

revolving doors

The Knot:

Lived experience perspectives to trauma,
poverty and inequalities

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About Revolving Doors

Revolving Doors 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 including mental ill-health, substance misuse, homelessness.

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.

About New Generation Policing

New Generation Policing is an initiative that supports police and crime commissioners and police services to develop and implement new interventions to stop young adults from being caught in the cycle of crime and crisis. Our partnership aims to divert young adults at the cusp of revolving door away from the criminal justice system and develop systemic responses to the combination of trauma, poverty and structural inequalities that drive the revolving door.

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Foreword

Revolving Doors has yet again provided us with an accurate description of a system that is working hard to do the wrong thing better. I do not say that to blame or judge my own, or any other, profession so much as the system we are a part of.

The report is a call for action and requires decisions and commitment to start the change. We should start by making trauma training mandatory for all professionals working with people with multiple unmet needs, so that we move from acknowledging trauma to responding to it effectively. It is not good enough to understand how a person arrived at the place they are today. We also need to use this insight to make better more compassionate decisions -decisions that are better for them, for victims and for communities.

The young people I spent my early police career catching and convicting are now adults and I now know their stories because I have met many of them. Childhoods loaded with Adverse Experiences and all too often physical and sexual abuse. When I ask them, what would have stopped them offending, they hardly ever mention arrest, custody and imprisonment. Quite often their turning point came as a result of one conversation with a frontline professional who believed in them, helped them access treatment, safe housing, peer support and a job. The things many of us take for granted.

Chief Constable Andy Rhodes
Chief Constable for Lancashire
Constabulary and the NPCC Lead for
Wellbeing and Engagement



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1 Introduction

This research explores guiding principles for trauma and poverty responsive policing from the perspective of young adults who commit repeated low-level offences. Their accounts highlight how their experiences of policing is tied in a knot with their experiences of trauma, poverty and structural inequalities.

Young adults are being dragged into our criminal justice system for relatively minor offences. They are getting caught in a cycle of repeat offending at an early age. We worked with people who have lived experience of that revolving door to offer their insights about what police could do differently.

Over the last five years, we have spoken to over 2,500 people with lived experience of the revolving door, and their accounts paint a stark picture of entangled disadvantages starting from childhood and continuing into adulthood. We have heard about multiple experiences of neglect, abuse and household dysfunction, multiple and traumatic losses and bereavement primarily driven by drug overdose and suicides, and experiences of community violence – of family and friends being beaten up, murdered, or families being driven out of their homes. All these experiences happen in the context of profound poverty, with unsafe or unsuitable accommodation, not being able to afford to feed the family, high levels of school exclusions, and persistent unemployment. People from Black and minoritised ethnic communities are even more likely to live in poverty,¹ experience huge inequalities in access to care, particularly for mental ill-health,² and be over-represented in the criminal justice system including for low-level and non-violent offences.³

Our current approach has led to a steady rise in the proportion of people with a history of repeat offending. People with histories of repeat offending have been rising, and now account for about 40% of all offenders.⁴ We need a smarter approach for intervening earlier and reducing this cycle of repeat low-level and non-violent offences that harm lives and communities.

Young adulthood is a critical time for intervention. Young adults aged 18-25 constitute less than 10 per cent of the UK population but make up to 30-40 per cent of all police cases. Evidence clearly shows that young adults do not reach full developmental maturity until age 25, and this lack of maturity can lead to unnecessary risk taking and impulsive behaviour. Many of these young adults are living in poverty, some are leaving care, large numbers are struggling with traumatic life events, some are at risk of sexual exploitation, and on turning 18 many experience a huge chasm between child-centred approaches and adult services in areas like housing, mental health and substance misuse.

A smarter approach would get young adults out of the criminal justice system and into support, freeing up police time to focus on serious and violent crime. A smarter approach would consider ‘causes of causes’ – looking behind the crime or even the immediate health need, and instead understand what is driving it – poverty, trauma and inequalities.

This briefing explores a set of guiding principles and approaches for trauma and poverty-responsive policing, taken from the perspective of people with lived experience of the revolving door. We use qualitative evidence from 100 people with lived experience of the revolving door, documenting their experiences leading up to each police contact and exploring their needs, expectations and limitations at each stage of interaction with the police (pre-arrest, arrest, police custody, and charging).

2 Summary of the findings and recommendations

This research suggests that:

- Young adults who come into repeat contact with the police are likely to have experienced ‘a tangle of disadvantage’, stacking experiences of trauma, poor health, structural inequalities and poverty which shaped the way they experienced their encounters with the police and how they judged the role and effectiveness of policing.
- There is an inverse correlation between the number of times a young adult has encountered a policing response (including welfare, crisis, and criminal justice responses) and their perception of the effectiveness and fairness of police services.
- Every encounter with police, regardless of welfare, crisis, or criminal justice context, appears to exacerbate trauma and perceived and real inequalities faced by young adults who are caught in the tangle of poverty, trauma, and structural inequalities.
- Policing strategies must address disparities in both use of force and exercise discretion among young adults who face structural inequalities, due to poverty, race, and gender. They should also review how operational policing tactics might currently be replicating the dynamics of existing personal or societal trauma, such as loss of power, autonomy, and safety.
- Young adults who come into repeat contact with the criminal justice system are likely to distrust police services, alongside other services and authority figures, and they may avoid support because they believe that no one will be understanding or trustworthy. They often feel hopeless about their life circumstances or chances of recovery. Providing a peer outreach service can motivate individuals to engage with diversion services and comply with support and treatment requirements.
- Too many opportunities are being missed to identify the vulnerabilities and needs of young adults in police custody and during interrogation. Complex trauma can manifest in a range of ways, including impulsive and high-risk behaviours such as self-harm, and problematic substance use, or aggression often as means to gain control over their lives. Police officers should recognise that vulnerabilities can manifest in ways beside crying or self-harm. Young adults, even those with repeat experiences of police custody, may still require assessment and support.
- Policing strategies should acknowledge the prevalence of trauma among young adults who commit relatively low-level but repeat offences, as well as the impact trauma may have on how they experience high-stress situations and environments, such as being arrested and held in police custody settings. This research found that young adults routinely reported feeling so disoriented and stressed in police custody that they did not understand the processes, their rights and obligations, the information given to them or requested from them. They subsequently pleaded guilty to simply speed up the process and leave the custody suite as soon as they could. This has a huge bearing on the procedures and fairness of our justice system, and it should be looked at as a priority by policing leaders.
- Policing strategies should include a review to identify ways to improve police custody environments. Getting basics right is crucial, such as minimum daylight requirements, heating, and availability of sanitary products for women. Participants suggested that improvements such as installing digital clocks in cells, providing noise cancelling headphones, and undertaking positive activities to manage stress, such as reading, colouring, or opportunities to exercise could reduce harm to vulnerable people.

Some police services have already taken positive steps to improve the police custody environment by designing and developing specialist wings for first-time offenders, children, and women. The learnings from these pilot schemes should become mainstream to avoid further escalating trauma among those young adults who are repeatedly arrested. Investing in core policing skills such as de-escalation, effective listening and effective communication are also likely to improve the experience of young adults in police custody or under interrogation.

- People with experience of custody or interrogation were clear that it is not possible to create a trauma-informed police custody, which may aid rather than hinder a person's recovery from trauma. Those developing policing strategies should consider reducing the use of police custody, whenever possible and appropriate. Investing in pre-arrest/at the point of arrest diversion and increasing the provision of voluntary interviews for vulnerable young adults who might be presenting for relatively low-level but repeat offences can reduce the trauma.



3 Methodology

This briefing brings together evidence from 100 people with personal experience of the ‘revolving door’, meaning people in repeat contact with the criminal justice system, driven by multiple unmet needs including mental ill-health, problematic substance use, homelessness, and domestic abuse.

The research incorporates findings from participatory workshops co-facilitated by people with lived experience. The workshops were held between August and October 2019 at the Revolving Doors Lived Experience Forum meetings in London, Birmingham, and Manchester, as well as a session hosted by Leaders Unlocked.⁵ These workshops were followed up with 15 in-depth interviews with 30 people aged 20-30 focusing on their experience during the transition from childhood into adulthood (18-25) from October 2019-August 2020.

The workshops and interviews aimed to capture a variety of information, including:

- When their first contact with police services occurred, what the nature of that contact was, and what their experiences with police and subsequently other services were.
- How many times they have had contact with the police, in different contexts, during the transition from childhood to adulthood (18-25); including in the community, as part of a crisis or welfare response (such as mental health crisis, homelessness), as victims/witnesses of crime, and as suspects.
- Their experience of police (or policing) and how these might have helped or hindered how they can deal with any issues that led up to the police contact
- Exploring their needs, expectations and what they perceive to be limitations at each stage of police interaction (pre-arrest/community, arrest, custody, and being charged or diverted)

- How these interactions would change if police (or policing) had a greater understanding of trauma, poverty, and where relevant structural inequalities (such as race, ethnicity or gender).

The workshops were followed by a session for the authors and Revolving Doors Lived Experience Forum members and young advisors at Leaders Unlocked to confirm key findings and recommendations.

Additional analysis has been undertaken by the authors to develop:

- lived experience journeys, which is a detailed map of lived experience over time that can be used to quickly identify the positive and negative experiences⁶ in young peoples’ interactions with the police and other agencies, and
- personas, a short document that summarises the needs, experiences, behaviours and goals of a group of people who share a similar journey.

4 Pre-arrest encounters with police

This section explores the participants' early recollections of police encounters, including their experiences of community policing, receiving a welfare response, or being involved as a victim or witness of crime. It builds on each subsequent and often frequent contact, and considers whether their experiences of police services and their perceptions of policing in general changed over time. Each subsection includes strategic and operational practice ideas developed by people with lived experience to make policing more responsive to trauma, poverty, and structural inequalities.

Lived experience recommendations: Pre-arrest

- 1 Policing strategies should include in-depth understanding of poverty, trauma, and how they intersect with gender-specific or racial trauma. This should include a clear plan to reduce the use of police services to deliver crisis and welfare responses through partnership working.
- 2 Policing strategies should prioritise investment in preventative services and support capacity building among communities that are most affected by structural inequalities and trauma.
- 3 Police services need to focus on building relationships with communities, and especially young adults in communities, in areas which have high crime or arrest rates. They need to be proactive, creative and develop relationships through individuals or organisations that young adults already trust. This may include partnership with community leaders, civil rights groups, faith groups and local voluntary organisations.
- 4 Policing strategies should pro-actively address racial disparities in their use of both force and discretion.
- 5 Police officers must be trained to challenge preconceptions about poverty, and any operational prejudices and stereotypes held by the rank and file about 'underclasses' should be routinely challenged.
- 6 Police officers should actively seek to avoid re-enforcing traumas that are caused by structural inequalities, such as poverty, race, ethnicity, and gender. This means limiting actions that can replicate the dynamics of the original trauma, such as loss of power, autonomy or safety.
- 7 Police officers should consider the impact of trauma on victims of domestic abuse and ensure that women's needs (alongside the needs of their children) are attended to effectively.

4.1. Policing deprivation

The first key consideration in understanding participants' early encounters with police and other services is, inevitably, the context within which they occur. The vast majority of participants grew up in and continue to live in the most deprived areas of the country (sometimes referred as the first Decile⁷). Evidence shows that crime, as well as the most intensive policing efforts, tends to be concentrated in the most deprived localities. Participants' experiences of disputes with neighbours and sometimes exposure to community violence, signals why there might have been a concentrated police effort in their local area, but their experience of intensive policing efforts remains complex.

Participants frequently talked about how police officers were 'always' on their street or estate patrolling, but not necessarily engaging with the residents. They felt that because of their local area's reputation it was treated differently from elsewhere.

“All my mates had family problems, you know, my mother was on crack, others had regular beatings. But we supported each other and looked after each other. Yeh, there was some criminality, people smoked weed and took booze from the off licence, but there was nothing major. We didn't need the police to watch our every move, we needed some love and support, and I think we'd have got that if we lived somewhere else.”

Participants reflected that policing of deprived areas was about increased surveillance or target hardening (for example installation of fences and cages where young adults gather or installing unfriendly architecture to discourage individuals from sleeping rough). One respondent described this as “it's always operations and special task forces where I live”, and contrasted this approach with listening and signposting individuals to services: “It's a police service for rich people, it's a police force for poor people”.

Despite these commonly perceived inequalities in policing response, participants often reflected their first personal encounter with the police as a helpful and positive experience. However, their experiences changed as they grew older and reached adulthood. One respondent described growing up in a deprived area as:

“being robbed from any hope...you might as well stop trying to prove your innocence and do what's expected of you.”

Participants also reflected that growing up under suspicion resulted in outbursts of anger and resentment. The outbursts were thought to “bubble up around the problem between police and communities they serve”.

4.2. Policing poverty and personal crisis

While not everyone within a given area will necessarily experience the same level or type of deprivation, evidence shows that the vast majority of participants in this study have experienced profound levels of poverty, such as not being able to adequately heat their homes or live in a home in a good state of repair. As children they had to go without one or more things that are deemed essential by the majority of the population, such as a warm winter coat, three meals a day, or books and toys of their own. Almost none of them had had access to hobbies or social activities such as school trips. These hardships were not exceptional one-off incidences, instead they persisted from early childhood into adulthood.

Participants felt they were unfairly labelled as 'work shy', 'scrounger' or 'skiver'. They felt that the popular image of 'underclass' in the media shaped the way police officers saw them:

“If you are a lad, and don't have a job, because there isn't any jobs around and your education is questionable, they assume you must be unemployed just of out spite, they think you must be into crime, and all sorts of deceit and fraud...Most of the time you're only surviving, but they are onto you all the time.”

Participants reflected on the overlapping nature of poverty and ill-health, and difficulties in accessing support from services in areas they have grown up and lived in. There was a recognition that poverty breeds ill-health (including mental ill-health and problematic substance use), and ill-health simultaneously increased their likelihood of future poverty due to unemployment or low-paid work.

Participants found that that the police officers were 'considerate', 'friendly' and 'helpful' when they responded to them during mental health crisis or homelessness. This was particularly the case for welfare responses they have received as a child or a young adult.

“Overall, the police were friendly. They gave me a coat when I was cold and brought me food. That made me feel grateful.”

“I was sitting on the steps and sobbing (aged 16), when the police attended. He sat down and talked to me, he told me about his sister, who has the same condition as me. He told me about charities to get support. He was very understanding.”

However, participants raised significant concerns about police responding to mental health crisis. Participants recognised that police officers have to routinely respond to mental health crisis because of significant underinvestment and cuts to community health provision, however they were concerned that those in need of mental health care were unnecessarily driven into the criminal justice system. There were additional concerns among individuals who had negative experiences of policing and police services suggesting further police contact does more harm than good at times of crisis.

“If I'm having a mental health breakdown, and the police pulls up a car, first that's very humiliating, as if I committed a crime. Second, the police have a bit of a bad rep where I live, so if I am not arrested, people will think I'm a grass, and that's not good either.”

The negative cycle between poor health and poverty was frequently experienced inter-generationally, making it more likely that people encountered police services early in life, for example as part of a crisis response (for example someone in their family dying as a result of drug overdose).

“The police asked me to name and identify [my brother who overdosed in the living room]. I told them it was my brother. I don't know why that was necessary. They already knew who he was, he was in and out [of police custody]. They wanted to know where he got his drugs from. It didn't matter, he was gone.”

Participants often talked about their experiences of traumatic incidents, like witnessing or being the victim of violence, physical and sexual abuse, and parental neglect. Their experiences are consistent with the latest research that proves children and young adults who experience poverty and live in deprived neighbourhoods are more likely to experience traumatic incidents.⁸ Furthermore, daily stresses caused by food poverty and housing insecurity, as well as other factors associated with deprivation such as low neighbourhood safety and exposure to community violence, increase the risk that trauma will negatively impact their lives. Participants reflected that the police services recognised the association between poverty, trauma and crimes, but they often treated as factors that almost inevitably resulted in crime, and did very little to signpost or support young people who are experiencing poverty and trauma away from the criminal justice system.

“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.”

Participants also recognised the impact of traumatic experiences on police officers, who not only attend to violent incidents and road accidents, but also attend to people who are going through a mental health crisis, people with complex histories of trauma.

“The police are just re-enacting the way the system is treating them. They need support to remain human too.”

4.3. Policing structural inequalities

Participants also made a clear link between poverty and structural inequalities. Their concerns are validated by recent statistics: Women, disabled people and people of colour face a higher likelihood of poverty than their male, non-disabled or white counterparts. The poverty rate is 1.5 percentage points higher for women than men, 7.3 percentage points higher for disabled adults than for non-disabled adults, and a staggering 16 percentage points higher for BAME adults than for white adults.⁹

Participants described ‘a tangle of disadvantage’, stacking experiences of poor health, structural inequalities and poverty which shaped the way they experienced dealings with the police and how they assessed the role and effectiveness of policing.

Race and ethnicity

Black and South Asian participants highlighted the significance of deprivation and poverty resulting from the systematic discrimination of minority groups. They reflected how they are frequently disadvantaged in accessing education and employment because of discrimination against their race, religion, or accent. They shared their experiences of growing up in, what some called, “twilight zones”, with many generations being pushed into a life in poverty, often in poor quality accommodation and with poor access to services. For some participants, this was due to institutional racism, and for others, it was due to commissioners not consulting and working alongside black and minoritised ethnic groups in designing services that meet their needs. For example, one participant shared his frustration of being “on the police radar” even before they had formal contact due to his experiences of poverty and proximity to crime. He was particularly frustrated that there was “a big divide between services (including police) and the local community they serve”.

Some of the Black and South Asian participants suggested that the crime rates were higher in where they live in part due to being pulled into petty acquisitive crimes to make ends meet, and partly due to the intensive policing. The younger participants reported negative behaviour and misconduct by the police towards young people in their communities and suggested that race remains an important factor in police interactions. Frequently, this resulted in young adults feeling they were being targeted.

One participant was a victim of a violent attack at the Notting Hill Carnival. She felt that the police refused to recognise her, or her friends, as victims because they were Black and working class.

“There was a stabbing, and my group of friends were targeted [by the police] but we were actually the victims.”

One of the most persistent criticisms of the police related to the way in which they exercise their powers to stop and search. This was particularly to the case for Black young adults who live in urban areas.

“I didn’t understand the purpose [of stop and search]. They said I matched a description of a robbery - I was dressed very smartly. I felt confused, targeted, fearful.”

“I got stopped and searched tens of times. Any excuse like riding my bike on the pavement, to being suspected of stealing from the shops. After a while, it really bothers you. I am innocent, but, like, they won’t give up, they’ll target me until one day I do something wrong.”

Black participants also commented on how police officers make judgements based on their perceptions of the behavioural and cultural traits of the communities they serve.

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

These judgements were particularly problematic when the police attended and searched a home where a family member was a suspect. One woman described her experience as:

“My mother was shaking like a leaf. My mum has anxiety issues, so I wanted to keep her calm. I told her ‘police are the good guys, don’t worry’ in our native tongue. I was shouted down. I didn’t know we weren’t allowed to speak to each other. Imagine me, three big men in the house, mum having a panic attack, not allowed to talk, not allowed to move. Our door wasn’t repaired for six months. There wasn’t any follow up support for either one of us.”

It is important to recognise that young Black people’s personal interactions with police were influenced by the accounts of their parents and grandparents, as well as online videos and recordings of black men and women being assaulted or killed by police (internationally and in the UK). These experiences were added to the daily experiences of racism, such as hate crimes, or discrimination at school or work, systemic racism including disparities in wealth and health, as well as more subtle forms of racism in the form of comments or questions that perpetuate racial stereotypes. Cumulatively this has a significant impact on young Black people’s health and wellbeing and is now recognised as ‘racial trauma’; its impact can span generations. One of the key challenges for participants was developing an intellectual and practical response in which racial trauma can be considered and tackled by policing. Reflecting on the principles of ‘trauma-informed’ approaches, participants considered that police should acknowledge the impact of racial trauma, often compounded by poverty, among young people from Black and South Asian backgrounds, *and* actively seek to avoid re-traumatisation.

Young women

Women who took part in the interviews reflected on the financial instability and economic exploitation they have experienced as lone mothers. They felt they were frequently stereotyped by services, including police services as ‘single mothers of the estate’, and felt under constant scrutiny for lack of employment, poverty and their supposed ‘inadequate parenting’, particularly of their sons.

“It’s as if I was the only person responsible for raising my children alone. My partner was abusive towards me, I had to leave him to save my children. I can’t find work due to my criminal record, not because I don’t want to work, or not because I don’t want to look after my children.”

Women participants also shared their experiences of encountering police services as a victim of a domestic abuse. One young woman talked about her previous violent relationship, which has on several occasions, resulted in police attendance. When the below incident occurred, she was drinking heavily to “numb the pain”. She said:

“On one occasion, my boyfriend smashed my car. When I saw it, my heart sank. I had no money to get it repaired, and I had no other means to get to work the next day. I feared for the safety of my children too, so I took them to my mother’s house. My boyfriend came back which kicked off a big row. Again, the police came [after] half an hour, and the first thing they did was to take pictures of the car, and ask me where he’s gone, then they asked me where my children are. At no point, did they ask me ‘hey, how are you feeling, what can we do to help you?’. They were interested in securing evidence, rather than securing I am okay.”

Her experience was echoed by other women who raised their concerns about the policing response to women experiencing homelessness, or other drug and alcohol issues.

“The police were helpful in the first domestic violence case (aged 16), but last year when I was in a domestic situation, they were not so much (aged 26). Because when you are homeless, you have no room to sound [off]. My voice echoes in the town centre, but no one hears. . . I was begging them last year to leave me alone, but when I actually needed them they were not there.”

Women also discussed the policing of sex work. Their accounts highlighted an institutionalised prejudice against sex workers, with women often feeling blamed, judged, and criminalised. They emphasised that the role of policing in targeting sex workers, clients or other people involved in organising sex work displaced women into isolated and dangerous work locations. They often felt disbelieved over the accounts of their clients and police officers.

“I was street homeless for 15 years. I just had to do what I had to survive on the streets, but a lot of damage has been done during this time...I often thought to myself what's the point, nobody cares about women like me.”

Their accounts were consistent with a recent systematic review which showed that sex workers who experienced repressive policing practices (such as a recent arrest, displacement from a work place) were more likely to experience sexual or physical violence, less likely to report these to police, and more likely to have HIV or other sexually transmitted infections, compared with sex workers who had managed to avoid repressive policing practices.¹⁰



5 Arrests

This section explores participants' experiences of arrests, beginning from the first arrest in childhood or young adulthood, escalating to frequent arrests in adulthood. It also considers what else was happening in their lives that led up to each arrest, and whether they felt the policing response was adequate in addressing the issues that might have led to police contact in the first place.

Lived experience recommendations on arrest

- 1 Police strategies should recognise that repeat low-level and non-violent offending that particularly escalates during young adulthood is driven by a combination of poverty, trauma and structural inequalities. Safeguarding measures and support provisions currently available for children should also be made available to those transitioning from childhood into adulthood.
- 2 Police services should recognise the prevalence of complex trauma among people who commit repeated low-level crime. Police officers should recognise that complex trauma may manifest in a range of ways such as impulsive and high risk behaviour, self-injurious behaviours, problematic substance use to mask emotional or mental health problems or to have a sense of control over their experiences.
- 3 Frontline police officers should recognise that arrests are highly stressful, often re-enacting and exacerbating existing trauma. When appropriate, police officers should consider diverting individuals who commit repeat low-level offences driven by poverty and trauma away from the criminal justice system, ideally without arresting, to minimise further psychological harm.
- 4 Police strategies should recognise that young adults who experienced poverty, trauma and structural inequalities are likely to distrust police services, alongside other services and authority figures, and they may avoid support either because they believe that no one will be understanding or trustworthy or because they feel hopeless about their life circumstances or recovery. Providing a peer outreach service can motivate individuals to engage with diversion services and comply with support and treatment requirements.

5.1. The changing nature of arrest from childhood into adulthood

Before participants experienced their first arrest many had had frequent prior contact with police services. This was a consequence of growing up in areas where there was a strong police presence, as well as witnessing or being a victim of crime (particularly domestic abuse or other violent crime). Participants commonly commented that they were “known” to the police service, because either their family members or close friends were involved in using drugs, or because they themselves had received

a welfare or crisis response. For a considerable majority, the police were perceived as both a “service provider” and an “antagonistic” presence that targeted them, their friends or family. Participants felt that the police understood the circumstances within which the crime occurred, but that their law enforcement role conflicted with their welfare role. One participant described this as:

“They know your background, but they use it to judge, not understand.”

The dual role of police as law enforcement and welfare provider was particularly confusing for young adults, whose low-level (most often non-violent) offending would ordinarily be addressed differently when they were children. For example, participants talked about the cliff-edge in support from children and adolescent services as they turn 18, and how they were left to “fend for themselves” as young adults. For some this meant they were left without any mental health support as they no longer reached the adult thresholds, while for others, this meant finding themselves sofa-surfing and eventually on the streets, often picking up drugs and alcohol to “cope” with their situation.

The cliff-edge in support from other services, and the increasing levels of need among young adults resulted in further police encounters in the context of welfare and crisis support, alongside the law enforcement for theft, drug possession or nuisance behaviour (such as loitering, street drinking and sleeping rough). Other participants talked about being caught stealing groceries or toiletries, and the police visiting their homes as part of a safeguarding response to ensure that the child was not being neglected by their parents or experiencing severe poverty.

“Police aren’t interested in what’s going on in your life. They tell you ‘you’re now a grown up, so start taking responsibility for your actions.’”

Participants talked about how the police did not seem to consider factors such as household pressures, poverty, and exploitation as possible causes of low-level offending among young adults. Young women with children, who live in abusive relationships, particularly felt unsupported by services while being judged and scrutinised by the police services. This was particularly the case if they developed mental ill-health or problematic substance misuse, or when they behaved “aggressively” against police officers and other services because of significant trauma they have experienced. In many instances, women shared their experiences of stealing to fund the addiction of their partners, feed their children, or sometimes

accepting responsibility for substantial drug charges to protect their partners or family members.

“I understand there are consequences and people appreciate that if you do bad things then there is a price, but not everything is black and white. It is as if somehow that is going to stop just by being condemned, no it instead perpetuates a cycle. When you are labelled as a bad person, given more punishment, that’s more reason to pick up a drink. Somewhere in that cycle, they need to see how for some people there isn’t any chance of changing.”

Our interviews suggested that arrests and cautions received in childhood for offences such as theft and minor drug offences were rare; in contrast there was a sharp increase in the rates of arrests for the same offences after they turned 18. Half of the people who participated in interviews highlighted 20 or more arrests, a third 10 or more arrests, and the remaining five or more arrests during the ages of 18-25. If those arrests had been spread evenly across those seven years, the lowest rate of arrest would have been once a year, and the highest would have been one arrest every two months.

5.2. Arrests escalating trauma and structural inequalities

Research shows that people with trauma histories are more likely to incorrectly understand the emotions of others and assume other peoples’ intentions to be malevolent.¹¹ They are also more likely to distrust authority, including the police. Participants to this research had histories of repeat contact with the criminal justice system, as well as other health and support services, such as mental health services, drug and alcohol agencies, and homelessness services. Over several years, they have engaged, dropped out of, and tried to re-engage with services many times. It was clear that their experiences of ‘being let down by services’ reflected past traumatic relationships.

“ I don't trust anyone, apart from my mother. I don't trust the government; I don't trust services; I don't trust people. They do what they want to do when they want to do it....I have been in and out for ten years, some of them were recalls, they let me down each time. ”

Participants' accounts broadly suggested an inverse correlation between the participants' perceptions of police services as a fair or helpful service and the number of interactions they had with police (including welfare, victim, and criminal justice responses). This negative perception of policing had serious ramifications for their cooperation with the police officers, particularly in high stress situations such as stop and search, and on arrest. Their experiences are consistent with the research which shows that people with trauma histories are more likely to struggle with regulating emotions or managing anger.¹² Participants, especially men, reflected that “lack of cooperation” with police officers during arrest was frequently a sign of distress caused by unresolved trauma, but the police officers often interpreted it as a sign of aggression.

“ Police are too risk averse to see why the person in front of them are resisting the arrest. Not always, but sometimes it is linked to trauma. ”

There is ample evidence, including from this study, that shows a correlation between trauma and high-risk behaviours, such as problematic drug or alcohol use. However, participants felt that police too often focused on ‘what they did’ rather than ‘what happened to them’. Respondents told us that police services did not ask them what was happening in their lives leading up to the offence, and what support they needed then to be able to address the main causes of their offending.

“ They used to keep telling me “Come on, move on”. Nobody asked me what was happening in my life. Cops just batted my head and took me in from the age of 16. They would just do the interview, and no one ever asked what is really going on. ”

Participants consistently expressed tensions between harm reduction and law enforcement, expressing concerns that their experiences of mental ill-health, homelessness and substance misuse were ‘criminalised’ rather than ‘supported’:

“ I am not blaming individual [police officers], but the law seems so black and white in terms of punishment. I understand it is complex and the police aren't equipped to always ask what's going on in people's lives, they can't help. For women especially, addiction is a major source of criminal behaviour. I disagree that police try to help people like me. They've just become part of a system that is not designed to help people who are in addiction or struggling otherwise. They perpetuate the cycle of addiction and crime. ”

Participants consistently told us that repeat arrests heightened emotional distress and reinforced feelings of helplessness. They said these experiences put them at a higher risk of negative reactions, emotionally, verbally, and sometimes physically against the police officers, in one participant's words, “to be heard”.

Black and South Asian participants had additional concerns about the interface of racial trauma and arrests, particularly when they result in release due to lack of evidence. Participants reflected on ‘the ripple effect’ of arrests on their community, with each wrongful arrest confirming the communities' experiences of being “targeted”, ‘humiliated’ and ‘victimised’ by law enforcement.

“Police broke down our front door and pulled me outside in my boxers. I was arrested on the grounds for selling Class A drugs. They thought I was doing that because people used to come in and out of our house at all hours. But our home was like a social hub, my father was a well-respected figure in the community. I felt so embarrassed that day. I wasn’t charged due to lack of evidence, but we had to tell people not to go in and out of our house so often. I felt my dad was humiliated for his Rastafarian beliefs.”

Among Black and South Asian participants, there were additional concerns about the frequent use of sweep arrests for being in an area at the wrong time. Participants felt that the sweep arrests were frequently used because the areas they lived in were labelled as ‘crime-ridden’. They also raised consistent concerns about racial profiling, saying that the current practice damages the relationship between police services and communities they serve.

5.3. Poverty’s interface with arrests

Participants with experiences of homelessness shared their experiences of being regularly moved on, fined, or banned from certain locations, or being arrested for breaches. They felt arrests were ‘dehumanising’ and left them feel ‘ignored’ or ‘abandoned’, when they clearly needed help accessing safe and secure accommodation. One participant shared how they were arrested while sleeping on the streets and screamed due to agony caused by abscesses on their legs; however, his scream was interpreted as aggression towards the police.

“Don’t fight with aggression, deescalate the causes of aggression – pain, anxiety, triggers.”

Others were arrested for petty crimes such as shoplifting and drug use, while they were sleeping rough:

“I have 26 convictions, most are petty crimes or breaches, like not attending the voluntary interview or showing up at the probation. But if you are on the streets, it is difficult to stick to your appointments. They say they are helping the homeless, but they are cherry picking who they are helping.”

Participants highlighted the common use of synthetic cannabinoids among people who are sleeping rough, and how the drug’s effects such as extreme anxiety, confusion, paranoia and violent behaviour might impact on their interactions with the police officers on the street. They suggested people with problematic substance use on the streets are well known to the police services, and more likely to be stopped and searched, or arrested for possession and distribution of drugs. None of the participants had any experience of pre-arrest diversion, except for two people who accessed treatment services through Thames Valley Police.

“People are in a very vulnerable situation. You can’t deal with drugs through arrest targets, police need to get as creative as they can be.”

Participants said that the police services routinely missed opportunities to identify that poverty was driving relatively low-level acquisitive crime. They felt the police officers should “slow down”, and reflect whether a person was experiencing profound poverty, including rough sleeping, and could be diverted into a support service rather than be arrested and processed. One participant described how they experienced such a response when they were “acting untoward” due to mental ill-health. The police officer who attended the incident did not arrest the individual, but instead informed mental health services who arrived at the scene and intervened. The participant was not prosecuted, and they successfully engaged with mental health support services. The participant attributed this outcome to the police de-escalating the situation and recognising their needs.

6 Police custody

This section explores how young adults who come into repeat contact with the criminal justice system experience police custody. Although the workshops were not designed specifically to understand the impact of trauma and traumatic stress in police custody, participants consistently chose to speak out about this issue, and particularly how being held in a cell and being interviewed by both police and other health services can reinforce trauma.

Lived experience recommendations: police custody

- 1 Policing strategies should acknowledge the prevalence of trauma among young adults who commit relatively low-level but repeated offences, as well as the impact this may have in how they experience high-stress situations and environments, such as being arrested and held in police custody settings. This research highlights that young adults routinely reported feeling so disoriented and stressed in police custody that they did not understand the processes, their rights and obligations, the information given to them or requested from them, and subsequently pleaded guilty to simply speed up the process and leave the custody suite as soon as they could. This has a huge bearing on the procedures and fairness of our justice system, and it should be dealt with as a priority by policing leaders.
- 2 Custody staff, including police and health teams, should recognise that people who are arrested for relatively low-level but repeat offences are likely to experience vulnerabilities linked to the impact of previous trauma. For young adults who experienced trauma, brain development may be interrupted, and their maturity, mental health, and emotional regulation affected, as well as skills for managing impulses and anger. It is concerning that young adults feel they had to negotiate their vulnerability, and felt they would not be able to access the assessment and support they need unless they cried uncontrollably or self-harmed.
- 3 Policing strategies should include a review of police custody environments with a view to making improvements that would benefit all users of the custody service. Getting basics right is crucial, such as minimum daylight requirements, heating, and availability of sanitary products for women. Some police services have already taken positive steps to improve police custody environment or by designing and developing specialist wings for first-time offenders, children and women. Learning from these pilot schemes should be rolled out across police services to avoid further escalating trauma among young adults who are repeatedly arrested. Investing in core policing skills such as de-escalation, effective listening and effective communication are likely to improve the experience of young adults in police custody or under interrogation.
- 4 Policing strategies should also consider the myriad ways the police custody environments can retraumatise vulnerable individuals. This research suggests that the most effective prevention is to avoid police custody, whenever possible and appropriate. Investing in pre-arrest/at the point of arrest diversion and strengthening the provision of voluntary interviews for vulnerable young adults who might be presenting for relatively low-level but repeat offences can be useful.

6.1. Trauma in police custody

Participants reported feeling stressed, disoriented, and overwhelmed when they were brought to police custody. They did not understand the processes and reflected that they often misunderstood or did not know their rights and obligations. When they were asked about any physical illnesses, mental health conditions or learning disabilities, they did not want to disclose this information. There were several reasons for this: including not understanding why medical information was needed or what information was relevant. They were also concerned about privacy or feared the information might be used against them.

“You might be there with a mental health condition, and that’s hard enough to talk about without someone talking to someone else beside you and behind you. It’s intimidating.”

Similarly, many found that they were ‘processed’ through the evidence room, often commenting they felt ‘shuffled’ between fingerprints, drug testing and photographs. Some recalled that the police officers took time to explain the process to them at their first arrest, but they were too stressed and disoriented to fully listen and comprehend what they were told. Others commented that the police officers in custody assume that “frequent flyers know exactly how the process works”, and therefore pay very little attention to understanding their needs or explaining the process to them.

Participants frequently described the high anxiety caused by sensory impacts such as bright lights and loud noises in the custody environment. They described two different ways of coping with the high sensory environment; uncontrollable anger or feeling as if they have been disconnected from reality, feeling like they are sitting outside their bodies observing events happening around them, or not being able to tell the passage of time. It is important to note that both response types are closely associated with trauma, regardless of whether they fall below or above the threshold of mental disorders.¹³

Participants reported they resorted to shouting and screaming, as they felt this was the only way for them to feel heard. They also talked about anger and other challenging behaviours as not a symptom of mental ill-health, but rather an unhelpful reaction to the stressful environment which triggered thoughts and feelings such as distrust, being let down, or re-enactment of previous traumatic experiences. They reflected that while police officers might interpret these behaviours as ‘attention-seeking’ or ‘non-compliant’, they felt this was the only way to cope.

“It’s so loud – buzzers, screaming, shouting. The only way to get heard is to scream and shout yourself”

“I kick off, because I’m scared, I’m frightened, I don’t know where I am, I don’t fully understand things. I’m not trying to be a pain or anything it’s just the way I react to that situation”

Participants also reported experiences of terror, confusion, disorientation, helplessness, and detaching from reality. They talked about how “the time stops in police custody” and how they could not tell the difference between one or five hours, or “each hour felt like days”. Some felt they were watching themselves from a distance as an observer, with the custody suite appearing unreal. They felt completely withdrawn and overwhelmed, feeling ‘trapped’, ‘helpless’ and ‘forgotten about’, unable to speak or ask for help.

“The environment is daunting and scary. The room amplifies anxiety.”

“I was left in limbo, in a cell, was scared and not sure what was happening. The police could have done more to reassure and explain the process.”

“There is a torture of waiting...it’s all more trauma.”

“It was freezing cold, uncomfortable, boring, nothing to help you or understand what is happening.”

Participants’ accounts described different ways that young adults and adults in the revolving door might negotiate their vulnerabilities in police custody. Amongst some participants there was an agreement that the custody officers thought people who “presented well” (i.e. remained silent) and individuals who appeared ‘aggressive’ did not require additional support. Their accounts are consistent with recent research that suggests vulnerability remains difficult to identify in police custody and in practice is subject to interpretation by officers.¹⁴

A small minority of respondents shared their experiences of self-inflicted harm, and how these were their attempts to cope with emotional and physical distress in custody suites. While the participants recognised that custody officers’ duties were guided by risk assessments and ensuring the welfare of the person detained in suites was attended to, they felt that the risk assessment was done to meet the guidelines, rather than for genuine care and interest in the person’s wellbeing.

“They’re checking how I am doing, but they’re not interested in how I’m feeling.”

Some participants made a connection between these negative experiences and a lack of access to justice. Many reported that they waived their legal rights to an Appropriate Adult, and sometimes a lawyer, or pleaded guilty to speed up the process and be released. They reported that they often did not understand or consider the consequences of pleading guilty. Others told us that due to trauma, or psychosis, they experience lapses in memory or recall and struggled to describe their experiences in a coherent way. They felt that the police interpreted this as an “inconsistent therefore incorrect” account, which only contributed to existing feelings of anxiety, and made them more likely to accept being charged with the offence, *even if* they did not commit it.

“I was persuaded to accept a ‘reprimand’ so I could just go home. The impact of a reprimand on my record was downplayed and I was told it would be gone from my criminal record after a few years.”

“I just wanted out. I didn’t know how my conviction would affect my life. I can’t find employment; it’s seriously affecting my mental health.”

Participants commonly reported that the negative experiences of detention had an affect on their overall wellbeing. Those struggling with drugs or alcohol reported that they took higher doses of alcohol or drugs immediately after leaving the police custody.

6.2. Improvements to police custody

Overall participants observed many missed opportunities to identify vulnerabilities, or the needs of the detained people. This was thought to be especially the case for those who came into repeat contact with the criminal justice system. Although there were areas where police custody could be improved, many questioned what was being done to avoid police custody altogether.

While some participants acknowledged the progress made through Liaison and Diversion services, they felt the services were still not available to all suspects, particularly those who are not “visibly distressed or vulnerable”. They consistently raised concern that issues such as autism, learning disabilities, and Acquired Brain Injury, which are common among young adults in the criminal justice system, went unidentified. There were additional concerns that police and health services did not take maturity into consideration or treat it as a factor in their assessment process. In some instances, this made the assessment process difficult for young adults to comprehend, or it lessened the young adults’ engagement with the process.

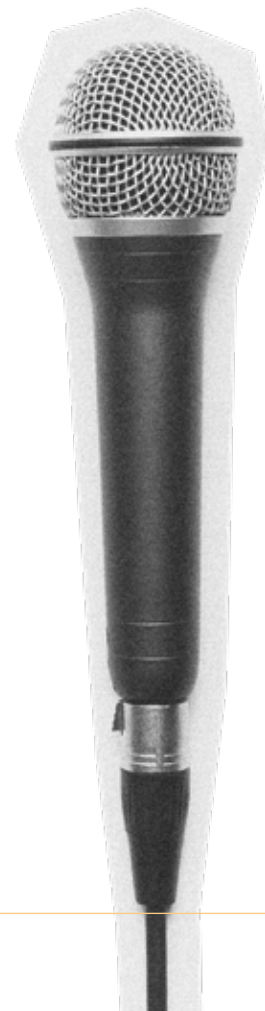
Participants questioned the available support provided alongside Liaison and Diversion services, saying it was often limited; lacking links with broader service provision such as housing and welfare advice, or specialist services for young adults, women, or people from Black and minoritised ethnic backgrounds. Taken together, they expressed grave concerns that vulnerable people were not being appropriately diverted away from police custody.

“ They should take the time to find out what’s going on in the life of the person in custody. For example, does this person have any family problems, mental health problems, drug and alcohol problems, homelessness, abuse, medical problems? ”

Participants stressed the need for improving the quality of the physical environment. Their suggestions included providing toilet paper and sanitary products, installing digital clocks in cells, regulating cell temperature so that it is not too cold, ensuring that there is some daylight in cells or interview rooms where the detained people spend considerable time, providing noise cancelling headphones, and or positive ways to manage stress, such as reading, colouring, or opportunities to exercise to reduce harm for vulnerable people.

Participants highlighted that improvements in the physical environment and needs assessment would have a positive impact and reduce harm on individuals held in police custody. However, they did not believe it was possible to create a trauma-informed police custody environment. Their judgement was that being detained always hindered rather than aided a person’s recovery from trauma. Participants queried the rationale behind the police custody thresholds and suggested that voluntary attendance should be an option, particularly for young adults who commit low-level and non-violent offences.

“ Instead of spending a night in a cell where their mental health could get worse, the person could be offered the option of staying with a trusted friend or family member and reporting back in the morning. The trusted person could act as a guarantor and come back in the morning with them. This could be called ‘custody with carer’. ”



7 Next steps

The accounts of a hundred people who have taken part in this study paints a bleak picture of young adulthood leading up to a lifetime spent in the revolving door of crisis and crime. It is, no wonder, difficult to find the uplifting words to conclude this work.

Young adults who took part in this study told us how they felt being robbed of any optimism that they could achieve, change their circumstances, have voice and choice about their lives, how they felt they were tied into a big knot of poverty, trauma, inequalities which were even tied tighter by policing and criminal justice response. They told us how they are slowly giving into the expectation that they will fail, and this knot will be all they have. Some participants who took part in this research have spent the majority of their adult lives in the revolving door of crisis and crime, going from police stations, to court, prison and probation. Others, of course, were young adults aged 18-25, who still have a long life ahead of them. We know, from nearly 30 years of work, that people can, and do, turn their lives around. But for that to happen, the criminal justice system, including policing, should change, and give them the opportunity to shape their own future. Perhaps, the only uplifting way to conclude this work is to highlight the most urgent changes needed.

Starting with their experiences of families, homes, and neighbourhoods, participants have begun to unravel the knot of trauma, poverty, and inequalities that persisted from their childhoods into adulthoods. They told us what it is like to be a young adult living in some of the most deprived parts of the country, unable to access housing, support and care they need, experiencing multiple exclusions from services, schools, job opportunities, as well as from their own families and social circles. They told us about their experiences of living hand to mouth, the indignity of having to choose between heating and eating, the scrutiny they had for not finding a job in what appears to be an austere job market for an unskilled worker.

They told us, loud and clear, how their experiences of abuse, neglect, and multiple losses tied into a societal trauma, each enforcing their loss of power, autonomy, and safety.

It was clear that, most have been known to the police from a very young age. This was in part due to the most intensive policing efforts concentrating in the neighbourhoods they have grown up in, and in part due to several safeguarding concerns from their families or care workers being brought to the police, multiple experiences of being a victim or a witness of a crime, as well as police responding to mental health crisis because of significant underinvestment and cuts to community health provision. Concerningly, this study highlights that regardless of the scope, and sometimes despite the best intention of police officers, young adults find these interactions with the police traumatising. It feels important to reiterate our recommendation to develop a clear plan to reduce the use of police services to deliver crisis and welfare responses, through partnership working and sufficient funding for community provision. Equally, it is important that both strategic and operational aspects of policing should actively seek to avoid re-enforcing traumas that are caused by structural inequalities, such as poverty, race, ethnicity, and gender by limiting actions that can replicate the dynamics of the original trauma, such as loss of power, autonomy, or safety.

A further and related finding emerged in this study which was that despite the prevalence and impact of complex trauma among young adults who come into repeat contact with the criminal justice system, police services miss too many opportunities to identify and effectively respond to their vulnerabilities. Evidence shows that for young adults who experienced trauma, brain development may be interrupted, and their maturity, mental health, and emotional regulation may be affected, as well as skills for managing impulses and anger. It is disquieting that young adults who participated in this study often reported feeling so disoriented and stressed in police custody that they did not understand the process, their rights and obligations, the information given to them or requested from them, yet still have not been able to access the assessment and support they needed. This has a huge bearing on the procedures and fairness of our justice system, and it should be dealt with as a priority. Again, there is a real need for police leaders to invest in diversion, and particularly pre-arrest and at the point of arrest diversion for young adults who might be presenting for repeated but relatively low-level offences to avoid police custody, which can be retraumatising, where it is safe to do so.

Finally, it is perplexing that this research was the first time the majority of participants were ever asked their experiences and views of policing. At a time when the policing is going through rapid change and serious reform to meet the new demands, it is vital that the voices of young adults, especially those who frequently interact with the police have a say. There is a prime opportunity now to shape the future of policing on robust lived experience insight, so that the policing strategies can methodically consider their expectations, needs and motivations and their insights are then used to ensure the operational policing can effectively turn young adults' lives around, as well reduce crime and reduce victims.



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