed as dangerous at 15 and he was given an extended sentence, so you have to go through parole. When he came to me, I disagreed with the dangerousness assessment... So, I went to the young person and started working with him and then started speaking to the solicitor. I knew my young person wanted to appeal the sentence, so I essentially did a historic NRM (National Referral Mechanism) for him that hadn't been done at the time. NRMs weren't completed at that time because he'd been sentenced years before that. We managed to get a conclusive grounds NRM specific to the offences that he was assessed as dangerous for, so we went back to the court. We actually went to the High Court, we went to the Court of Appeal, and we managed to get his dangerousness assessment overturned, which then changed his sentence (Prac 2).**

More often, however, practitioners painted a bleak picture of their interactions with a court system characterised by a reluctance to engage in depth, beyond required standard training, with issues of disproportionality:

> **Judges are not willing to engage in that with us. So, to me, if the very systems that are creating these disproportionate numbers are not willing to engage in that conversation with us, what hope have we got of really addressing it genuinely? (Prac 4).**

Case study – Pre-Sentence Reports

The Pre-Sentence Report in general talks about the young person's, like, life, upbringing, family, anything that was impacted on that young person to bring them to where they are today. Like what's led them to offending. So, we hadn't considered discrimination in that before, and what their experiences were of that and how the system could have discriminated against them and how that could be part of the big picture of what's led to them offending. So, we now include that to say that it's just as important as their adultification or the exclusions they got or their family life. It's all part of them, their identity. So, we just give that information to the court as well, say, "Oh, this is a young person that was excluded from school five times and we know that Black boys are more likely to get excluded." So, we'll put that sort of information in. It's been done since 2020, obviously since the George Floyd incident, it was on the back of that really. So, since that part. I think maybe it was implemented in 2021. I submitted the particular report that had that information in there, the magistrates weren't happy that I'd highlighted it. So, they felt that they were well trained on disproportionality and they knew the discrimination that Black boys and girls faced, and they didn't need to be told about it because they've been trained on it. They wrote that down and we have like a feedback form that goes with the Pre-Sentence Report and that was their feedback. So, I couldn't believe it. We were so shocked about that. And my manager raised it, went up much higher actually. But the magistrates, they didn't want to know, they felt that it shouldn't be in there, they know that information they don't need reminding. They've had lots of training and that was what they felt. So, we challenged that and told them why they needed to take that into account when they're dealing with this young person and why they need to think about his experiences and how his experiences of the world have been partly shaped by the colour of his skin, et cetera. And it went higher, so the managers dealt with it. And I think one of our managers ended up offering some training to the magistrates or to explain in more detail why it's included.

Practitioner 1, Camden

One practitioner suggested that more unconscious bias training could benefit criminal justice professionals across multiple stages of the CJS.

> **I think unconscious bias training for police, magistrates, CPS, the Crown Prosecution Service… We had Social Graces training, that's to do with… characteristics that people have that they could face discrimination against. So, age, gender, race, religion, disability, all those types of things. And the training kind of gets you to think about how you are impacted by those different Graces, they're called. How you are impacted by all of those and how the service user's impacted and how your experience of the world interplays with each of those different things. The training was absolutely brilliant… In that training was one of my colleagues who's White, she was able to stay in that training and she finds it difficult to have conversations because she's White… and it's like, you really don't want to offend people, 'so I better not say anything because I might offend people'. It was talked about that you probably wouldn't offend if you were coming from a good place, and it shouldn't stop you having conversations. So, I think that Social Grace training is really good because that is a problem – people sort of worry that they don't want to say the wrong thing (Prac 1).**

For another practitioner, echoing the above comments on the adultification of children and young people within the youth justice system, attitudinal and cultural change needed to be modelled from the top by organisations' most senior members.

> **They want our people to meet with police officers, to bridge that gap. I personally don't think that's the solution, because... it needs to be on how ours the Superintendents are making sure training is done appropriately to deal with the escalation in matters that don't involve violence and aggression. So, for a young man coming up to you, because you are arresting his friends, not to meet this man with aggression, but to meet him with that common courtesy. So, I think it needs to be done by the way that police are trained... to see the young people not as threats... and to see it more like 'this is a child, this is a young person' (Prac 3).**

Another practitioner did not hold out much hope, since in their view the most senior professionals are also the most distant from the issues and challenges shaping children and young people's lives:

> **I think those at the top in these institutions [police and the courts] have far removed themselves from what actually happens on our streets. [They need] to hear our young people's voices, make sure our young people's voices are reflected in policy-making decisions and any conversation that could affect their lives (Prac 3).**

The lack of diversity among more senior criminal justice professionals was highlighted by several participants,

> **In terms of the people that the Black people see in the criminal justice system, other than practitioners in our work, but magistrates, police, and CPS, I think obviously there will be more White people, it's a White country at the end of the day. But I think more representation in those kinds of areas, particularly magistrates. I don't think I've even seen a Black magistrate at Highbury for a long time. I think they should target that sort of area and try to get more people of colour involved in the criminal justice system (Prac 2).**

Another practitioner developed this point.

> **Representation – I think first and foremost, I would look at the courts and tribunal services. There is nowhere near enough representation there. And that was a good place to start. If I had the time and the energy, I would be doing the magistrates training. I always wanted to, but then COVID came along and pissed on that plan (Prac 4).**

Case Study – Creating Spaces for Open Dialogue

I think we need to open up the space where young people can share their experiences, because I can't think of a space we currently have now... Not one of the young people wants to meet the police, so let's try to create a space – that's a lot more informal, a space driven by them – a space with people they want to talk with about their experiences. Because we can talk about training all day long, but if we don't actually understand the experiences from the young people, then a lot of it would be us just hypothesising, or stating what we think needs to happen. Which is pointless if we don't have the conversation with the young people and could just result in implementing things that young people don't even want or need. So, we need to create a space where young people can come in and be safe enough to say that 'Hey, I have this place to speak, why did that happen?' and open that room for young people to question their experiences with the criminal justice system and professionals, so then we can have this really open, honest conversations... That spark for professionals to then say, 'Okay look we have these young people coming to us. They literally saying A, B, C, D ...what do we need to do, what do we need to fix this. What can we implement going forward?'

Practitioner 3, Islington

Recommendations

The Courts and Youth Justice System

Recommendations

- Increase the ethnic diversity within the judiciary and of lay benches at court
- Strengthen unconscious bias training within the judiciary and lay benches to continually improve understandings of racial trauma.

Mentoring and its Impact on Outcomes

What the Children and Young People Said

46 children and young people from Black and mixed-heritage backgrounds were engaged in the Mentoring and Leadership programme. Wipers and the local area report that 40 (87%) did not reoffend during their time on the programme. More than half of these children and young people (60%) received extended mentoring support, and 67% evidenced an increase in hopes, dreams and aspirations (see more on this below). 80% of mentees accessed education, employment or training. Those young mentees who participated in the research project were clear about the value of mentors and the intensive mentoring programme in their lives.

Children and young people spoke of the important niche occupied by their mentors in relation to family, plus representatives of agencies such as the Youth Offending Team (YOT) and Social Services. For one interviewee, the mentoring programme helped to re-establish positive family relationships.

> **Well, I love my caseworker and YOT. They've always been there for me, isn't it? Even now, like even though... Well, I do work for YOT because I got like a part-time job with them. And that's what I love because I can keep in touch with them. So, when it comes to things like YOT and like my mental service, I can tell they really wanted to help me. Wipers were more than happy to help me out. I love Wipers, I wish I could go there again ... Makes me feel happy and that, because even though my family was supporting me, like we've had some very tough arguments, hence why I ended up in care. But it just felt good to have someone that worked with my family that I could talk to (YP12).**

Another young person contrasted the care shown by mentors and representatives from Social Services:

> **It's because I've had social workers all my life. I thought like, you see all these services, I thought they was like Social Services, isn't it? Like they just don't care. But then I saw my caseworker, and she was caring because she wasn't giving up. She was trying to get through to me by all means necessary (YP7).**

A number of children and young people described how mentors, through their words and actions, showed they cared, and the difference that this made:

> **Whereas if more people were like my caseworker and my YOT workers who are doing their job because they actually care, you'd see a difference. But they're hiring people that don't care (YP19).**

Case Study – Mentors Going 'Above and Beyond'

There's an appeal going on at the moment... Advocates getting put in place. I helped with the appeal. I didn't personally agree with you (mentee) going to a PRU. But obviously I listened to the parents' concern, grandmother's concern, and they felt the same. So, I helped support them to go through the appeals process and found information about the EHCP assessment which wasn't spoken about, so we put that application form through. I helped them with that. Then... Yeah, so we did the EHCP plan together. Then I was looking for advocates. Managed to find an advocate that deals with BAME only in exclusions, which I should be having a meeting with them tomorrow because they're going for the next stage of the appeal because they've actually been refused. So, I'm hoping to get them in to support them for the next stage ... I mean there was a lot of language that was being used and they've changed a lot of the documentation because they were saying she was aggressive and violent, but they've changed a lot of the wording now because...*

*The research team was subsequently informed that the appeal was successful and the young person returned to a mainstream school.

Mentor 3 supporting Camden mentee

Reflecting on the effectiveness of their work, one mentor underlined the significance of relevant lived experience:

> **I just feel that we need more people out there on the ground that do have that side of lived experience. Lived experience, which is important. And also understanding, but I also believe there needs to be a lot of training around the ADHD and autism because we've got quite a lot of kids that are going through it. And they're slipping through this system and they've got so much potential (Mentor 4).**

Practitioners were clear on the critical role mentors can play in the lives of children and young people from Black. Mixed-heritage and minoritised backgrounds, at times fulfilling a key role model position that might otherwise be missing.

> **I guess it is for those young people that don't have that positive influence in their life or need more of that. All of all our work is based on relationships and it's based on building that relationship with a young person. So, I think to have a mentor, to have someone who's invested in you, for that young person is massive (Prac 1).**

In some case, relatively simple and straightforward activities – simply being out of the house, engaged in sport or socialising – could help turn round patterns of negative behaviour, build self-confidence and serve as an agent of progressive change in the young person's life.

> **We're working with a young person at the moment, he's 18, and he has a lot of additional needs, he's going through an adult autism Adult Social Care assessment. We have a lot of concerns that he doesn't really have any friends and he's at home on his own all the time, so he's started working with a mentor. They've gone out, they've played football together. Even in such a short amount of time he's built his confidence up so that he's talking to other young people when they're out on a session, which might sound small but it's not, it's really significant. I think it helps build your leadership skills... and also building his positive activity. So, it's a factor for desistance. It's going to reduce the chance of reoffending in the sense that he's doing something really constructive in the community (Prac 2).**

Nor were practitioners committed to the view that mentors needed to be of the same ethnic background as their mentees, though for some children and young people this could be significant. Most important was the ability to help the children and young people navigate the complexity of their lives, interpreting and making sense of their experiences, and knowing they had someone in their corner to stand up for and represent them.

> **There's plenty of mentors that can be a different skin colour from the young people they're working with, and that can work fine. But I think that's important because, as we said also, a lot of the time the young person doesn't understand the things that they're going through or things that are happening to them, and the parents may not do so either, or wish to challenge anything. And I think having someone that represents them is definitely needed (Prac 1).**

Indeed, the positioning of mentors as outside for the formal, professionalised 'system' can enable them to establish trust more quickly with children and young people from Black, mixed-heritage and minoritised backgrounds, many of whom have come to view 'the system' as a source of harsh judgement and punitive intervention.

> **I had a young man, who is willing to have a conversation with a mentor but may not be able to sit in the same room with a professional. And this is a young man who has had a lot of trauma, a lot of difficulties and some really terrifying experiences. And I asked him 'Why is it that you feel you can talk to him?' And he was like, 'He is separate. He is not here to tell me off. He is here to help' (Prac 3).**

Recommendations

Mentoring and its Impact on Outcomes

Recommendations

- Ensure local authorities are able to offer children and young people from Black and minoritised communities access to mentors when they need it, particularly supporting early intervention.
- Create more opportunities for peer support for children and young people from Black and minoritised communities.
- Extend the Wipers intensive mentoring and leadership programme, making it available to more at-risk children and young people from Black and minoritised communities.

Hope and Fears for the Future

What the Children and Young People Said

The ambitions of children and young people varied significantly. One participant saw their future in the global currency market:

> **I want to be in Forex trading (YP3).**

Others similarly hoped for a lucrative career in business or finance:

> **Hopefully, at age 22 or 23 I want a child and that's if I'm financially stable and then the right mindset. But yeah, I want to be a CEO, to be honest (YP11).**

Another group was pursuing a more traditional set of occupations, having identified the skills and credentials needed to achieve their objectives:

> **I want to be a carpenter... To achieve that I need to get back into school and pass my GCSEs. And then I need to get a work experience and then on my apprenticeship (YP2).**
>
> **I'm studying operation, vehicle maintenance. My goal is to get a part-time job in Mercedes, a part-time job in Sainsbury's (YP5).**

A career in which they could directly assist other children and young people was important for these interviewees:

> **So right now, I'm starting an apprenticeship for people that have SEN needs, learning mentor. I feel like that also adds on because there's Black people that might be autistic or there's Black people that might have mental health and not know how to verbally work up what needs to be said. And they most definitely can't be good to talk to the police, especially if they can't verbally work up what needs to be said and stuff. So, I feel like that's one skillset that I'm trying to get, as well as my talking skillsets (YP14).**
>
> **Because my life goal is I want to work my ass off hard and then I want to open up like my own church or charity per se. And instead of people like donating to us, like if you can prove to me that you're like in a bit of a sticky situation, you really do need help, I would love to help people. Not from the government, off my own back (YP19).**

Most children and young people had a clear sense of what was needed to realise their ambitions, whether it be formal qualifications or more intrinsic elements of self-improvement. For these three children and young people, education was the priority:

> **Probably working towards a law degree. I feel like my school is accepting to a certain extent. So, they do support me (YP6).**
>
> **I feel like it's wasting my time, but yeah, I just know that I need to put a hundred percent focus and effort and determination into college this time around (YP18).**
>
> **I knew the first thing I definitely need to get to have a successful life is education (YP13).**

For another young person, it was changes on an individual level that would make the biggest difference:

> **There is changes I can learn myself, learn not to rise to people's rubbish and that. Learn when someone's trying to play a game to me, I need to play the game back instead of getting angry and losing the argument. There's a lot of self-improvements I could make (YP19).**

As in other areas, though, the children and young people were quick to identify potential obstacles to success, both for themselves and their peers. For one young person it was the number of services he was required to engage with that could potentially scupper his ambitions of becoming engineer or architect:

> **I am studying engineering, so I just want to be in architecture or some sort of engineer … So obviously, I have got my case worker I have got a sexual health worker, I have got a mentor, I have got, for example, a drugs abuse worker, alcohol worker. They just keep naming people that I have to meet. For example, the alcohol worker, I do not know why I am there. I have drunk once in my life. Why am I there? But it feels unnecessary to put me on there … It is not helping (YP10).**

The same young person reflected on the way that their appearance had impacted their employment, especially in comparison with peers from different ethnic backgrounds:

> **I had a friend that came up to me and said, 'they won't hire me because of my skin colour, they just looked at me in a weird way'. Whereas I am not dark skinned, but I am mixed, and I am getting jobs, I am good at job interviews. That is just an example. They need to be more fair and equal and just give them a chance (YP10).**

Reflections and Limitations

Reflections and Limitations

Developing and delivering the Disproportionality Leadership and Mentoring Project threw up a number of learning opportunities, and reflecting on these is worthwhile in the final sections of this report they may provide some insight and guidance for the design and delivery of future collaborative research projects.

Things that Worked Well

- Co-producing the project from the start with practitioners ensured the early buy-in and support from senior practitioner partners and enabled the research team to establish credibility more quickly with children and young people.
- Regular check-ins and progress meetings with the partnership organisations provided a forum for challenges to be raised and either addressed on the spot, or for supporting actions to be put in place – particularly around boosting numbers of participants for the research project.
- The appointment of a dedicated engagement officer within the research team strengthened the academic-partnership organisation link.
- The recruitment of the engagement officer also helped the team to foster positive and productive relationships with mentors and practitioners who, as gatekeepers, were crucial in recruiting children and young people.
- On the issue of trust, the fact that the research team was not perceived to be part of 'the system', but viewed as a group of objective and impartial researchers with no vested interest in defending 'the system', helped establish trust with a number of the children and young people and their parents/carers. That said, some participants still refused to participate.
- Capturing and prioritising the voices of children and young people and foregrounding their views and experiences, alongside those of practitioners and mentors, gave the young participants a higher stake in the project and further helped to encourage participation and establish trust.

Things that Worked Less Well/Learning for future projects

- Because of the nature of the project, the mistrust that some children and young people had in anyone who may represent the 'system' and/or 'authority', and the complex lives of many of these children and young people, the engagement process for the project was necessarily long and, in some cases, relatively intensive. Furthermore, this commitment to engagement did not always result in children and young people agreeing to take part in the research project.
- As a result of their engagement and positive experience with the research team, a number of children and young people expressed an interest in ongoing involvement with collaborative research projects, if opportunities were available. A longer-term project could have enabled the team to incorporate opportunities for children and young people's active involvement in research, which in turn could have had a more positive impact on their learning and skills development, and potentially influence future training or employment aspirations.

Outcomes, Policy Challenges and Next Steps

Outcomes, Policy Challenges and Next Steps

All partners share the same ethos and value base in relation to children deserving the best possible start in life. However, this project demonstrated that children can face the kind of disproportionate disadvantage that affects their development and threatens their future health and happiness. All partners agreed that early intervention can play a part in offering these children and their families the support they need to reach their potential.

Effective early intervention works to prevent problems occurring, or to tackle them head-on when they do, before problems get worse. Although each borough has strong early intervention services, these were not able to address the problems of the children and young people that were interviewed as they progressed into more specialist and statutory services. This shows that effective implementation of early intervention approaches is not straightforward and that it is not always easy to identify the right interventions to support Black, mixed-heritage and minoritised families with multiple and complex needs. Effective early intervention approaches can only be successful when both carefully targeted and suitably reinforced by other parts of the wider system.

This research project, expanding on earlier projects with Islington and Haringey, sought to better understand the lived experiences of disproportionality and the services required at different stages in their childhood and adolescence. The findings confirmed many of the concerns that are known about children and young people who offend where typical childhoods are characterised by trauma, instability (home and school), early involvement in crime, and intervention by the Local Authority from a young age.

The strength of this project is the in-depth, qualitative methodology which has enabled the voices of children and young people not only to be heard, but also directly to inform the development of solutions to the multiple, varied and complex challenges shaping many lives across the four London boroughs and beyond. One outcome of capturing these voices has been the identification of several key policy and strategic areas for further development:

- Tackling school exclusions and poor educational attainment for disadvantaged groups must continue to be a strategic priority, including addressing inequality and disproportionality issues.
- The availability and accessibility of mentors for children and young people should be maximised.
- Support in relation to parental and child emotional wellbeing needs to be strengthened.
- Services which provide support to girls and young women should be enhanced.
- Cultural competence should be strengthened as a priority within local authorities and across the courts, police and youth justice services.
- More and better training and employment opportunities for children and young people from Black, mixed-heritage and minoritised backgrounds should be developed.

It is also significant to note the findings and recommendations from an earlier partnership project (*The Disproportionality Project*, Greer et al. 2020, funded by the Youth Justice Board) are even more significant today given the further inequalities created by the COVID-19 pandemic and cost-of-living crisis.

Many of the children and young people involved in the intensive mentoring programme and the research project evidenced an enhanced sense of self-belief, and some expressed an aspiration to be involved in future research opportunities should they become available.

Practitioners noted a shared desire for children and young people and parents/carers to become active rather than passive recipients of services.

Mentors were united in the view that disproportionality remains a core problem at local, regional and national levels. Their work remains pivotal in helping children and young people to recognise disproportionality when they encounter it, seek advice and support when they need it, and develop more general life skills to help them navigate a world which can at times be full of excitement and opportunity, but all too often seems stacked against them.

For everyone involved, the project has developed a deeper understanding of the views of children and young people, mentors, parents/carers and practitioners – including where they align and diverge – in relation to the lived experience of disproportionality, services and support across four London boroughs and more widely.

It is hoped that the four boroughs, MOPAC and other key partners will work together in taking forward the recommendations arising from this collaboration.

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Appendix 1

Appendix 1

Embedding Co-Production throughout the Project

Engagement

The three-stage approach to engagement proceeded as follows.

Stage 1 – engaging with the mentors

This stage was about developing better understanding of the background of the young person, any challenges the mentors might be having with young person's engagement with the mentoring programme, and about the young person's confidence in participating in the research. On average, this stage involved five of six touchpoints with the mentors – including, emails, phone calls and meetings. At this stage, mentors secured signed consent forms from those children and young people who were keen to participate.

Eight of the children and young people who were identified as potential research participants did not progress to interview, largely because their engagement with the mentors was patchy or they fell away from the process completely. In one case, the young person broke his bail conditions and disengaged.

Stage 2 – engaging with the children and young people

Once the signed consent form has been received, the engagement lead contacted the young person to talk through the research project, build a rapport and arrange the interview. In each case, several phone calls were needed.

Stage 3 – interviewing the children and young people

The engagement lead agreed a time for interview with the young person from a list of slots provided in advance by the research team, and then allocated the interview to one of the team. Although there was some rescheduling before the interview date, and cases where the young person did not to pick up on the day, most of the interviews proceeded as planned. Of the 24 children and young people contacted by the engagement lead, 20 completed their interviews.

Interviews

Once the co-produced interview questions were agreed and the engagement process was under way, the first few interviews involved children and young people encountering the questions cold – that is, encountering the questions for the first time in the interview itself. This approach worked well for some YPs, but others struggled to articulate their views and experiences or lacked confidence in the interview.

Reflecting with Wipers mentors on early progress, it was agreed that for subsequent interviews the project team would share the questions in advance so mentors could talk through those questions with the children and young people before the formal interview took place. While this approach extended the engagement process, it generated a richer set of responses from children and young people by creating a more dynamic discursive environment where mentors, and/or parents/carers when they were

in attendance, could prompt the children and young people to share particular stories or experiences they had raised in the pre-interview run through. A number of the key vignettes included in this report arose in this way. Mentors and parents/carers were also inclined – and always welcome – to share their views and experiences. This inclusive and highly interactive approach – with children and young people sharing their stories alongside trusted individuals, who were also sharing – gave the interviews a more conversational tone which we believe, in turn, encouraged a greater and more detailed level of disclosure from the children and young people in a safe space.

There were periods when the numbers of mentees available for interview was limited, and the project team in consultation with borough partners agreed to widen the net and speak with other children and young people from minoritised backgrounds who were not involved with the intensive mentoring scheme, but were either known to Wipers or open to services and therefore known to the borough practitioners. These interviewees provided additional insights into the lived experience of disproportionality.

As the research project progressed the team met regularly with Wipers mentors to share and discuss emerging findings, which reinforced co-production and enabled the team to reflect further on the engagement approach, sense check some of the findings, and identify where we might need to probe more in interviews to address any gaps around thematic areas of interest.

Two of the themes YPs were reluctant to discuss, or found difficult to articulate, were their recognition and understanding of disproportionality and their experiences of the courts. Input from mentors was particularly helpful here because disproportionality can often be subtle and difficult to recognise. Mentors were then able to support YPs in interview to share issues that might not otherwise have been understood in terms of disproportionality.

Embedding co-production throughout the research process undoubtedly enhanced the outcomes.

"The Disproportionality Leadership and Mentoring project extends the partnership with Islington to three other London boroughs – Camden, Hackney and Haringey – and seeks to capture the lived experience of disproportionality in the words of crime-affected children and young people from minoritised backgrounds (primarily Black and mixed heritage), their mentors, and their parents/carers."

> “By capturing their expert voices, this research report seeks to create a deeper understanding of the lived experience of disproportionality from the perspective of those most directly affected. Children and young people’s views, alongside those of mentors and practitioners, in turn, informed the development of new, context-specific ways of tackling disproportionality, locally and more widely.”

The Disproportionality Leadership and Mentoring Project:

Capturing the Lived Experience of Disproportionality among Children and Children and young people from Black, Mixed-Heritage and Minoritised backgrounds across Four London Boroughs

November 2024