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# Understand us:

A survey exploring  
young adults' **views**  
and **experiences**  
of policing

February 2021

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## Acknowledgements

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## About Revolving Doors Agency

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

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

## New Generation Campaigners

New Generation Campaigners is a group of young adults who have experience of the criminal justice system. They have been brought together by Revolving Doors Agency to explore how police can better respond to the needs of young adults, and to develop a campaign for change..



**Chief Constable Jo Shiner**  
Chief Constable for Sussex Constabulary  
NPCC Lead for Children and Young  
People

## Foreword

As National Police Chiefs Council (NPCC) lead for children and young people, I know that my colleagues in the service understand that the transition to adulthood can be a challenging time. We are committed to a better understanding of how we are perceived by, and how we police, young adults. Crucially that requires us to understand their circumstances and their motivations. This report reminds us of what a crucial age young adulthood is; it is a time of huge transition and personal development. Whilst some are nurtured into adulthood, others are struggling with past trauma, everyday poverty, and discrimination. If we are to serve this community appropriately, then policing must be able to identify and respond empathetically to those vulnerabilities, in partnership with other agencies.

The work of Revolving Doors Agency and their New Generation Campaigners gives us a perceptive insight into the views of young adults. Some of the feedback is difficult to read but will crucially help with continuing our work to increase trust and confidence between young people and the police. The lived experience of young adults and their relationship with policing is essential for us to understand. Without mutual trust, confidence, and understanding it is far more challenging to build upon the good work that policing does do to enable children and young people to live their best future lives. I will continue to strive to listen and act in a way, which engenders that trust, and enables us to truly police our younger communities by meaningful consent.

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Why we  
focus on  
young adults

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Young adults, aged 18-25, represent around 10 per cent of the UK population but account for over 30 per cent of all police cases. Young adults need a distinct approach if we are serious about reducing crime. We call this *New Generation Policing*, a distinct approach that:

- Considers vulnerabilities (including maturity, health needs, poverty and structural inequalities).
- Diverts young adults away from the criminal justice system and into support, especially for low-level and non-violent crimes that are caused by unmet needs.
- Puts young adults' voices at the heart of decision-making, and design and delivery of a policing service fit for a new generation.

## Maturity

There is a robust body of evidence from neurology, psychology and criminology that explains why we need to focus on brain development and maturity among young adults<sup>1</sup>. Findings from neuroscience show that the brain is not fully developed until a person's mid-20s, and the last element to develop are forward planning, rational thinking, and empathy. As we gain a more sophisticated understanding of brain development and the different speeds at which full maturity is attained, it becomes abundantly clear how the cliff-edge of an 18th birthday is an arbitrary date that bears little relation to the reality of young adults' lives. We are encouraged by the growing acceptance of a distinct approach for young adults in parts of the criminal justice system<sup>2</sup>, yet policing remains behind the curve<sup>3</sup>.

## Vulnerability

On reaching adulthood, young adults' lives go through multiple changes. For some, it is an exciting time, involving leaving the family home, finishing education, starting a career, challenging themselves, meeting new friends and falling in and out of love. For others, it is a more turbulent time, requiring them to simultaneously manage multiple health and human needs and negotiating their transition from children's and adolescent's services to their adult equivalents. Higher thresholds for equivalent adult services, gaps in available support and differing and inappropriate modes of practice and service culture result in many young people slipping through the net and going without support at a vulnerable time in their development.

The cliff-edge in support takes a devastating toll on young adults' lives: We know that three quarters of adults with mental ill-health will have experienced the onset of those issues by the age of 24<sup>4</sup>. Given how often police have to respond to mental health-related calls, it is crucial for the police services to adopt a distinct approach for young adults in crisis. Research shows that of the young adults in recent contact with mental health services, 45% were in contact with the police or youth justice<sup>5</sup>. Getting this distinct approach right is more urgent than ever, as the pandemic risks causing long-term damage to the mental health and wellbeing of young adults. A recent report<sup>6</sup> from The Prince's Trust estimates that more than half of young people aged 16-25 "always" or "often" feel anxious, rising to 64 per cent for young adults who are not in education, employment, or training. Worryingly, the study also found that one in four young people say they feel unable to cope with life since the start of the pandemic, increasing to 40% among those not in work, education, or training. Adopting a distinct approach can save lives; of those aged 20-24 who die by suicide, 20% have had contact with police or criminal justice agencies<sup>7</sup>.

## Poverty

Socio-economic constraints and poverty has an impact on the maturation process<sup>8</sup>, preventing young adults from becoming fully independent. Younger single people, especially if they are living outside the family home, now face highly disproportionate risks of poverty<sup>9</sup>. Young men under 25 are the group most likely to be destitute<sup>10</sup>. A range of welfare benefit freezes and restrictions exacerbate homelessness; particularly, removal of 'automatic' Housing Benefit entitlement for young adults and full roll out of Universal Credit could trigger significant increases in homelessness for this group. As with single homelessness more generally, statutory acceptances likely represent only a small proportion of overall youth homelessness as many young adults will not qualify as being in priority need<sup>11</sup>. Young adults who experience poverty and housing insecurity are more likely to be dealt by the police, they are more likely to experience poor mental health, they are at risk of exploitation, at risk of being victims of crime, and are significantly more likely to break the law. The rising levels of unemployment and poverty among young adults<sup>12</sup> because of the pandemic is likely to increase the demand on policing driven by young adults.

We know that children and young adults living in deprived neighbourhoods are more likely to suffer traumatic incidents, like witnessing or being the victim of violence, and parental neglect or abuse<sup>13</sup>. Factors associated with deprivation such as low neighbourhood safety, daily hassles, alongside racial discrimination are also core policing business. It is important to remember that while confidence in local policing has remained stable overall, people who live in the most deprived neighbourhoods are less likely to feel that the police can be relied upon, or that the police would treat them with fairness, respect and understanding in dealing with local concerns. Overall confidence in the police is 80% in the least deprived areas, but just 69% in the most deprived<sup>14</sup>. This report's findings also reflect on this wider trend.

## Structural inequalities

Ethnic and racial inequalities in the criminal justice system remain a huge concern. Black young adults (aged 18-20) are twice more likely to be arrested, and more likely to be held in custody on remand. Our previous analysis shows that they are also more likely to be dragged into the criminal justice system for relatively low-level and non-violent offences: A black young adult is 8.4 times more likely to receive a conviction for a non-violent offence compared to a white young adult. This suggests some of the disparities in the use of discretion for police-assisted diversion.

The inequalities in the criminal justice system are heightened by the inequalities young adults from Black and minoritised ethnic backgrounds face in access to healthcare, support and work. A particular area of interest for policing is the disparities Black, Asian and Roma, Gypsy, Traveller young adults face in obtaining mental health treatment. Diverse barriers to timely access exists, including racism, discrimination, and culturally inappropriate support. It is also important to highlight that Black young adults are overrepresented at the more critical end of the mental health system, in referrals from the criminal justice system, particularly through the use of restrictive interventions and detentions and under the Mental Health Act. Subsequently, they receive poorer treatment outcomes.

## A new way:

Maturity, vulnerability, poverty, and structural inequality should be at the heart of our approach to policing young adults. A lack of understanding of these challenges can lead to a new generation who enter adult life with both reduced life chances and negative perceptions of the police. We have a once in a generation opportunity to understand the challenges young adults face and invest in approaches that can divert them away from the criminal justice system and into support that turns lives around. Many of these young adults have boundless potential, but they need the right support to release it. Not only can a diversion change lives, if successful it will also enable police more time and resource to focus on serious and organised crime.

In developing this new approach, police should listen to young adults, because nobody understands their challenges and expectations better. This engagement will be a valuable educational process for both young adults and police. We hope these survey results can spark some of that debate nationally and locally.

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The surveys

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This publication analyses results from two national surveys that aimed to understand young adults' views of policing:

- The first survey was designed and delivered by Revolving Doors Agency in conjunction with New Generation Campaigners, an independent group of young adults who advise us on our policing policy work.
- The second was an independent poll commissioned by Revolving Doors Agency and conducted by Populus.

We have assessed how their experiences differ by gender, ethnicity, and life circumstances, and what can be done to improve young adults' trust and confidence in policing. It is our hope that this survey begins a national conversation about policing young adults. We have made charts and dataset open source and we encourage local forces to extract data and begin to understand trends in their local area.

Both surveys highlight the new generation's changing attitudes towards policing, crime, and justice. Young adults today expect the police to understand their personal circumstances and show compassion towards them. They want police officers to be able to identify their health and human needs and divert them away from the criminal justice system and into support. It is vital that the police leaders listen to young adults, particularly those with lived experience of the criminal justice system, understand their concerns, needs and expectations and co-create the future of policing in collaboration with them.

## Methodology

- The first survey was hosted online for four weeks between 3rd December 2020 and 4th January 2021. Respondents were able to remain anonymous to ensure confidentiality. All questions apart from the eligibility criteria were made optional to allow flexibility. The survey collected a mixture of quantitative and qualitative data. Qualitative data is also augmented by two focus groups with young adults. The survey reached 689 valid responses from young adults (18-25-year-olds). The findings of this survey are discussed in Sections from 3.1 and 3.4.
- The Populus poll was conducted between 12th and 13th of October 2020. The poll is based on a nationally representative sample of 2,034 adults, but the findings represented in this publication are based on a data extract of 232 young adults.

## Interpreting findings

Though the number of respondents to both surveys were large, we still need to be careful when interpreting the data and extrapolating from the findings. There is no guarantee that it was representative of the entire young adult population in England and Wales.

It is important to note that the level of needs among respondents are, in some cases significantly, higher than the general population estimates. This may indicate that young adults who experience more frequent contact with the police, due to multiple vulnerabilities, were more likely to respond to the survey.

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Profile of  
respondents

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This section summarises the profile of respondents to the first survey, carried out by the Revolving Doors Agency and excludes the additional 232 young adults who took part in the poll.

## Respondents' characteristics

The ethnicity of survey respondents broadly reflected the wider population of young adults.

Ethnic Group	Asian	Black	Mixed Race	White
Survey Population	10%	5%	6%	77%
National Population	10.3%	3.7%	3.2%	81.5%

- 69% of respondents were female, 29% were male, 2% preferred not to say.
- 18% of respondents identified as LGBTQ+.

## Respondents' needs profile

- Over a quarter (26%) were eligible for Free School Meals (compared to 17.3% in general population).
- 1 in 8 (12%) temporarily or permanently excluded from school (compared to 5.2% in general population).
- 1 in 3 reported previous experience of mental health issues (compared to 1 in 6 in general young adult population).
- 1 in 8 (12%) had a disability and/or long-term health condition.
- 1 in 10 had experienced problems with drugs and/or alcohol.
- 1 in 16 had previously experienced homelessness.
- 1 in 20 had experience of the care system / leaving care.
- Those with experience of homelessness and/or the care system/ leaving care often reported multiple needs.

## Respondents' experiences of police contact

- 45% of respondents did not have prior police contact; 39% reported 1-5 previous police contact(s); 16% had 6 or more previous police contacts.
- Two thirds of respondents who have previously been on Free Schools Meals had experienced police contact.
- A significant majority (89%) of respondents who had been temporarily or permanently excluded from school had experienced police contact.
- 1 in 3 respondents had been a victim of crime (compared to 10% of young people in London) and 1 in 5 had witnessed a crime.
- 1 in 5 had been stopped and searched (compared to the national average of 7 in 1000).

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# Findings

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## Trust

A majority of young adults who took part in this survey broadly agreed on the value of police in maintaining law and order and serving the public.

7 in 10 young adults believe that the police are a force for good.



6 in 10 young adults agree that the police were there to help them and their peers.



6 in 10 young adults agree that the police consistently act within the law.



*“Police are important in maintaining law and order and keeping us safe.”*

*“The aim of the police force is to protect the community.”*

*“Because I like to believe our police are here to protect the people.”*

However, over half of young adults (54%) did not think that the police consistently act in line with their own beliefs and values. Over half of young adults (53%) did not think the police understood young adults’ circumstances or acted compassionately towards them. They highlighted that the police should take steps to understand and tackle social issues such as poverty, violence against young women, and racism.

*“More focus on solving issues such as poverty – not just arresting and criminalising young people who turn to crime for money.”*

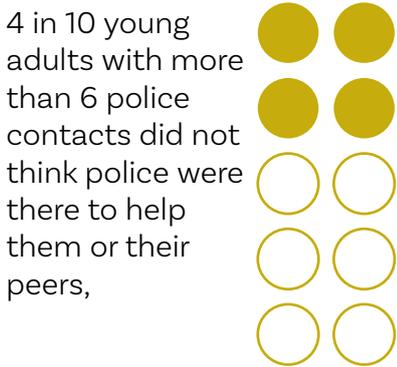
*“The police could seek to show more understanding of people from different backgrounds and work on their own internal diversity to better represent the population.”*

*“For many years, the police acted as if we were lying about domestic violence, despite consistent call outs and vulnerable family members.”*

*“The police make assumptions about young people especially Gypsies and Travellers they judge us and treat us unfairly they are prejudiced.”*



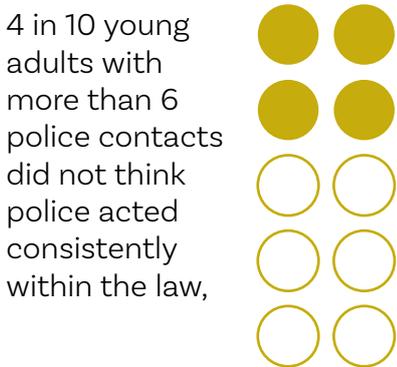
Young adults with experience of multiple police contacts (including mental health crisis, or being a victim or a witness or a suspect of crime) almost always gave more negative responses about the police.



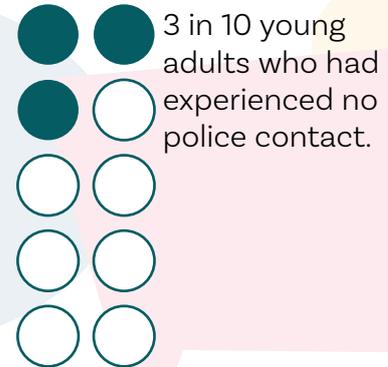
compared to



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Young adults who had negative experiences of policing expressed concern about police's reliance on arrest them or their peers, rather than offering support. Some felt police discriminated against them, or failed to recognise vulnerabilities or challenging circumstances that they found themselves in.

*"I have been mistreated by the police and have witnessed mistreatment."*

*"I often feel 'othered' by police due to my obviously foreign accent. I feel scared of police sometimes and like me and certain others are picked on for very minor things when older citizens may not be."*

*"The police discriminate against young people, particularly the working class or those of ethnic minorities."*

*“They hardly understand young people in a crisis situation, and I feel like they are a fear tactic rather than there to help others.”*

*“The police don’t seem to have a proper understanding of other people’s experiences and situations.”*

*“The police seem more interested in filling cells or policing people’s interactions with each other, than protecting the community.”*

## Fairness

Young adults who took part in this survey told us multiple factors influence the way police treats a young adult.

### When asked if the police would treat a person differently...

7 in 10 young adults thought police would treat them differently, if they lived in a deprived area.



7 in 10 young adults thought police would treat them differently, if they were a person of colour.



6 in 10 young adults thought police would treat them differently, if they had family or friends who have been in the criminal justice system.



5 in 10 young adults thought police would treat them differently, if they lived in poverty.



4 in 10 young adults thought police would treat them differently, if they had been in care.



*“It’s always operations and special task forces where I live.”*

*“Police is a ‘service’ for rich people, but ‘force’ for poor people.”*

*“If your dad is in prison, mum is in the hospital, and nan is struggling to look after you, you bet you’re on their list of suspects for the next burglary.”*

*“Police officers think they are communicating with people ‘in their own language’. That just means louder, and harsher if you come from my community.”*

## Safety

A majority of young adults, especially those with protected characteristics under the equalities act, did not feel safe walking home after dark.

### We asked young adults 'do you feel safe walking home alone after dark'

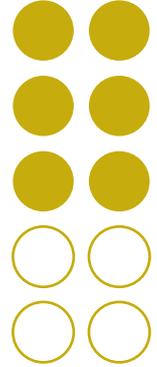
4 in 10 young men did not.



7 in 10 young women did not.



6 in 10 LGBTQ+ young adults did not.

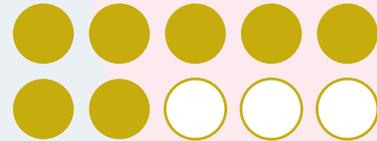


6 in 10 young adults who had a disability or long-term health condition did not.



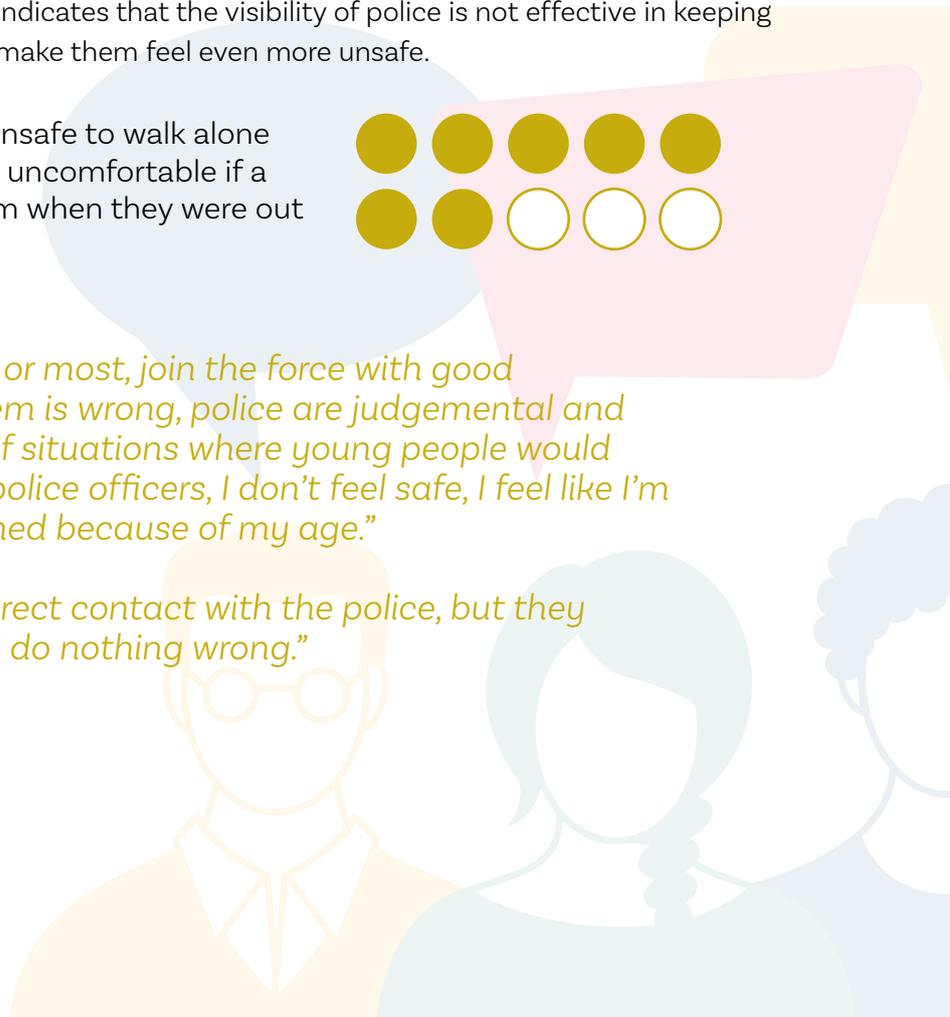
It has been long assumed that highly visible police in an area would make people feel safer because it deters and prevents crime. This survey indicates that the visibility of police is not effective in keeping young adults safe, instead it may even make them feel even more unsafe.

7 in 10 young adults who felt unsafe to walk alone after dark said they would feel uncomfortable if a police officer approached them when they were out on their own after dark.



*"Honestly, I know some, or most, join the force with good intentions, but the system is wrong, police are judgemental and frankly useless in a lot of situations where young people would need them. When I see police officers, I don't feel safe, I feel like I'm being judged and watched because of my age."*

*"I've never had bad or direct contact with the police, but they frighten me even when I do nothing wrong."*



## Confidence

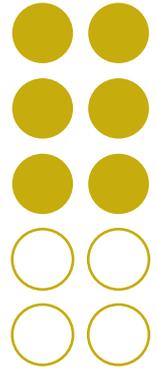
5 in 10 young adults would feel uncomfortable if a police officer approached them when they were out on their own after dark.



5 in 10 young adults would feel uncomfortable if a police officer approached them if they were with their friends in the park.



6 in 10 young adults would feel uncomfortable if a police officer came to their house.



This survey does not show a clear trend between amount of police contact and confidence of young adults in dealing with police in different scenarios. However, young adults with previous multiple police encounters, were more likely to feel “very uncomfortable” if the police approached to them in the park with their friends, or if a police officer came to their house. Focus groups carried out with our New Generation Campaigners suggests that discomfort was often caused because police officers would likely refer to previous criminal justice contacts (arrests or convictions), and they did not recognise when they developed or changed. They often did not want their friends, flatmates, or neighbours to find out about their offending history through this encounter and did not trust police to maintain confidence.

*“I know the second any officer puts my name into any database it’s going to change the way they interact with me. I work really hard to hide that side of me, I surround myself with people who don’t know that part of my life. So, if I’m refusing to give my name or I do give it and it escalates into a scene around people who aren’t used to those interactions – I know they would feel strange.”*

This survey suggests that compared to their peers, young adults who have mental health needs, disabilities or long-term health conditions, as well as young adults who were either victims or perpetrators of crime, are the least likely to feel confident when dealing with the police.

**We asked young adults how comfortable they would feel if a police officer approached to them when they were out on their own after dark.**

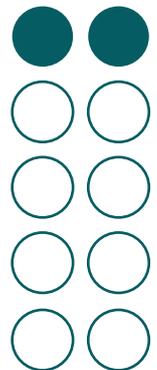
4 in 10 young adults who had a disability or long-term health condition would feel **very uncomfortable**.



3 in 10 young adults who identified as LGBTQ+ would feel **very uncomfortable**.



Compared to only 2 in 10 of all young adults who responded to the survey.



**We asked young adults how comfortable they would feel if a police officer came to their house.**

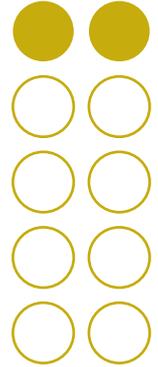
4 in 10 young adults who had police contact due to a mental health crisis would feel **very uncomfortable**.



3 in 10 young adults who had previously been arrested would feel **very uncomfortable**.



2 in 10 young adults who have been a victim of a crime would feel **very uncomfortable**.



*“They need to be aware that mental illness or autism is common, and they cannot assume everyone is neurotypical.”*

*“They came to my house once without warning and ruined my life.”*

**Young adults who do not trust the police are more likely to feel very uncomfortable about police contact.**

5 in 10 young adults, who disagreed that the police were a force for good, would feel very uncomfortable if the police approach them when they were out on their own after dark,



compared to



2 in 10 among all young adults.

5 in 10 young adults, who disagreed that the police consistently acts within law, would feel very uncomfortable if the police came to their house,



compared to



3 in 10 among all young adults.

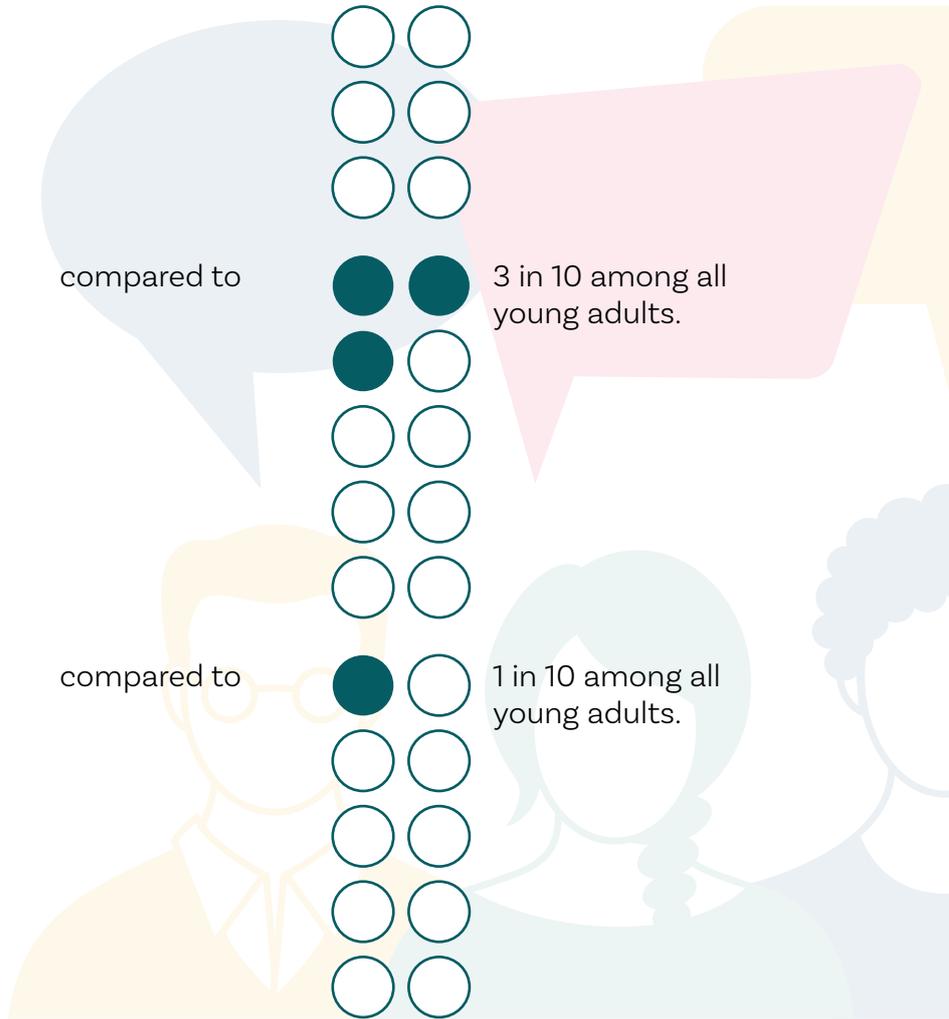
3 in 10 young adults, who disagreed that the police are there to help them or their peers, would feel very uncomfortable if the police approached them when they were in a park with their friends,



compared to



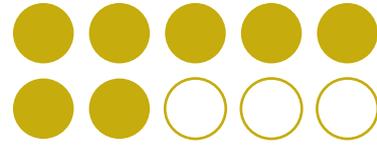
1 in 10 among all young adults.



## Diversion

In an independent poll, commissioned by Revolving Doors Agency and conducted by Populus, we asked: “if a young adult is experiencing homelessness, mental ill-health or drug or alcohol problems, should the police have the option to divert that young adult into support rather than arrest”

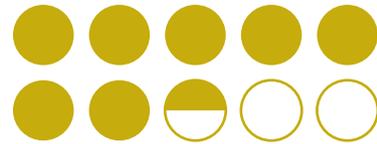
7 in 10 young adults agree that the police should divert rather than arrest, for all low-level and non-violent offences, such as shoplifting, minor drug offences, and summary non-motoring offences.



Young adults make a clear distinction between these low-level offences and more serious or violent crimes. The level of support for diversion for these group of offences is 2.5 times higher than more serious or violent offences, such as drug-trafficking and violence against person.

The public poll also suggests young adults’ changing attitudes towards drug-related offences:

7.5 in 10 young adults agree that drugs should be treated as a health problem, instead of a crime.





# Recommendations

## Young adults' recommendations

- 1 Involve** - Police leaders, locally and nationally, should create opportunities for young adults to raise their concerns, provide feedback and shape services
- 2 Understand** - Police must develop a common definition of vulnerabilities and train police to identify them (including low maturity, poverty, structural inequalities, mental health conditions, disabilities, and neurodiverse conditions).
- 3 Divert** - Police should divert vulnerable young adults into support, especially for those arrested for low-level and non-violent crimes.
- 4 Record** - Police must document their decision to divert young adults upon or prior to arrest.
- 5 Review** - Police data should be broken down by young adults (18-25); including an evidence-based explanation if the data shows any aspect of disproportionality or potential discrimination under all protected characteristics. Police should demonstrate what they are doing to tackle any identified inequalities.



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