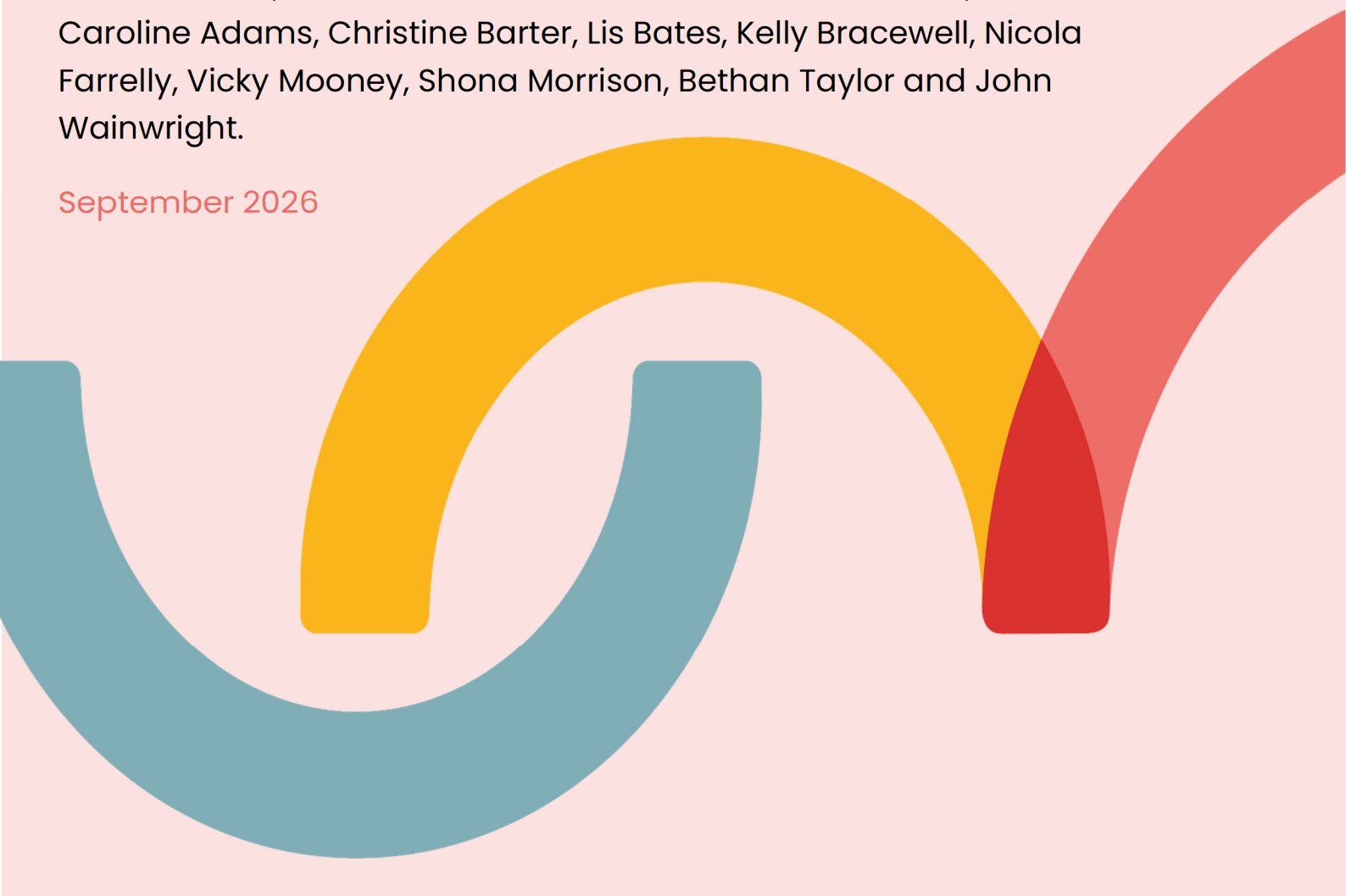


Safeguarding children involved in violence: Insights for 'best practice' in policing

Executive summary

Helen Beckett, Debra Allnock and Helen Richardson Foster, with Caroline Adams, Christine Barter, Lis Bates, Kelly Bracewell, Nicola Farrelly, Vicky Mooney, Shona Morrison, Bethan Taylor and John Wainwright.

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University of
Bedfordshire



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1. Introduction

This executive summary provides an overview of the conduct and key findings of Youth Endowment Fund (YEF)–funded research into how police in England and Wales safeguard and protect children involved in violence.

Although violence involving children is a significant societal issue, both in terms of prevalence and impact (YEF, 2024), responses remain underdeveloped and inconsistent, with *“a failure to consistently identify serious youth violence as a safeguarding issue...leaving too many children at serious risk of harm”* (Ofsted et al., 2024a; no pagination). The YEF commissioned this research in response to these issues and in recognition of gaps in the existing evidence base around what constitutes ‘best practice’ in relation to safeguarding and protecting children involved in violence.

The study was led by Professor Helen Beckett from the University of Lancashire and Professor Debra Allnock from the University of Bedfordshire, with support from colleagues at these universities, the Open University and the Vulnerability Knowledge and Practice Programme.

2. About the study

The study sought to explore five key areas of interest:

- What represents ‘best practice’ in how police safeguard and protect children involved in violence (including with reference to stop and search, possession of a weapon and missing children)
- Barriers and facilitators to implementing such an approach
- Any racial or other disparities in current practice (with specific consideration of Black, Asian and minority ethnic children, children who have special educational needs and disabilities [SEND] or are neurodivergent, and whether the child is a suspect or victim or a boy or girl) and how these could be addressed
- Frontline officers’ awareness of safeguarding-led and child-centred approaches to violence involving children
- The policy and practice changes required to support an improved safeguarding response, both strategically and operationally

The study ran from September 2025 to March 2026 and included six work strands:

- A desk-based review
- A professional stakeholder consultation (interviews and focus groups)
- A national force-level survey

- Questions for police officers/staff, in an evidence-based policing (EBP) survey run by Cordis Bright¹
- Case studies and practice examples
- A youth consultation

The remit and definitions underpinning the study were as follows:

- The YEF's definition of 'children involved in violence' was adopted, which included both children (identified as being at risk of) perpetrating violence and those who experience such violence.
- All forms of violence perpetrated by children were in scope, including those perpetrated in online and offline contexts.
- All aspects of policing were also in scope, within the context of policing in England and Wales.
- The study remit included all children under 18 years of age.

3. Policy and operational contexts

Policing responses to children involved in violence sit within a complex and evolving policy landscape that increasingly emphasises safeguarding and public health approaches. However, inconsistent interpretation and operationalisation of these frameworks across forces and partnerships result in highly variable responses to children's harm and vulnerability:

- National policy sets a safeguarding-led direction, but delivery is uneven. While legislation and guidance position police as a key safeguarding partner and promote child-centred, trauma-informed responses, inspections and reviews continue to evidence inconsistent implementation.
- Where responsibility for violence involving children sits within a force (public protection, serious crime, neighbourhood policing or Violence Reduction Unit-aligned teams, for example) strongly influences how children and their actions are understood and whether they are routed into enforcement-led or support-led pathways.
- The force-level survey reveals that guidance and policies are also inconsistent across forces, with some having child-specific policies on stop and search, missing episodes or weapon possession, while others rely on adult-oriented procedures.
- Differences in thresholds, definitions and responses across local safeguarding partnerships further complicate force-level variation, producing divergent thresholds, inconsistent recognition of underlying

¹ The two surveys are described in subsequent text as the force-level survey and EBP survey.

harm and exploitation, and different trajectories for children across localities.

4. Police awareness of safeguarding-led and child-centred approaches

Some elements of policing, such as those represented in the case study elements of the research,² exhibit strong awareness and implementation of safeguarding-led and child-centred approaches to children involved in violence, clearly demonstrating both the possibility and benefits of such an approach. EBP survey findings also indicate broad conceptual support for safeguarding children involved in violence among police officers/staff, with 97% of respondents agreeing that the police have an important role to play in this and 75% believing that a child-first approach could reduce children's involvement in violence.

Findings from other elements of the study, however, suggest that further work is required to translate these conceptual commitments into operational practice. For example, although nine out of ten individual police respondents to the EBP survey said they understood the safeguarding needs of children involved in violence, such understanding and commitment were presented as the exception, rather than the norm, in the other elements of the study. These elements found:

- Significant variations in officers' safeguarding knowledge and child-centred practice, indicating that children's experience of 'best practice'³ varies considerably depending on where they live and which officers or teams respond.
- A pronounced divide between specialist teams and general frontline officers, with specialist teams more likely to embed trauma-informed, contextual approaches, while frontline responses are often enforcement-led.
- Concerns around communication and de-escalation skills and a lack of understanding of trauma and neurodiversity during first contact, resulting in unnecessary escalation and criminalisation, unrecognised vulnerability and need, and consequent missed opportunities for intervention.

² These included examples of prevention and early intervention work (Surrey, Greater Manchester and Northamptonshire police), on-the-ground engagements (British Transport Police) and experiences of custody (Cleveland police) and can be found in the main report.

³ For the purposes of reporting our findings, when we refer to 'best practice' we do so in inverted commas, in recognition of the emerging nature of the evidence base around this (both generally and within this study) and the inclusion of practices that have not been formally evaluated. The consistency of 'best practice' themes arising in the study – from policy, research and practice wisdom – does, however, justify their inclusion and merit further consideration.

5. Inequities in practice

In line with existing evidence, this study found widespread inequities in how police respond to different cohorts of children within different contexts of engagement. Importantly, these inequities are system-produced, not child-produced. They reflect how professionals and systems interpret identity, behaviour and context rather than the characteristics of the children themselves. Findings show that:

- Children experience markedly different responses depending on race, gender, neurodivergence/SEND and whether they are initially framed as victims or suspects, with overlapping identities compounding disadvantage.
- Though nuance clearly exists within this, broadly speaking, boys are more likely to be assumed to be, and identified as, causing harm (most often linked to weapon-enabled violence or criminal exploitation); girls are more likely to be assumed to be experiencing harm (particularly of a sexual nature).
- Racialised assumptions drive over-policing and under-protection. Black boys are more likely to experience surveillance and be criminalised, while indicators of exploitation or vulnerability are frequently overlooked. Black girls' exploitation is often minimised or reframed as choice.
- Though less frequently discussed, racialised frames and cultural assumptions were also identified for Asian children and Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children.
- Children who have SEND or who are neurodivergent were also repeatedly identified as having their needs and behaviours overlooked or misinterpreted. Distress, sensory overwhelm and communication differences are often read as defiance or non-compliance, particularly in high-pressure contexts, such as stop and search or custody, leading to escalation and delayed safeguarding.
- Children known or suspected to be perpetrating harm are markedly less likely to receive safeguarding-led responses, despite strong evidence of an overlap between victimisation and perpetration. Only one in five forces reported having a specific policy on the victimisation/perpetration overlap, and only half reported routinely monitoring these patterns.
- Inconsistent or fragmented demographic, perpetration and vulnerability data obscures patterns of disproportionality and related areas for redress.

6. Barriers to safeguarding-led policing

The study found a series of barriers to safeguarding-led policing, spanning frontline encounters, organisational cultures, inter-agency working and wider

structural conditions. Together, these barriers constrain professional curiosity, favour enforcement-led responses and limit the capacity of policing to deliver consistent, child-centred safeguarding. Study findings show that:

- Safeguarding is often constrained at the point of first contact. Fast-paced, crisis-driven encounters, limited confidence in engaging with children and gaps in trauma-informed practice restrict officers' ability to look beyond presenting behaviour to identify underlying harm or need.
- Enforcement-oriented priorities, number-driven performance frameworks, workforce inexperience and high turnover in specialist teams weaken the embedding and sustainability of safeguarding-led practice.
- Inconsistent training, limited opportunities for reflective practice and a lack of an integrated, vulnerability-focused support structure leave officers underprepared and unsupported to enact child-centred responses.
- Fragmented partnership working impedes safeguarding. Variable thresholds, incompatible information systems and inconsistent information-sharing across agencies result in delayed, partial or fragmented responses to children's needs.
- Wider system constraints, such as resource pressures and high intervention thresholds, result in a prioritisation of post-harm, reactive interventions over prevention or early intervention. Children known to be or suspected of perpetrating violence are often marginalised within mainstream safeguarding pathways.

7. 'Best practice' safeguarding-led policing

Collating key learning from across all phases of the study (including the case studies and other identified examples of safeguarding-led policing in practice), ten key principles of 'best practice' have been identified (Figure A; overleaf).⁴

Though the operationalisation of these principles will vary according to the specific context or interaction, there was remarkable consistency across the study's different strands regarding what these principles should be. The principles were viewed to apply irrespective of the nature of violence, the differing contexts of police-child encounters and the characteristics or offending histories of the child being engaged with. Furthermore, although considered in this study in relation to children involved in violence, they also hold relevance to broader police encounters with children and closely align with the NPCC Child-Centred Policing Strategy.

⁴ These were initially developed from the desk-based review and refined on the basis of the findings of other phases of the study.

Figure A: Ten principles of ‘best practice’

Child-centred	Contextual & holistic
Prevention & early intervention	Trauma-informed
Collaborative partnership working	Proactive anti-discriminatory practice
Transparency & accountability	Procedurally just & proportionate
Evidence-informed	Whole-systems change

Though presented individually here, the principles are both interconnected and mutually reinforcing and, as such, need to be implemented as a whole across both strategic and operational practice.

It is of note that, although many of the premises and practices outlined within these principles (Table B; overleaf) are not new, with some notable examples (such as the case studies included in the main report), they are still viewed as more aspirational than operational. This highlights the need for concerted action to translate professional rhetoric into real changes in children’s lives.

Table B: Enacting ‘best practice’ principles

Practice principle	This means...
Child-centred	• Treating anyone under 18 years as a child first and foremost • Keeping the best interests of the individual child at the heart of interactions and decision-making • Seeing the whole child and adopting a strengths-based, restorative approach to any offending behaviour • Embedding opportunities for them to share their views (at both an individual and strategic level) and taking these into account in line with developmental capacity • Recognising ongoing vulnerability post 17 years of age as a child transitions into the adult criminal justice system
Contextual and holistic	• Seeking to understand the wider context of a child’s life (school, peer relationships, family, etc.) • Identifying how relationships and experiences across these contexts can facilitate or mitigate against harm and harnessing protective relationships within these spaces • Ensuring approaches to assessing risk and safety planning consider all potential forms of harm/need and are responsive to the changing contexts and levels of risk, harm and opportunities for intervention • Using knowledge about patterns of harm (in particular locations, for example) to inform wider preventative and early intervention initiatives
Prevention and early intervention	• Investing in prevention and early intervention and working from the dual premises of avoiding harm in the first place and intervening early to divert and restore where harm is seen to be emerging or occurring • Prioritising diversion over criminalisation and focusing on the potential for change, alongside accountability • Creating opportunities for children to engage with police outside of crisis-based engagements and ensuring the continuity of personnel required to allow trust to develop • Creating accessible routes for children to report concerns and seek help
Trauma-informed	• Recognising the potential presence of trauma in a child’s life, even when not obviously apparent

Practice principle	This means...
	• Understanding how this can impact their presentation and needs • Actively seeking to avoid re-traumatisation and embedding trauma-informed principles (safety, trustworthiness, choice, collaboration, empowerment and cultural competency) • Recognising and responding to the potential for secondary/vicarious trauma among police
Collaborative partnership working	• Working with both statutory and non-statutory partners in the voluntary/community sectors. This needs to be at both the procedural and operational levels, with appropriate systems in place to support information-sharing and joint-working protocols. • Recognising the role that parents and carers can play and working with them as key safeguarding partners, unless evidence demonstrates otherwise
Proactive anti-discriminatory practice	• Acknowledging and ensuring reparation for harms caused, including through systemic racism • Proactively demonstrating a commitment to anti-discriminatory practice going forward. This requires more than training. It also requires active monitoring of anti-racist practice, inclusive neurodivergent practices, the recognition of the need for an intersectional approach, and swift and strong action where practice falls short of expected standards.
Transparency and accountability	• Ensuring there are clear accountability structures at both the individual and systemic levels and increased transparency about how they operate and the consequences of transgressing expected standards. Identified mechanisms for supporting this include: • Ensuring more consistent and detailed data capture about who police engage with, why they do this and what outcomes result (in relation to stop and search, for example) • Enhancing public oversight of policing practice • Seeking feedback from children on how they experience police engagements • Creating clearer access routes to complaint procedures

Practice principle	This means...
	• Making children aware of expected policing standards and their right to complain should their experiences fall short of these standards
Procedurally just and proportionate	• Embedding fairness, transparency, respectful treatment and proportionate responses as key cornerstones of safeguarding-led and child-centred policing • Supporting due process through clear documentation of the rationale for diversionary or charging decisions and the factors taken into consideration when assessing the proportionality of the response (through, for example, the use of the Child Risk Gravity Matrix) • Being able to share this rationale in an easily understandable form, to defend or amend decisions if challenged and to ensure that children, and those supporting them, are aware of routes for challenge or complaint • Taking time to explain to those who experience harm from a peer that the response being pursued is linked to the age of the child and not reflective of denial or minimisation of the harm they have experienced
Evidence-informed	• Ensuring national and force-level policies and procedures are embedded in up-to-date evidence about 'what works' • Creating opportunities for officers and forces to learn from each other (non-policing partners and children themselves) • Addressing gaps in data capture and usage and ensuring force-level data systems are fit for purpose • Addressing system barriers to multi-agency case tracking • Moving beyond numbers-driven performance indicators to incorporate broader measures that better capture safeguarding outcomes and the impact of diversionary and early intervention initiatives
Whole-systems change	• Acknowledging the need for widespread culture change • Working towards consistency in best practice across all force encounters • Investing in training, reflective supervision and continued professional development

Practice principle	This means...
	- Proactively sharing the learning from 'best practice' in specialist teams in ways that are feasible to implement in different settings and contexts - Ensuring commitment to safeguarding-led and child-centred policing is systemically embedded (in force-wide strategic plans, performance frameworks and governance structures) rather than dependent on individual officers or particular leaders.

8. Progressing change

Across all stages of the research, a consistent picture emerges: Safeguarding-led policing is possible, is occurring in some areas and, where experienced, is valued by children, families and partners. The issue is not that 'good practice' or passionate, committed individuals do not exist but that practice remains uneven, fragile and dependent on local structures, cultures and individuals rather than embedded system design.

Forces themselves recognise the need for more consistent safeguarding-led and child-centred practice when responding to children involved in violence. Only half of the forces responding to the force-level survey rated their response to children *experiencing* violence/harm as being 'well developed' (50%; n=9). Even fewer (39%; n=7) classed their response to children *perpetrating* violence/harm or those known to *both experience and perpetrate* violence/harm as 'well developed.' Police participants in both the stakeholder consultations and case studies also demonstrated reflective insights on areas for improvement and commitment to progressing these.

Embedding and sustaining a safeguarding-led policing response to children affected by violence requires shifts across systems, structures and everyday practice. The case studies and other examples shared within the study demonstrate that this is possible but not without concerted and sustained efforts and leadership commitment.

Change requires recognition that:

- Safeguarding-led practice depends on whole-system alignment.**
Specialist units demonstrate that child-centred, safeguarding-led and trauma-informed policing can be operationalised. However, scaling this

requires coherent pathways, supportive supervision, consistent expectations and a reduction in conflicting performance pressures.

- **First contact is pivotal.** Children's early experiences with police strongly shape trust, engagement and the success of later safeguarding interventions. Ensuring encounters are relational, developmentally appropriate and procedurally fair is fundamental.
- **Policing cannot achieve safeguarding alone.** Effective responses rely on coordinated multi-agency planning, consistent and operationally understood thresholds, reciprocal information-sharing and the operational infrastructure to support this, and parity of respect between police and non-police professionals. Where these exist, children receive earlier and more coherent support.
- **Oversight, Inspection, commissioning and national policy must align.** Participants stressed that when these structures reinforce one another – when scrutiny prioritises relational qualities, when Police and Crime Commissioners (or subsequent commissioning bodies) fund youth-focused roles and when the tenets of national guidance are embedded into data and performance systems – forces are much better positioned to reduce disparities, strengthen early intervention pathways and treat safeguarding as core police business rather than an optional enhancement.
- **Equity must be an explicit aim of safeguarding.** Patterns of adultification, racialised and gendered assumptions, and unrecognised neurodivergence are clearly observable in current responses. Addressing these requires accurate data, reflective practice, culturally competent approaches and an acknowledgement of historical and ongoing harms.
- **Prevention and early intervention are achievable when structurally supported.** Case studies demonstrate that when systems invest in prevention – such as school-based officers with clear safeguarding remits, contextual multi-agency teams or early diversion panels – risks and needs are identified sooner, escalation reduces and trust improves.

Chapter 9 of the full report explores the practical changes required across the four domains of police–child interactions, policing structures and cultures, interagency working, and wider system contexts to realise this.

9. Concluding observations

The real test of a safeguarding-led response is whether a child experiences this across every encounter with a force, including in first contacts, which are clearly documented as pivotal in determining the subsequent experiences of the child.

Across all strands of the study, the central message is clear: Children's experience of policing is too often shaped by geography, disjointed pathways, organisational culture and identity, rather than by consistent child-centred safeguarding principles. Yet the study also shows that when police, partners and systems align around children's rights, developmental needs and contexts, safeguarding-led practice is both feasible and impactful.

The challenge ahead is not only to identify what 'best practice' looks like – this study provides that blueprint – but also to create the structural, cultural and relational conditions that make such practices the norm rather than the exception. The findings offer key insights for future YEF guidance and sector-wide improvement, centred on a shared ambition: That every child affected by violence, whether harmed or harming, receives a response that protects, understands and supports them.

The full report is available at: www.youthendowmentfund.org.uk

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