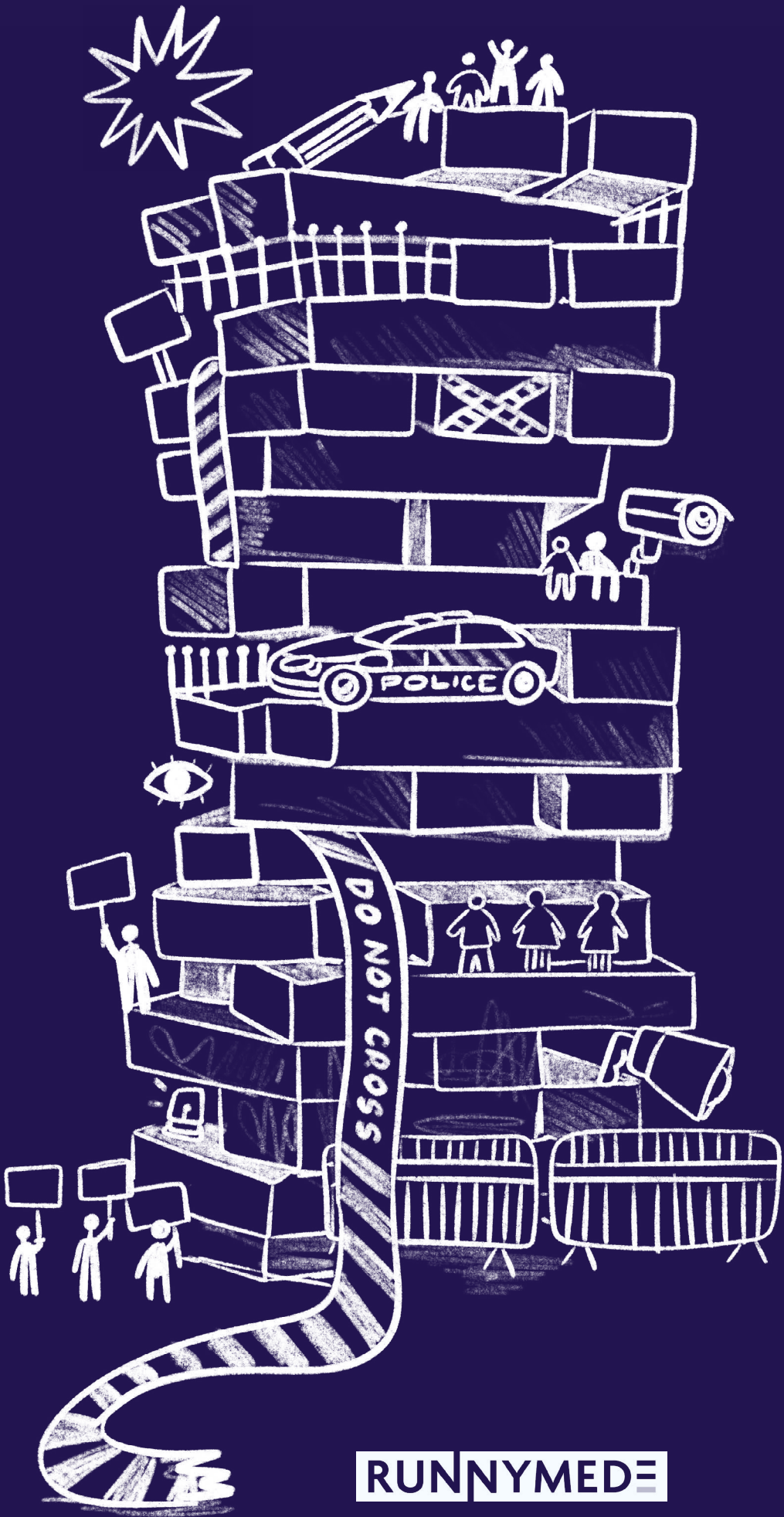


Keeping Us Safe



RUNNYMEDE

Rethinking
policing,
harm and
justice

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The Runnymede Trust is the UK’s leading independent racial justice think tank. Proudly independent, we speak truth to power on race and racism without fear or favour. From broadening the curriculum to exposing the Windrush scandal, our work is rooted in challenging structural racism and its impact on communities of colour. Our authoritative research-based interventions equip policy makers, practitioners and the general public with the tools to deliver genuine progress towards racial justice in Britain.

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Foreword

The flourishing and freedoms of a society can be measured by its people's capacity to dream and build life-affirming material infrastructures and social relations that keep all people safe, belonging and dignified.

By life-affirming infrastructures, we mean public and civic provisions: housing, education, health, transport, food systems and more, that fundamentally enhance the quality of people's lives. Not merely by prolonging life expectancy or ensuring financial stability, but in a fuller sense of living well with each other and with the planet.

By life-affirming social relations, we mean communities that are healthy, rooted in belonging, and capable of responding to harms and injustices in accountable and transformative ways. Communities that can address conflict without dispossessing or disposing of each other, and without entering cycles of violence and punishment.

What this requires is that the systems we rely on to create safety, justice, and health cannot themselves be places of injustice, harm, and violence, as is currently the case across many of our public institutions.

Keeping Us Safe reckons with the origins, development and maintenance of infrastructures of harm that are disguised as infrastructures of help. Often we turn to institutions like the police - despite decades of evidence of racism, discrimination and failing of the public - because we have been conditioned, both materially and culturally, to see policing as the only inevitable response to harm. For decades, it has been documented - particularly by marginalised and racially minoritised people - that policing and the wider carceral structure (including detention, border enforcement, and psychiatric restraint), don't merely fail to deliver safety, but actively produce harm. That they criminalise and punish people when they are most in need of support. If we are serious about collective health and safety - which we all require and deserve - then we need a total reimagining of these structures.

'Keeping Us Safe' offers a powerful proposition and invitation to build responses to harm that don't reproduce the violence caused by policing and punishment, but instead meet our fundamental longing for safety. It asks us to consider how we create the conditions for safety - conditions that are deeply intertwined with dignity, health and belonging for us all.

It accounts for these longings and demands from a grounded and practical space, attending to our material, emotional, social, spiritual needs, and to what communities themselves are calling for. It helps us begin at the right place: 'What do our communities really need for the conditions of safety, accountability, protection, and health?' Not: 'We need more police on the streets and harsher sentences to make us safer!' - as is the mainstream rhetoric.

In a time of escalating economic, social, political, ecological crises, we are witnessing the weaponisation of criminality to deepen austerity, repression and inequity, and to advance authoritarian and far-right agendas. In this moment, we must confront a fundamental question: if violence begets violence

and harm begets harm, how do we create the conditions for healing, health and flourishing instead?

At Healing Justice London - an organisation building community-led healing in response to intimate, interpersonal and structural violence - we grapple with the scale of distress and suffering we are witnessing. Nearly two decades of practice affirm what the many community responses in this report make clear: without structural change, we are projected towards a future with more violence, more trauma, and more harm. Now is the time to interrupt that trajectory and to turn towards our deepest longings: to be well, to be safe, to be loved, to be cared for, to live in dignity, and to belong. And to ensure these are not privileges reserved for those protected by hierarchies of race, class, gender, sexuality, and ableism but available to all of us.

The pursuit of collective safety and wellbeing is all our work. One that requires a total transformation of how our society is organised - including our notions of morality, our stake in each other's lives and the civic and public services and infrastructure that we have. It demands that we redefine safety outside of securitisation, protection of property and punishment in the interests of capital, states, and corporations. Instead towards meaningful safety for people and the planet. So that when people encounter our communities, they can see by the material and social design of our institutions and relations, that life here is precious, cared for and we made it so.

**Farzana Khan,
with Healing Justice Ldn**

What we
cannot
imagine
cannot come
into *being*

bell hooks

Executive summary

More police, more prisons and more punitive powers are repeatedly framed as benign, effective and uncontroversial interventions to mitigate against societal harms. But more policing is not a neutral response; the police are both a cause and symptom of structural racism.

The police were built to protect colonial and capitalist interests, to suppress multi-ethnic working-class resistance and to maintain social order. Those aims cannot be divorced from the harms the police cause today, which manifest in particularly devastating ways for communities of colour, marginalised communities and their intersections. The impacts of policing, then, are felt in broader socioeconomic outcomes, fuelling a vicious cycle of crisis, harm and policing, and entrenching existing structural inequalities.

This report not only explores the negligible positive impact of carceral approaches: it also examines how independent inquiries and police reforms have failed to address institutional racism. Training and diversity initiatives individualise the issue, and attempts to improve trust ignore how racialised harm is inherent to the police.

Keeping us safe therefore requires us to challenge the assumption that policing is an inevitability and instead push for a societal reorientation towards harm prevention. Taking public support for ‘tough on crime’ measures at face value misses vital context, disregarding how public opinion is shaped and an evidence base that does not support these measures.

Our research also finds widespread support for social interventions and non-policing approaches to safety and harm reduction. Around half of the public think greater investment in public and social services would do more to prevent crime than increasing the number of police on the street (*50 per cent*) and increasing police powers (*52 per cent*), with just 22 per cent and 18 per cent disagreeing, respectively (*the rest are unsure*).

This report builds on those findings, invites us to rethink community safety and demonstrates that non-police alternatives can, and do, work in practice. We do this through the lens of six themed areas which either are witnessing increased policing or require alternative approaches to prevent harm:

The moral panic around ‘serious youth violence’ has been used to justify intensified surveillance and policing, particularly working-class Black boys. Although this is a manufactured and exaggerated problem, real harm is disproportionately impacting Black communities. We argue for an end to individualised approaches and a recognition that this harm is caused by structural failure, including poverty, lack of opportunity, loss of community and trauma.

Education settings have become sites of punishment and surveillance, whether through police–school partnerships, policies such as Prevent, or internal use of exclusions and suspensions, feeding a school-to-prison pipeline. These approaches are driven by inadequate resources for schools and the impacts of austerity and structural deprivation on children. To ensure that schools are sites of care and learning, we must invest in our education systems, end the use of school exclusions and initiate restorative justice models.

The criminalisation of homelessness ignores its fundamental driver – the housing crisis – and the lack of mental health and problematic drug use support. We argue that punishing people who are trying to survive does nothing to prevent harm, and we must instead urgently address the housing crisis and redistribute wealth to those who need it most.

Policing the border, defined by ‘hostile-environment’ policies, are entrenching poverty, criminalising survival and deterring people from accessing support. A focus on surveillance and punishment rather than care and support is driving harm. We will enable safety for migrant communities only by dismantling everyday bordering practices, eliminating anti-migrant rhetoric and reversing the hostile environment.

Current attempts to address gender-based violence are failing, and they continue to ignore state-sanctioned forms of gender-based violence that are enabled by border policing, criminalisation and poverty. We argue that instead of a criminal-legal response, we should invest in holistic, community-led models of justice, healing and prevention, including by meeting people’s basic needs.

Poor mental health is the inevitable response to structural harm and racism. But instead of funding mental health services, we currently rely on the police to respond and punish those in crisis. Achieving safety and preventing harm means addressing the social and material conditions that cause poor mental health and creating spaces for healing.

Over centuries, Black, Indigenous and other marginalised communities have developed powerful knowledge and practices in response to systemic harm, grounded in care and healing, which show us what is possible when we move beyond the limitations of policing.

If we’re serious about preventing harm and creating safe communities we must enact something different:

- transformative justice practices that address harm without reproducing violence, grounded in care, consent and collective accountability;
- reparative justice approaches that acknowledge and seek redress for historic and ongoing harms caused by racism, colonialism and slavery and the inequalities they produced;
- restorative justice initiatives that empower survivors and create genuine opportunities for people who’ve caused harm to take responsibility and repair relationships;
- healing justice models that recognise harm as both systemic and interpersonal and treat healing as part of a collective political project.

We also recognise the immediate need to prevent harm, and we therefore recommend the following non-reformist reforms:

- abolish the Serious Violence Duty
- remove all School Based Police Officers
- enact an immediate moratorium on school exclusions
- abolish the Prevent Duty
- end the No Recourse to Public Funds policy and wider hostile-environment policies
- sign up to Article 59 of the Istanbul Convention
- overhaul the Mental Health Act
- repeal or reform the Misuse of Drugs Act to stop the criminalisation of people in crisis
- redistribute wealth

Terminology

Carceral

This term is used to describe attempts to address social issues that focus on incarceration.

Criminal legal system

We use this term or simply ‘legal system’ rather than ‘criminal justice system’ to highlight the failure of the current system to deliver justice, particularly for racialised and marginalised groups. This acknowledges the carceral nature of the system, which prioritises punishment and containment over repair or accountability.¹

Criminalised behaviour

This encompasses actions that are deemed criminal not because of the inherent harm they cause but due to the legal and political frameworks that define them. This includes actions that are part of attempts at survival, including rough sleeping, fare evasion, sex work and drug possession. These behaviours are often rooted in socioeconomic disadvantage, yet the state’s response is punitive rather than supportive.²

Everyday bordering

This term encapsulates the fluidity of the British border and how it follows individuals in their everyday lives and dictates their socioeconomic circumstances.³

1 Bryant, E. (2021) ‘Why we say “criminal legal system”, not “criminal justice system”’, Vera Institute of Justice, 1 December, www.vera.org/news/why-we-say-criminal-legal-system-not-criminal-justice-system.

2 Taylor, S. (2016) *Crime and Criminality: A Multidisciplinary Approach*, Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.

3 Yuval-Davis, N., Wemyss, G. and Cassidy, K. (2018) ‘Everyday bordering, belonging and the reorientation of British immigration legislation’, *Sociology* 52(2): 228–244.

Gang

This is an imprecise and racist label that is frequently applied to young working-class people of colour, particularly in urban settings. As scholars have highlighted, the idea of the ‘gang’ is used as a political and ideological tool to rationalise increased police surveillance, criminalisation and collective punishment.⁴ The term functions more as a proxy for age, race and class.

Gender-based violence (GBV)

We use this term to include all people affected by violence rooted in gender and power imbalances, including transgender, non-binary and gender-non-conforming people. GBV encompasses a broad spectrum of violence – not only interpersonal abuse but also state-sanctioned and structural forms of gender-based violence, such as immigration enforcement, border violence and criminalisation that disproportionately impact people belonging to marginalised gender identities.

Institutional police killings

This describes deaths following police contact that result from systemic and institutional practices. These include deaths in custody, during restraint or after neglect in detention. Such killings reflect wider patterns of institutional omission, erasure and racialised devaluation of life, particularly of Black men.⁵

4 Hallsworth, S. and Young, T. (2008) ‘Gang talk and gang talkers: A critique’, *Crime, Media, Culture: An International Journal* 4(2): 175–195; Williams and Clarke, ‘The Black criminal other’.

5 Williams, P., White, L., Harris, S. and Joseph-Salisbury, R. (2023) ‘Omission, erasure and obfuscation in the police institutional killing of Black men’, *Mortality* 28(2): 250–268.

Non-reformist reforms

These are policy, practice or legislative changes that reduce the power and reach of harmful systems – like policing – while building capacity for alternative approaches. These reforms are aimed not at legitimising or expanding existing systems but at transforming or dismantling them.

People/communities of colour

These are our preferred terms to describe people who are racialised in the UK and subjected to structural racism. This includes Black, Asian, Arab, Jewish, Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller communities, as well as other groups who experience racist marginalisation. While the term is imperfect, it facilitates a shared understanding of collective experiences of racism.

‘Black and minority ethnic’ is often used in data collection, institutional reporting or secondary analysis. We use this terminology only where required for statistical consistency or where it is used by cited sources.

School-to-prison pipeline

A term used to describe how school discipline practices – particularly exclusions, surveillance, and police presence in and around schools – disproportionately channel Black, working-class and disabled pupils out of education and into the legal system.⁶

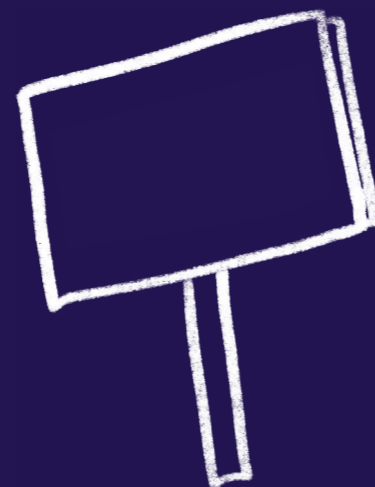
‘Serious youth violence’: This term is used widely in government and media discourse to refer to incidents where young people come into conflict with one another. The harm caused to and by young people is a real and pressing issue, but ‘serious youth violence’ is also ideologically constructed, disproportionately applied to young people of colour – particularly Black working-class boys – and used to justify punitive and racist surveillance and policing practices. ‘Serious youth violence’ discourse often pathologises individuals and entire communities, treating interpersonal violence as a moral failing or cultural defect and blaming young people while obscuring social and material causes such as poverty, trauma, social exclusion, and the erosion of services and safe spaces for marginalised young people.⁷

White supremacy: A political and socioeconomic system that privileges white people and whiteness as the norm while structurally marginalising people of colour. It manifests through institutions, cultures, narratives and policies that uphold racist hierarchies.

⁶ Gillborn, D. (2010) ‘Reform, racism and the centrality of whiteness: Assessment, ability and the “new eugenics”’ *Irish Educational Studies* 29(3): 231–252; Lammy, D. (2017) *Lammy Review: Final Report*, London, www.gov.uk/government/publications/lammy-review-final-report.

⁷ Williams, P. and Clarke, B. (2018) ‘The Black criminal other as an object of social control’, *Social Sciences* 7(11): 234–248.

Introduction



On 25 May 2020, George Floyd was murdered by police officer Derek Chauvin in Minneapolis, USA. His death reignited demands for racial justice across the globe, with millions taking to the streets to declare that Black Lives Matter. Here in the UK, over 210,000 people joined anti-racist protests across 260 towns and cities.

Protesters and activists reflected on structural racism and on their own experiences of racism in the UK, particularly at the hands of the police, with ‘the UK is not innocent’ becoming a rallying cry. This was the biggest anti-racist movement in the UK since the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and the abolition of slavery.⁸

Political leaders, the media, organisations and individuals took this opportunity to self-reflect. For some this led to a willing commitment to long-term change; for others it was a public relations exercise that was not meaningful and has not led to sustained action.

The Runnymede Trust itself sought to reflect and make sense of what we were witnessing, and it focused on the main concern of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement: policing. As chants of ‘no justice, no peace’ and ‘defund the police’ echoed across the country, we unpacked their meaning and asked what it would take to build communities free from police violence.

⁸ Mohdin, A., Swann, G. and Bannock, C. (2020) ‘How George Floyd’s death sparked a wave of UK anti-racism protests’, Guardian, 29 July, www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/jul/29/george-floyd-death-fuelled-anti-racism-protests-britain.

2024 racist riots

In summer 2024, the UK witnessed the worst racist riots for decades. But they didn't happen in isolation: they followed years of racist rhetoric and policymaking that demonise migrants and people seeking asylum, and the increasing normalisation of Islamophobia in the mainstream media and in politics. This was clear when far-right rioters chanted phrases popularised by politicians and the press, such as 'Stop the boats' and 'We want our country back'.

Research has found that a third of people charged in connection with these riots were people of colour, mostly young Muslim men, who had come out to oppose racism and defend migrants. This highlights that a policing response to protest and 'disorder' is often detrimental to progressive and marginalised voices,⁹ and it puts into question whether policing can meaningfully tackle the racism that underpinned the riots.

Two-tier policing

Law and order is often used as a political tool to manufacture divisive narratives and to justify harsh policing. One way in which this happens is through the rhetoric of 'two-tier policing' and 'two-tier justice' – the idea that white people are treated more harshly by the police. These claims are rooted in the far right but have begun to be heard more and more in mainstream political circles.

The evidence shows that the opposite is true: people of colour consistently face excessive and disproportionate policing, for example through stop and search, use of force, or institutional killings.¹⁰ A two-tier policing and legal system does exist, but it is one in which the treatment of people of colour is far harsher. We explore this further later in the report.

9 Burnett, J. (2026) 'In Racism's Echo Chamber: Government, Criminal Justice and the Summer 2024 Riots', Institute of Race Relations (IRR), <https://irr.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/In-racisms-echo-chamber-Final.pdf>.

10 Williams et al., 'Omission, erasure and obfuscation'; HM Government (no date) 'Crime, justice and the law', www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/crime-justice-and-the-law.

The police function as an arm of the state, tasked with upholding the law and maintaining social order.

Much of their role involves responding to the symptoms of an economic system which produces high levels of poverty, deprivation and inequality. In fact, 83 per cent of (command and control) calls to the police are for non-criminal matters (such as responding to mental health crises or missing people).¹¹

These socioeconomic conditions disproportionately affect working-class communities, and when combined with structural racism they have an even greater impact on communities of colour. This results in people of colour having more interaction with the police because of their role as enforcers of a status quo defined by racial and class ordering.

11 College of Policing (2021) College of Policing Analysis: Estimating Demand on the Police Service, London, <https://assets.college.police.uk/s3fs-public/2021-03/demand-on-policing-report.pdf>.

By extension, because it disproportionately impacts multi-ethnic working-class communities, policing causes and deepens inequality. Whether through the traumatic impact of policing or the effects of a criminal sanction, 'the policed' see their socioeconomic opportunities limited, and this embeds inequalities for future generations.

Over the last five years, we've seen a spate of high-profile policing scandals:

- the kidnapping, rape and murder of Sarah Everard by a serving police officer
- the deaths of Chris Kaba and Oladeji Omishore following contact with Metropolitan Police officers
- the case of Child Q, a 15-year-old girl who was strip-searched by police at school while on her period after being accused of smelling like cannabis
- photos taken by police officers posing with the corpses of Nicole Smallman and Bibaa Henry
- numerous allegations of sexual misconduct against individual officers and entire police forces
- the exposure of groups of officers demeaning their LGBTQ+, Muslim and Jewish colleagues and making disturbing 'jokes' about raping female colleagues, killing Black children and acts of domestic violence
- a BBC Panorama investigation into the Met Police again exposing racism and misogyny, including police officers displaying extreme Islamophobia and calling for migrants to be shot, and dismissing allegations of rape and domestic violence, as well as revelling in the use of force.¹²

12 Polglase, A. and Lee, J. (2025) 'Unmasked: Secret BBC filming exposes hidden culture of misogyny and racism inside Met Police', BBC News, 1 October, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cvgq06d44jyo>

What links these scandals is that the culture and standards of policing enable and perpetuate misogyny, racism and homophobia, as Baroness Casey found in her review of the Metropolitan Police.¹³

Amid the outrage of the BLM movement, many commentators were quick to dismiss the severity of police brutality in the UK. However, the UK has a long history of police violence and racism, evident in cases from the corruption of Stephen Lawrence's murder investigation to the police killing of Mark Duggan.¹⁴ According to INQUEST, there have been 1,940 deaths overall in police custody or following police contact in England and Wales since 1990.¹⁵ Black people are seven times more likely than white people to die after being restrained by the police – a trend that has persisted for decades.¹⁶

Despite this, only one officer has ever faced a murder charge – and even he was ultimately acquitted and instead found guilty of manslaughter. In 2021, PC Benjamin Monk was sentenced to imprisonment for the manslaughter of Dalian Atkinson, a Black man he Tasered three times before kicking him twice in the head, leaving bootlace prints on his forehead.¹⁷

13 Jessup, S., (2025) 'Vulnerable man repeatedly Tasered before fall', BBC News, 10 March, www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c4gm719rzy10; Gamble, J. and McCallum, R. (2022) Local Child Safeguarding Practice Review: Child Q, London: City of London and Hackney Safeguarding Children Partnership (CHSCP), <https://chscp.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Child-Q-PUBLISHED-14-March-22.pdf>; BBC News (2021) 'Bibaa Henry and Nicole Smallman: Met PCs jailed for crime scene images', 6 December, www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-59474472; McMenemy, R. (2023) 'Met officers investigated for sexual misconduct working as normal', BBC News, 20 March, www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-65005957; Hamilton, F. (2022) 'Police shared rape jokes and race slurs', The Times, 28 July, www.thetimes.com/uk/crime/article/police-colleagues-of-wayne-couzens-joked-about-sexually-assaulting-domestic-violence-victims-7c3w6tvlx; Baroness Casey of Blackstock (2023) Baroness Casey Review: Final Report. An Independent Review into the Standards of Behaviour and Internal Culture of the Metropolitan Police Service, London, www.met.police.uk/SysSiteAssets/media/downloads/met/about-us/baroness-casey-review/update-march-2023/baroness-casey-review-march-2023a.pdf.

14 Fero, K. and Mehmood, T (directors) (2021) *Injustice*, Migrant Media; Fero, K. (director) (2020) *Ultraviolence*, Migrant Media.

15 INQUEST (2025) 'Deaths of people in and following police custody', <https://www.inquest.org.uk/deaths-in-and-following-police-contact>.

16 INQUEST (2020) 'I Can't Breathe': Race and Death in British Policing, London, www.inquest.org.uk/i-cant-breathe-race-death-british-policing.

17 Judiciary of England and Wales (2021) 'Regina v. Benjamin Monk: Sentencing remarks of His Honour Judge Melbourne Inman QC, Recorder of Birmingham', www.judiciary.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/R-v-Monk-Sentencing-Remarks.pdf.

Cases such as those mentioned above cannot be separated from a broader context of racial disproportionality in policing and entrenched racism in the criminal legal system. Black communities, and Black men in particular, face disproportionate surveillance, stops, use of force, and fatal outcomes at the hands of the police.¹⁸ Families bereaved by state violence and impacted communities have long argued that formal systems of accountability – from the Independent Office for Police Conduct (IOPC) to the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) – are not designed to deliver meaningful justice and instead operate to shield officers from consequences.¹⁹

We must move beyond treating such incidents as isolated tragedies or failures of individual judgement. We need to ask: what are the structures, policies and cultures that make state violence predictable, repeated and unpunished, and how do we dismantle them? To prevent further deaths we must confront the root causes: racism, militarised policing and the normalisation of lethal force.

This final point – how police contact can be prevented – is the central theme of this report. Drawing on a combination of analysis of quantitative data with insights from community-based workshops across the UK,²⁰ we focus on the best ways to keep communities safe and to prevent harm. The evidence is clear: policing is both a symptom and a cause of structural racial inequality and racism.

We begin by examining the historical foundations of policing in Britain, situating contemporary practices in a broader context of social control. Then we present the findings of our national polling, offering a snapshot of public attitudes to policing and harm reduction. The report goes on to assess current policing practices and the harms that they produce in various areas of public life. After considering why repeated attempts at police reform have failed, we explore a range of alternative approaches to addressing harm and building community safety. We then turn to the thematic findings

18 University of Manchester (2022) 'New report uncovers "institutional racism" in the justice system', 18 October, www.manchester.ac.uk/about/news/new-report-uncovers-institutional-racism-in-the-justice-system.

19 INQUEST, 'I Can't Breathe'.

20 See appendix for full details of our methodology.

from our community-based workshops, exploring the drivers of criminalised behaviour, the harm caused by policing responses, and alternative strategies for care and protection in several areas: 'serious youth violence', education, housing and homelessness, policing the border, gender-based violence, and mental health.

The report concludes by setting out a series of non-reformist reforms – policy and legislative changes designed to challenge and reduce the scope, scale and power of oppressive systems, aimed at structural transformation rather than superficial tweaks – and community-led proposals designed to dismantle structures of harm and invest in alternative visions of justice and collective wellbeing beyond policing.

Colonial origins, resistance and political rhetoric



The origins of policing

It is a widely accepted academic finding that the police are a tool of social control: they exist to uphold the laws written by the state and to crack down on behaviour the state deems illegal.²¹ European and North American countries have not always had an organised police service, which is in fact a relatively new concept.

²¹ Foucault, M. (1975) *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, New York: Pantheon Books.

In seventeenth-century France, for example, when the rise of a centralised state and urbanisation created a need among the ruling powers for organised law enforcement, the state used the army to support a threatened aristocracy, restore order and collect taxes.²² Maintaining order then became the objective of a newly formed, state-controlled police force, to quell the emerging bourgeoisie and suppress further resistance.²³

From the mid-eighteenth century, the Industrial Revolution led to a greater risk of organised uprising. The British working classes organised for better working and living conditions. In the colonies, the expansion of territory and numbers of enslaved people prompted a movement towards the abolition of slavery. The 1780 Gordon Riots began as an anti-Catholic, anti-Irish anti-immigration response to a cost-of-living crisis but became a broader anti-establishment class struggle.²⁴ As working-class uprisings gained momentum,

²² Thompson, E.P. (1975) *Whigs and Hunters: The Origin of the Black Act*, London: Allen Lane; Emsley, C. (1996) *The English Police: A Political and Social History*, London: Longman.

²³ Foucault, M. (2022) 'Penal theories and institutions: Lectures at the Collège de France 1971–1972', *British Journal of Criminology* 62(1): 254–272.

²⁴ Palmer, S.H. (1988) *Police and Protest in England and Ireland 1780–1850*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

the state felt an increasing need for an established entity to maintain social order.

This led to a series of policing experiments in Britain and its colonies and attempts to pass policing bills through parliament. This began in Ireland in an attempt to quell revolt against British rule, in the course of which the Irish were depicted as violent and requiring control, and their protestations as unjustified.²⁵ By 1800, established police forces operated in Dublin, Glasgow and Kingston.

In London in 1798, the Thames River Police were the first state-adopted and state-funded police force. This was a public-private partnership between the West India Committee (a lobby group of slave owners) and the Home Office, assigned to protect the profits of slavery, to discipline the working class, and to protect colonial and

capitalist interests.²⁶ The need for this was felt even more strongly after the Peterloo Massacre of 1819, when a peaceful protest for political rights was met with violent policing, killing 18 and injuring nearly 700 people.²⁷ Sir Robert Peel's Metropolitan Police, formed in 1829 and widely known as the first modern police force, absorbed the Thames River Police.

The key difference between British and overseas police forces was the central emphasis in Britain on 'policing by consent' instead of militarised tactics and use of force. It was recognised that tactics relied on elsewhere would face a backlash, and gaining public trust and confidence enabled the police to be considered less oppressive and therefore a legitimate maintainer of social control.²⁸ While military threat was commonplace in the Empire and settler colonies to quell revolt, police armour and weaponry was not seen on the British mainland until the 1960s.²⁹ Violent and militarised policing was first used to suppress nationalist dissidents during the Troubles in Northern Ireland. Meanwhile, migrants from colonies and former colonies who had begun to settle in Britain were greeted with racist stereotyping and moral panics, perpetuated by politicians and the media, about inherent violence and criminality. As anti-racist uprisings took hold, these narratives created the illusion that the British police and legal systems were unprepared for the incoming violence and resistance, and so militarised forms of policing crossed the Irish Sea to the British mainland.³⁰

25 Bell, E. (2013) 'Normalising the exceptional: British colonial policing cultures come home', *Mémoire(s), identité(s), marginalité(s) dans le monde occidental contemporain: Cahiers du MIMMOC* 10; Fekete, L. (2025) 'Paramilitary policing against the people: Colonial continuities and the challenge from below', *IRR*, 25 May, <https://irr.org.uk/article/paramilitary-policing-against-the-people-colonial-continuities-and-the-challenge-from-below>.

26 British Police History (2025) Thames River Police, <https://british-police-history.uk/f/thames-river>

27 Hirsch, S. (no date) 'Protest and Peterloo: The story of 16 August 1819', People's History Museum, www.phm.org.uk/protest-and-peterloo-the-story-of-16-august-1819.

28 Holdaway, S. (1983) *Inside the British Police: A Force at Work*, Oxford: Blackwell.

29 Loader, I. and Gilman, N.J. (2009) 'The militarization of policing: An introduction', *Policing and Society* 19(2): 103–109.

30 The unrest was not caused by migration but reflects the continuation of colonial violence.

Resistance to policing

Since formerly colonised communities of colour settled in Britain, there have been multiple, intersecting forms of resistance to policing, which are a continuation of anti-colonial resistance in former colonies. This resistance has been central to racial justice movements.

National campaign groups such as the Black Unity and Freedom Party, the British Black Panthers, the Black Liberation Front and the Black Parents Movement, and local action groups such as the Broadwater Farm Defence Campaign, existed to resist carceral state violence, as did the Asian Youth Movements and the Race Today Collective.³¹ As we discuss later, reforms such as neighbourhood policing and police complaints systems were attempted in response to various uprisings, but they have done little to break the connection between colonial forms of policing and the police racism we see today.³²

The 1980s was a period of intense conflict between the police and Britain's Black communities. The 1981 Brixton uprisings were a response to rumours of police brutality in the context of widespread use of stop and search (*through Operation Swamp 81*), particularly on Black Caribbean people, and the aftermath of the New Cross house fire. Uprisings spread across the UK that year to Birmingham, Liverpool, Manchester and Nottingham.³³

One of the most obvious examples of militarised policing occurred on Broadwater Farm, Tottenham, London, in

31 Elliot-Cooper, A. (2021) *Black Resistance to British Policing*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.

32 Ibid.

33 Gilroy, P. (1987) *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation*, London: Routledge.

October 1985.³⁴ Cynthia Jarrett, a Black Caribbean woman, died of heart failure during a police search of her home. Tensions between the community and the police were already high following the shooting of another Black woman, Cherry Groce, in Brixton the previous week. Demonstrations outside Tottenham police station escalated into violent encounters with the police: rioters were met by hundreds of armed police officers, baton charges and tear gas.

As this history shows, racism in the police is not just an interpersonal problem but a system of governance used to exploit, discipline and control anyone who resists the deeply unequal status quo. The white supremacy that justified the atrocities of colonial governance cannot be divorced from British colonial policing. Policing therefore becomes inherently about controlling and ‘civilising’ populations deemed to be inferior, even in the absence of force and brutality. Post-colonial and contemporary policing follows these same dynamics.³⁵

Crime as a social construct

Tracing the foundations of the police, what they were established to do and who or what they were instructed to protect gives us a fundamental understanding of ‘order’, ‘crime’ and ‘justice’.

These concepts are constructed and shaped by violence, colonialism and slavery. By extension, the idea of criminality is also constructed. This is magnified during governmental, political or economic failure. In other words, what is deemed to be a crime is a social construct, shaped by economic, political, cultural and historical processes.³⁶

Importantly, what is deemed criminal is often

34 Keith, M. (1993) *Race, Riots and Policing: Lore and Disorder in a Multi-Racist Society*, London: UCL Press.

35 Elliot-Cooper, *Black Resistance to British Policing*.

36 Elliot-Cooper, *Black Resistance to British Policing*.

disproportionate to the harm it causes others.³⁷ For example, drug-related prosecutions and sex work are deemed crimes against the state and are not directly harmful to others; this is comparable to previous laws making it illegal to attempt to ‘commit’ suicide, which were repealed in 1961. Similarly, so-called vagrancy and behaviours associated with homelessness (*e.g. rough sleeping and ‘begging’*) have been criminalised for over two hundred years, while it is considered legitimate that the state knowingly pushes people into poverty.

What is deemed criminal is also a moral question. For example, someone carrying a weapon on the street can expect to go to prison, but at the same time the state and private actors legally invest billions in the global arms trade that can enable civilian killings abroad. This is undeniably an example of structural and institutional violence that increases the likelihood of violence and the targeting of certain groups, but it is not considered criminal in popular understandings of crime.

Another clear example of this is the suggestion – by politicians and the British press – that ‘mugging’ was a new form of crime brought to Britain by immigrants in the 1970s. As Stuart Hall argues in *Policing the Crisis*, the police and criminal legal system in part created the phenomenon itself, through mass arrests, classifying offences as ‘muggings’ and heavy sentences in an attempt to deter.³⁸

More recently, we have seen a proliferation of the racist rhetoric of ‘Black on Black’ crime in relation to ‘serious youth violence’. It is worth noting that these narratives are not specific to the recent politics of the populist right but were carved out by the New Labour government, which introduced over 3,600 new criminal offences between 1997 and 2008.

37 Cooper, V. and Whyte, D. (2018) ‘Grenfell, austerity, and institutional violence’, *Sociological Research Online* 23(4): 416–422.

38 Hall, S., Critcher, C., Jefferson, T., Clarke, J. and Roberts, B. (2013) *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State and Law and Order*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

In 2007, then-Prime Minister Tony Blair said:

There needs to be an intensive police focus on these groups ... The black community – the vast majority of whom in these communities are decent, law-abiding people horrified at what is happening – need to be mobilised in denunciation of this gang culture that is killing innocent young black kids ... But we won't stop this by pretending it isn't young black kids doing it.³⁹

This sowed the seeds for continued racist rhetoric by succeeding governments and politicians. More recently, a Conservative London mayoral candidate asserted that 'the Black community has a crime problem'.⁴⁰ Such language perpetuates dangerous stereotypes, tarnishing entire communities and individualising social problems and criminalising Black spaces, culture and associations to justify social control. 'Race' is a socially constructed and fluid concept that can change depending on context; the process of using racially disproportionate policing and incarceration to then justify

further punitive measures exacerbates and cements racial inequalities, and this amounts to crafting racial difference in itself. The whipping up of moral panics is an attempt to gain public consent to maintain the status quo.

The construction of crime and criminality legitimises the 'war on gangs', the 'war on terror' and the 'hostile environment' for migrants, and moral panics are manufactured to justify the encroachment of policing into schools, housing, healthcare settings and other public institutions, under the guise of 'public safety'. The Runnymede Trust report *Creating a Crisis: Immigration, Racism and the 2024 General Election* discusses how public opinion and concern (in this case about immigration) is a top-down construction, gaining salience through political motives, 'data politics' and media interest.⁴¹

There is no credible evidence to support claims that different racialised groups have an inherent propensity toward particular forms of crime. The cultural deficit model, which assumes that the values of certain communities are the primary explanation for behaviours, relies on a denial of structural racism and has been heavily refuted. Where disproportionalities do occur, they are better explained by current and historical structural inequalities and power imbalances.

On the other hand, we recognise the very real existence of harm that impacts different communities in different ways. Policing disproportionately imprisons people of colour and working-class communities. This

worsens the harm and trauma underlying criminalised behaviours, such as poverty-related offences, and criminalises issues that should be addressed through social support, such as youth violence, school misbehaviour, homelessness, border harms, gender-based violence, and mental health crises. The evidence shows that punitive approaches fail to deliver meaningful improvements in public safety and deepens the violence and inequality already present in people's lives. Instead, we must prioritise social solutions to social harms.

Political rhetoric in favour of carceral solutions weaponises public support to justify increasing police numbers and powers. Politicians often claim that 'Black communities want more stop and search' or that they have spoken to the families of victims of violence who want to see heavier policing. We commissioned polling to understand these views in more detail.



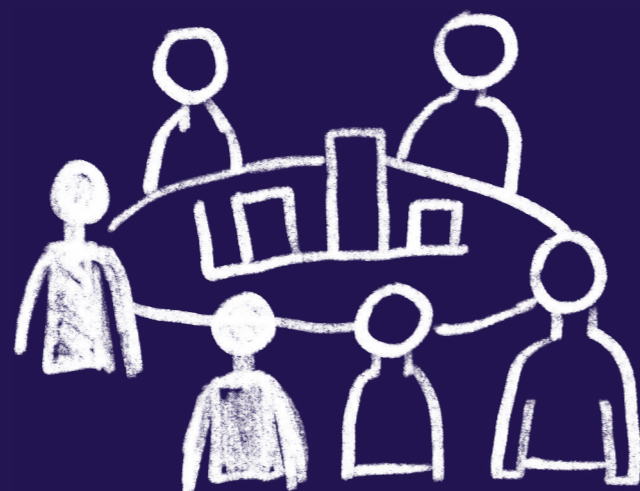
The evidence shows that punitive approaches fail to deliver meaningful improvements in public safety and deepens the violence and inequality already present in people's lives.

39 Blair, T. (2007) 'Speech by the prime minister at Cardiff City Hall: The Callaghan Memorial Lecture', 11 April, <https://image.guardian.co.uk/sys-files/Politics/documents/2007/04/11/blairlecture.pdf>.

40 White, N. and Dearden, L. (2022) "'Offensive attitudes': Anger as London Assembly Tory leader says "Black community has a crime problem"', Independent, 28 February, www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/susan-hall-london-conservatives-black-crime-b2023783.html.

41 Mondon, A. and Winter, A. (2024) *Creating a Crisis: Immigration, Racism and the 2024 General Election*, London: Verso Books.

Our polling



Values versus evidence

While polling is an important tool to understand public opinion, it should not always be used as a signifier of evidence or static facts.

Public attitudes do not sit outside of political debate and can be used to legitimise regressive policy. In the context of public support for anti-immigration measures, public opinion polls have been used uncritically to validate and mainstream so-called populist politics and far-right ideas, empowering politicians to distract the public from the real social and economic crises impacting the working class and communities of colour specifically.⁴² This logic can be extended to opinion polls on policing and crime that are used to legitimise regressive and punitive policing measures.

⁴² Mondon and Winter, *Creating a Crisis*.

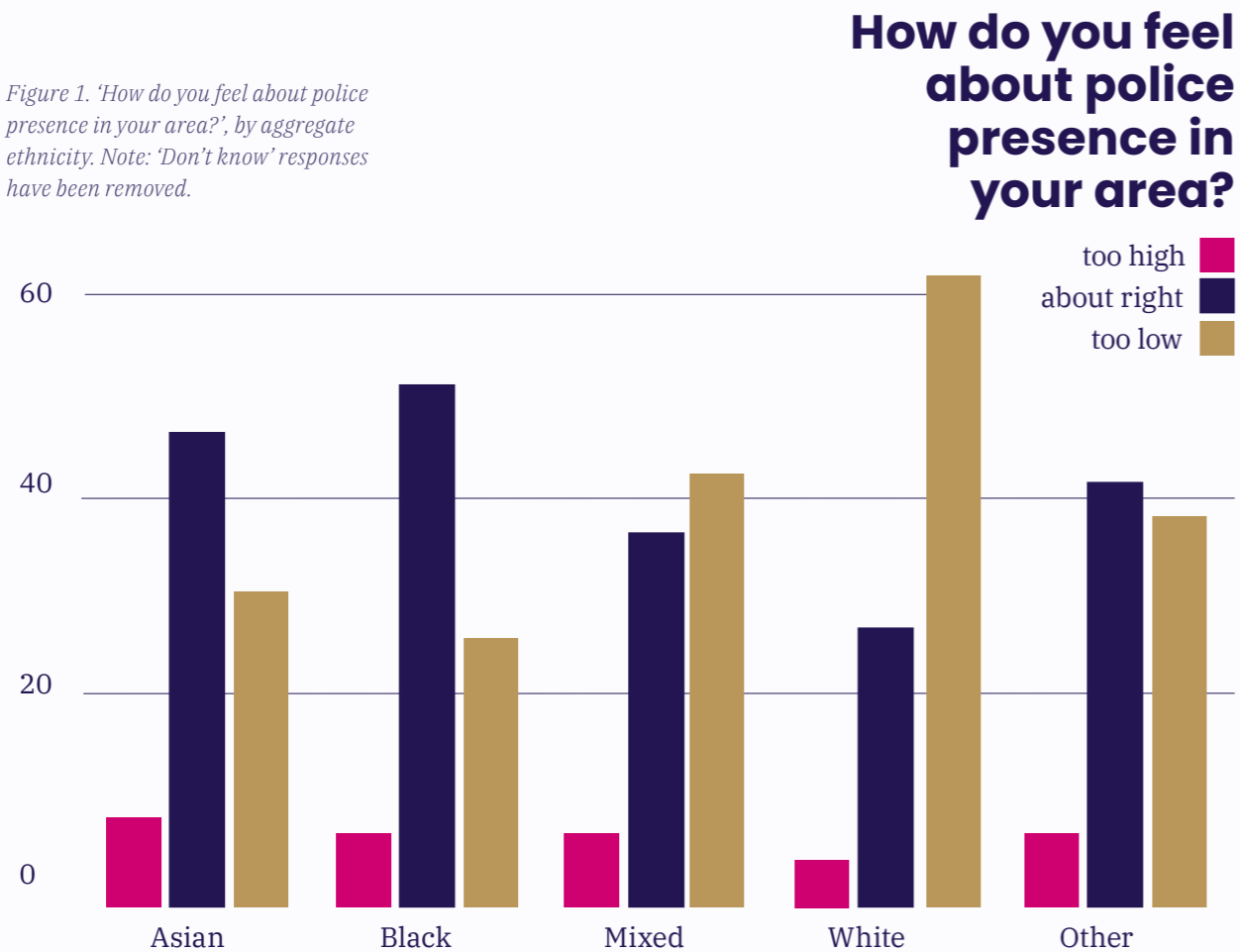
Attitudes towards police powers

We conducted nationally representative polling of 5,405 people in England and Wales to understand attitudes towards policing. Generally speaking, we found high levels of support for the police, including high levels of support across all ethnic groups for maintaining or extending police numbers.

Regarding police presence in local areas, Figure 1 shows that:

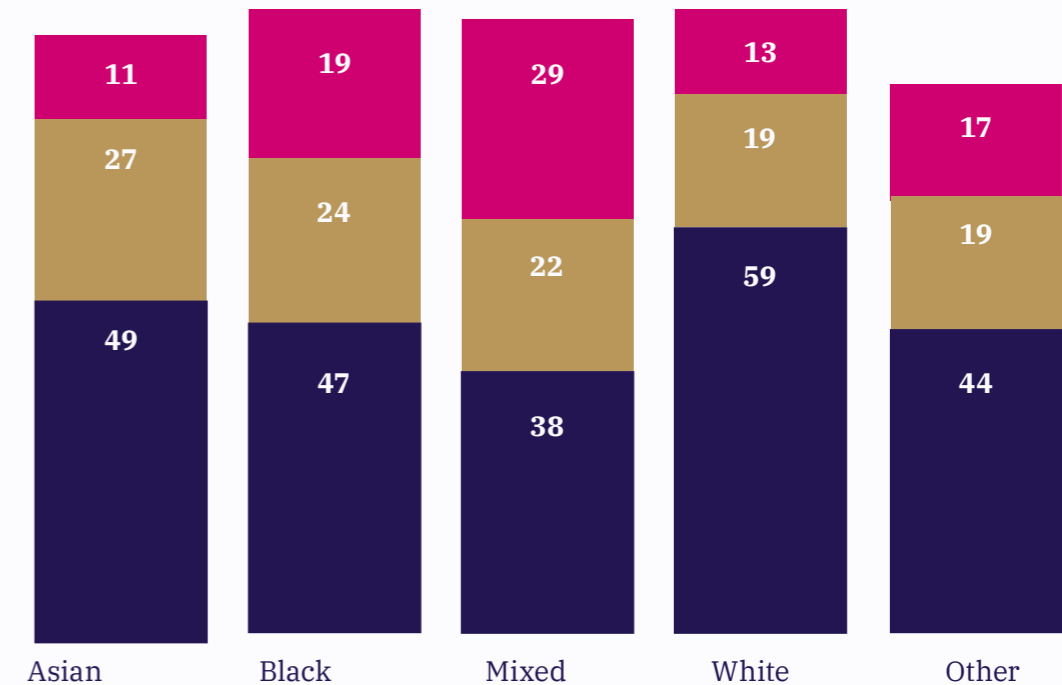
- White groups are most likely to say police presence is 'too low' (61 per cent) and are more than twice as likely to think this compared with Black groups (27 per cent).
- People of colour are up to twice as likely to say police presence is 'too high' (8 per cent) compared with white groups (4 per cent).

Figure 1. 'How do you feel about police presence in your area?', by aggregate ethnicity. Note: 'Don't know' responses have been removed.



Would you support or oppose the extension of stop and search powers?

oppose
neither
support



Figures 2 to 5 show that:

- There is widespread support for the extension of stop and search powers, although this is lower among communities of colour (46 per cent versus 59 per cent in white communities).
- 'Mixed' groups are most likely to oppose the extension of stop and search powers (29 per cent) and the least likely to support this (38 per cent).
- Among Asian groups, Pakistani (15 per cent) and Bangladeshi (15 per cent) respondents are most likely to oppose the extension of stop and search powers. Black Caribbean respondents (26 per cent) oppose the extension of stop and search powers more than any other Black community.
- With the exception of Chinese (3 per cent), Indian (9 per cent), Other Asian (9 per cent) and Black African (13 per cent) groups, each disaggregated ethnic group opposes extending stop and search powers at a higher rate than White British (13 per cent) groups.

Figure 2. 'Would you support or oppose the extension of stop and search powers?', by aggregate ethnicity

Opposition to extending stop and search powers

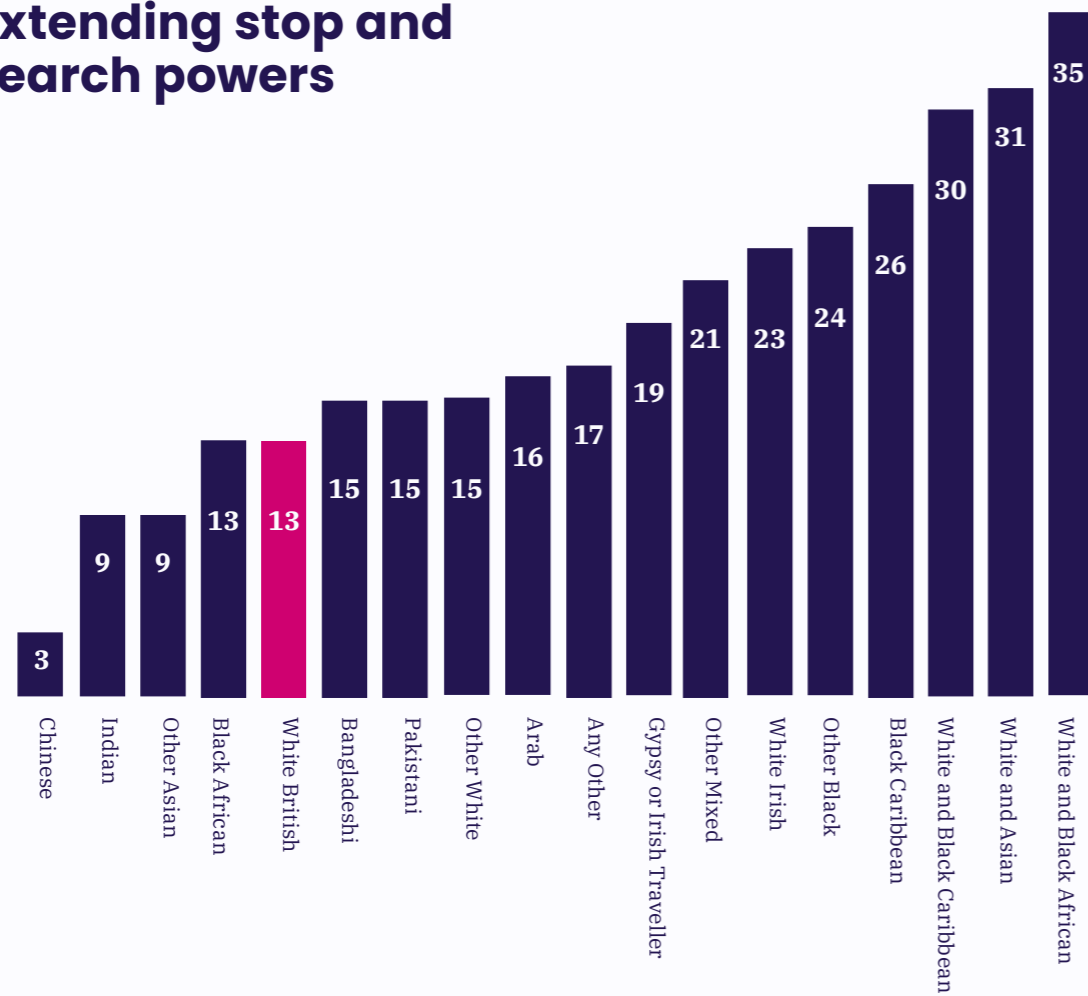


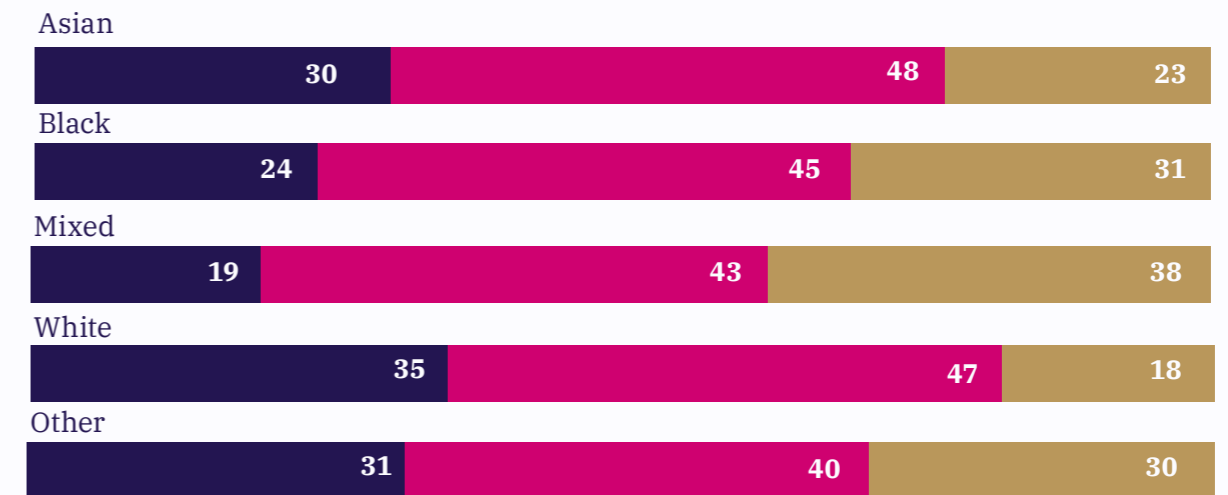
Figure 3. Opposition to extending stop and search powers, by disaggregated ethnic group

- White groups are most likely to want to see, or be unconcerned by, increased use of stop and search (82 per cent). Support or neutrality is lower among people of colour (72 per cent).
- ‘Mixed’ groups are particularly likely to oppose the increased use (i.e. frequency) of stop and search (38 per cent) and are twice as likely to oppose it as to support it (19 per cent). Conversely, white groups are twice as likely to want to see an increase in stop and search use (35 per cent) than to be concerned by an increase in its use (18 per cent).
- When disaggregated, the majority of communities of colour (up to 42 per cent) are more likely to oppose the increased use of stop and search compared with White British people (18 per cent).

How would you feel about increasing the use of stop and search?

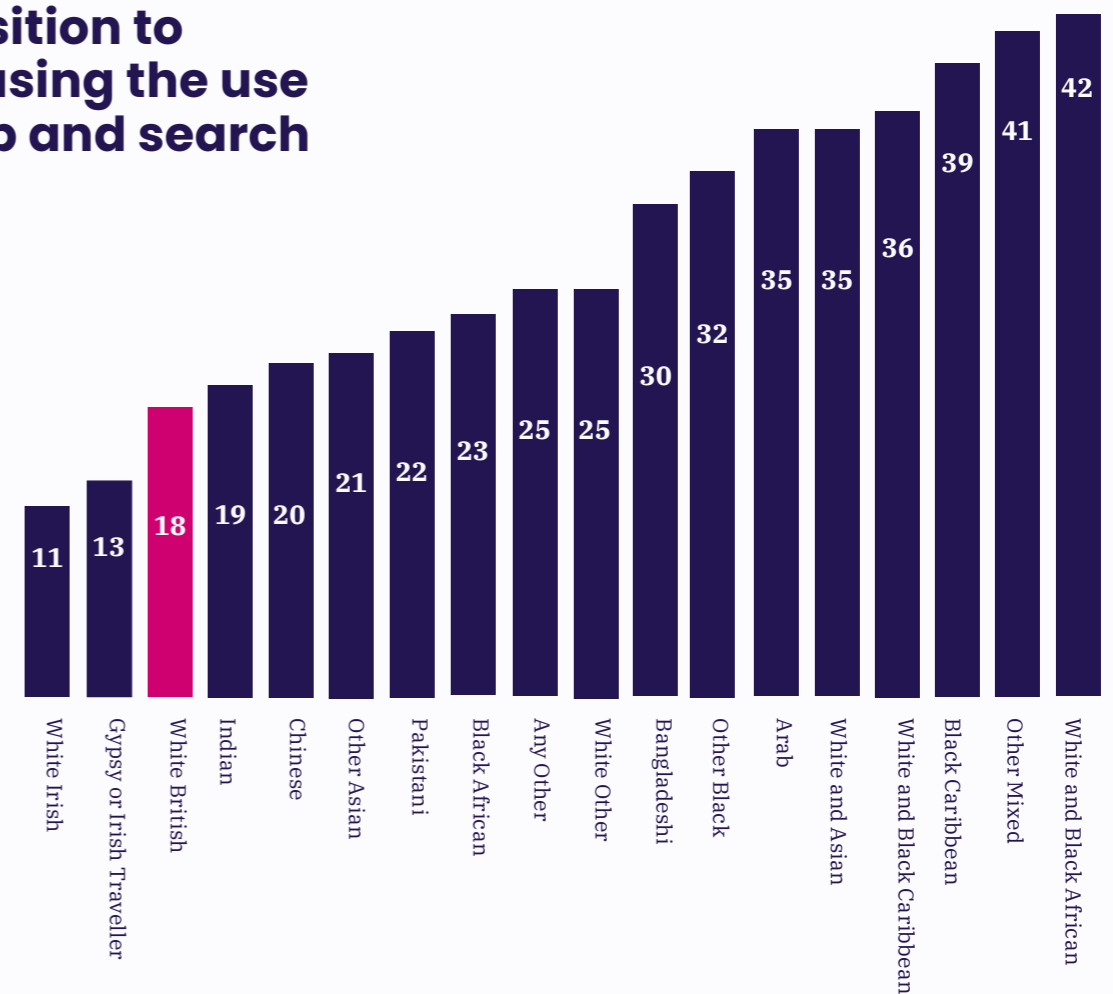
- I would like to see the increased use of police stop and search
- The increased use of police stop and search would not bother me
- I would not like to see the increased use of police stop and search

Figure 4. How would you feel about increasing the use of stop and search? by disaggregated ethnic group



Opposition to increasing the use of stop and search

Figure 5. Opposition to increasing the use of stop and search by disaggregated ethnic group



While these findings were not surprising, we were keen to interrogate them, including through our round-table discussion with civil society organisations and by conducting interviews to discuss our survey results and the reasons for them.

First, when we conduct more granular analysis we find that working-class people (whether defined by social grade or levels of income) are generally more supportive of police powers such as stop and search. Working-class conditions are increasingly precarious, and with greater material deprivation comes more individual⁴³ and community⁴⁴ competition. It is therefore not surprising that people would be in favour of punitive policing in order to defend what they do have and to feel a sense of safety.

Second, it was understood that the public is not neutral and that polling doesn't take place in a neutral social context. Attendees at our round-table spoke about the manufacturing of crises and moral panics around crime. This is characterised by fear-mongering about declining neighbourhood policing and false narratives about increasing overall crime rates, which are then used to justify increasing police numbers, enhancing police powers, and the further securitisation of public and social spheres. Too often, the headline figures for these issues are divorced

43 Wilson, W.J. (1987) *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

44 Tyler, K. (2012) *Whiteness, Class and the Legacies of Empire: On Home Ground*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

from context. For example, there is very little discussion about the cost-of-living crisis when shoplifting is the subject of debate. The public is fed sensationalised media discourse and inevitably reproduces that bias. This was also made clear in our interviews:

they'll do anything to rubbish Black people's name ... and they control what's going on in the media, and that when we're reading the media, if you're just a normal, everyday person [not from a working-class community of colour], you're just going to think 'Oh, this is what it's like'. (*Poetic Unity*)

Third, evidence shows that levels of insecurity and feelings of lack of safety are increasing,⁴⁵ whether that threat is real or imagined, and this can trigger visceral responses. As austerity has led to disinvestment in communities and public services, recent years have seen increased levels of poverty and homelessness, health inequalities, and some forms of harm and crime (although overall crime rates have been declining for many years). Alongside the mainstream narrative suggesting that more investment in policing is required, this can promote insecurity. It then follows that the logical answer, particularly in communities feeling a sense of desperation, is to police our way out. This has been called 'austerity-driven policification', where increases in police subsidies mean the cutting of roles in welfare and social institutions, in a shift that triggers coercive, punitive and exclusionary measures and normalises the presence of police.⁴⁶ For many, the stresses of poverty and traumatic community experiences provide little space to reimagine community safety.

Finally, as we have already mentioned, polling is not without its flaws as a research methodology. One flaw is the presentation of a binary choice, i.e. 'Do you think the police are effective, yes or no?' Such value statements leave no room for people participating in the research to think beyond the immediate choice, meaning that there is no exploration

45 ONS (2025) *Crime in England and Wales: Annual supplementary tables*, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/datasets/crimeinenglandandwalesannualsupplementarytables>

46 Laub, M.M. (2023) 'Austerity-driven policification: Neoliberalisation, schools and the police in Britain', *The Sociological Review* 72(3): online 4 October, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00380261231202649>.

of anything that could be deemed more effective. As can be seen in the next section, when presented with more nuanced options, policing was seen less favourably than other options for preventing crime.

It is also the case that scientific methods are often taken as hard evidence for complex social phenomena, but this can risk oversimplifying a more nuanced picture. It was therefore important for us to design different forms of questions and, as we report later, to combine this with qualitative research methods, providing space for people to meet each other, hear different personal experiences and deliberate on issues. This led to nuanced research findings that go beyond simplified poll-based studies.

'Copaganda'

From Noddy's Toyland Adventures to Line of Duty, from Paw Patrol to Luther, the influence of 'copaganda' helps to sustain support for the police, even in the face of clear evidence of harm.⁴⁷ Popular media and political discourse frame the police as inherently just, moral, protective, and essential to maintaining law and order, simultaneously narrowing the public imagination of what safety might otherwise look like.

Policing vs social interventions

When given a choice between social interventions and a policing response, the public think investment in public and social services would do more to prevent crime than putting more police on the streets. Around half of the public think greater investment in public and social services would do more to prevent crime than increasing the number of police on the street (50 per cent) and increasing police powers (52 per cent), with just 22 per cent and 18 per cent disagreeing respectively (the rest are unsure).

This is true across all ethnic groups (including white groups) but is felt particularly strongly among people of colour (Figure 6 and 7). These perceptions align well with previous research showing that social interventions and community safety initiatives can successfully prevent criminalised behaviour, as we discuss later.

47 Frazer-Carroll, M. (2020) 'Copaganda: Why film and TV portrayals of the police are under fire', Independent, 9 July, www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/tv/features/police-brutality-tv-copaganda-brooklyn-nine-nine-paw-patrol-cops-george-floyd-a9610956.html.

Figure 6. 'What would do more to prevent crime, investing in public and social services or increasing police numbers?', by disaggregated ethnic group. Note: 'Don't know' and 'Neutral' responses have been removed.

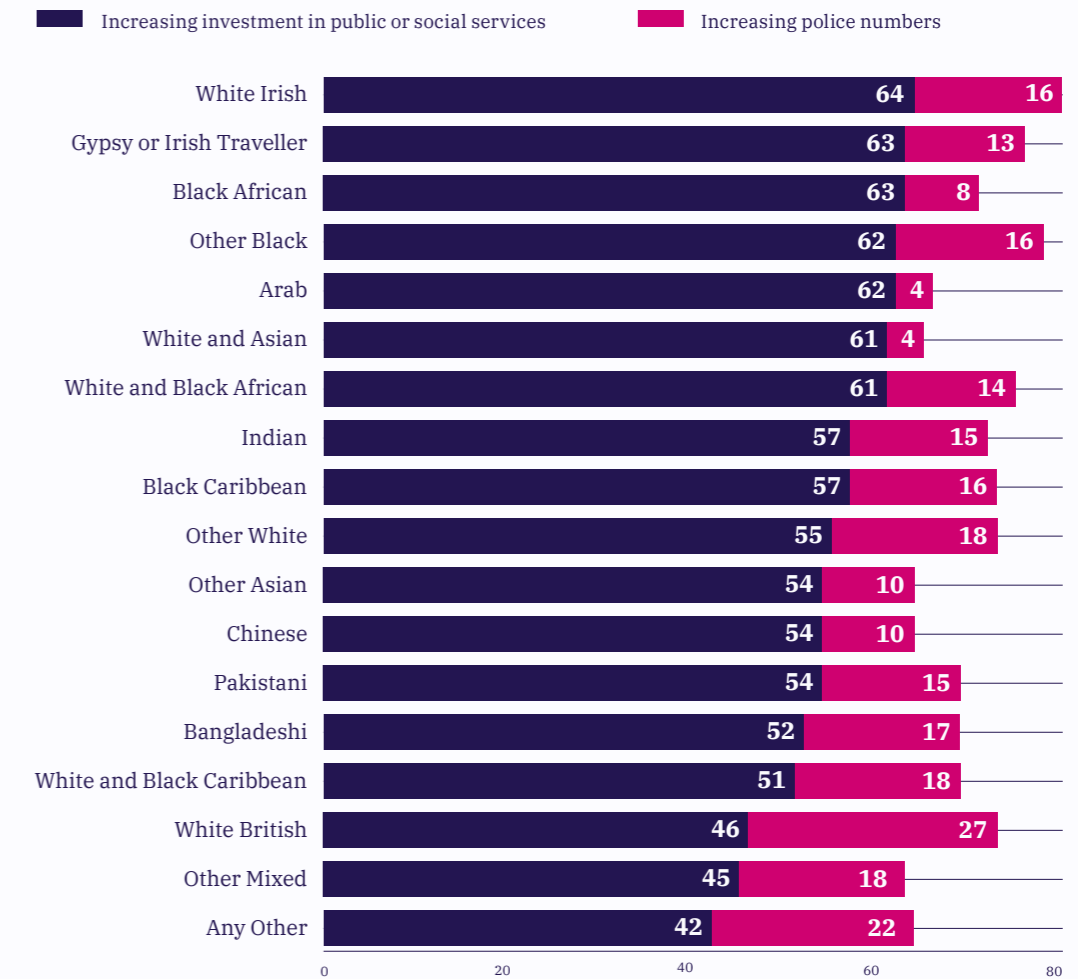
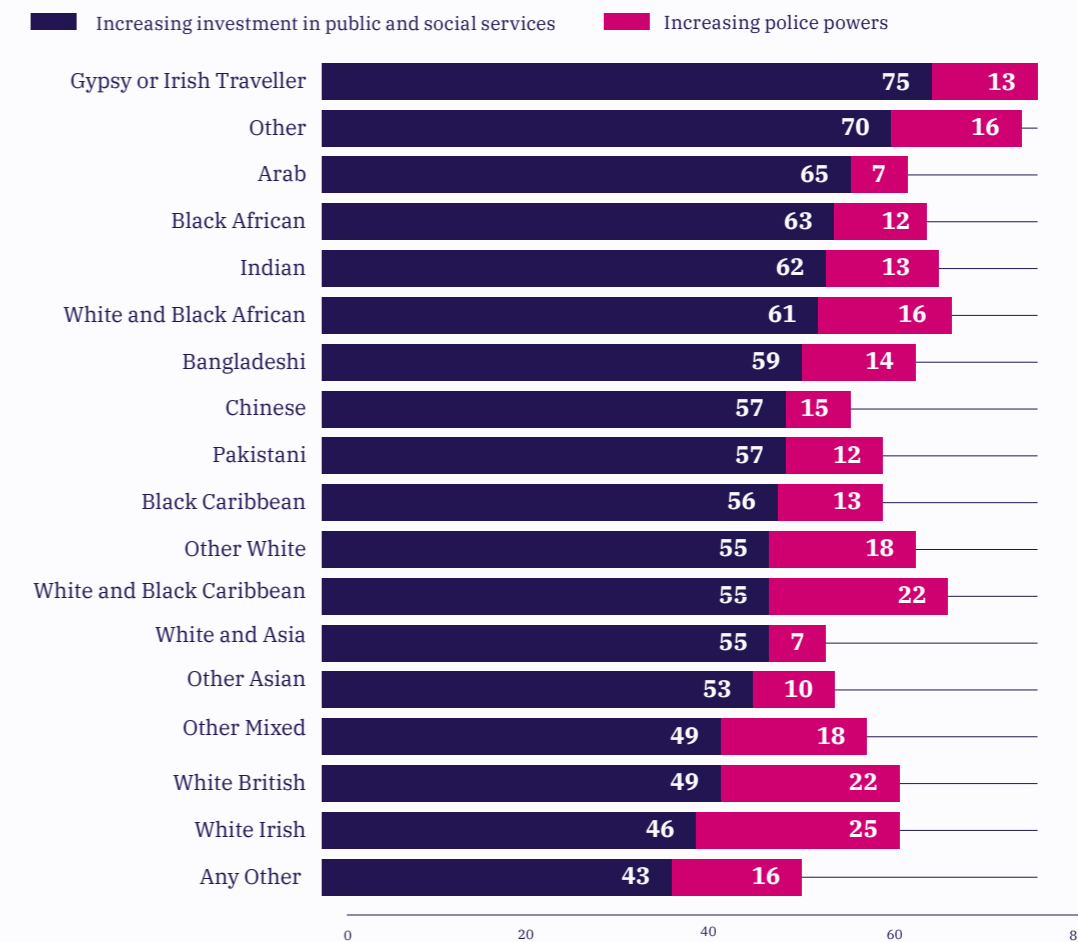


Figure 7. 'What would do more to prevent crime, investing in public and social services or increasing police powers?', by disaggregated ethnic group. Note: 'Don't know' and 'Neutral' responses have been removed.



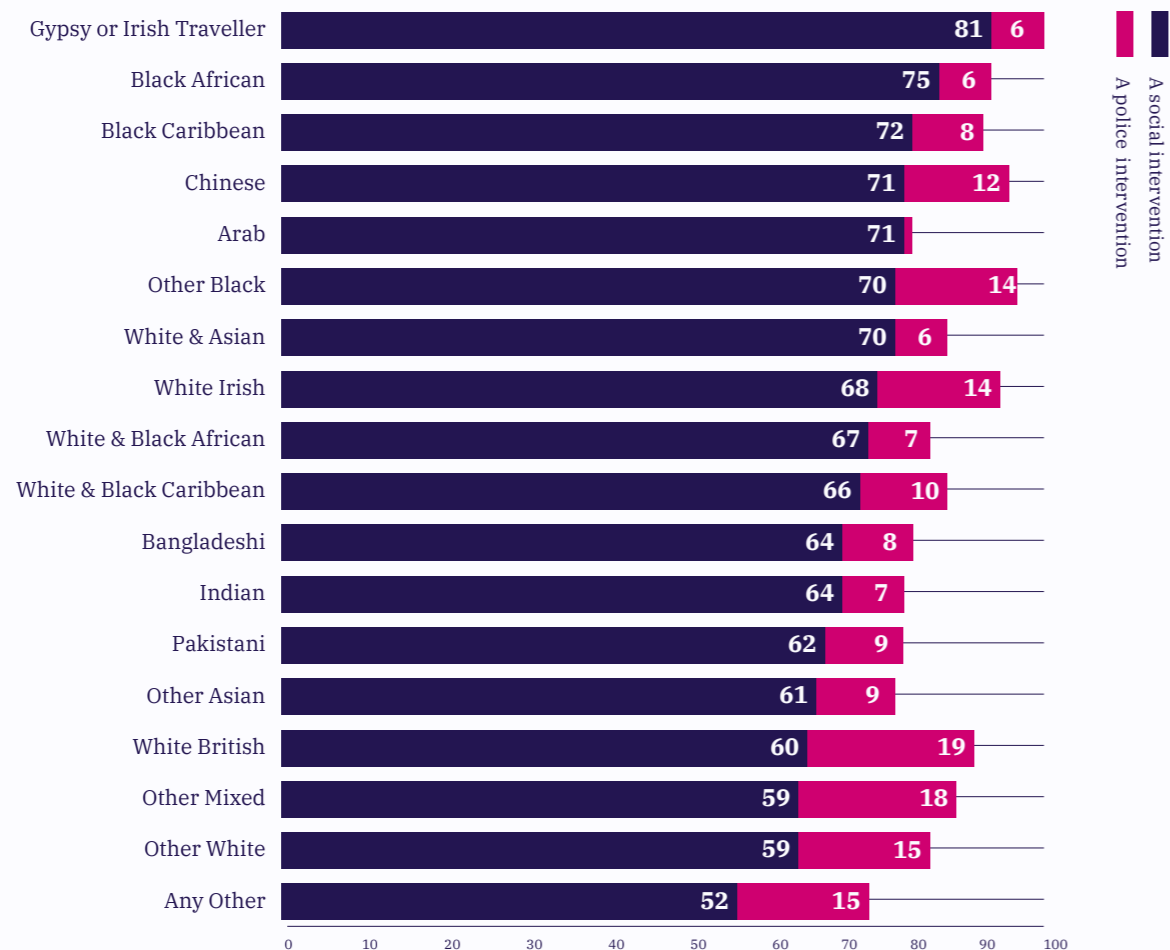


Figure 8. 'In an area where there are concerns about young people gathering in local parks and causing a nuisance, which do you think would have the most longer-term impact?', by disaggregated ethnic group

Note: 'Don't know' and 'Neutral' responses have been removed

Respondents were also asked to think of scenarios – based on real-life examples – which might attract a policing intervention. Over 75 per cent of people of colour think that a social intervention, such as providing funding for a youth jobs guarantee scheme or opening a local youth centre, would do more to prevent young people gathering in local parks and causing a nuisance than a policing response, such as increasing police numbers in the area or extending stop and search powers. Despite being more supportive of the police in general, around 70 per cent of respondents from White groups agree. Disaggregated analysis shows particularly high levels of support for social interventions among Gypsy or Irish Traveller (81 per cent), Black Caribbean (72 per cent) and Black African (75 per cent) communities (Figure 8).

When asked about effective interventions for people struggling with class A drug addiction, although the proportion was lower than for the previous example, a majority of respondents still selected a social intervention as the best way to reduce harm. Support was highest among Black, Asian and 'Mixed' respondents, with respondents from white groups most likely to support a heavy, punitive response (see Figure 9).

Which would be the most effective intervention for people struggling with class A substance addiction?

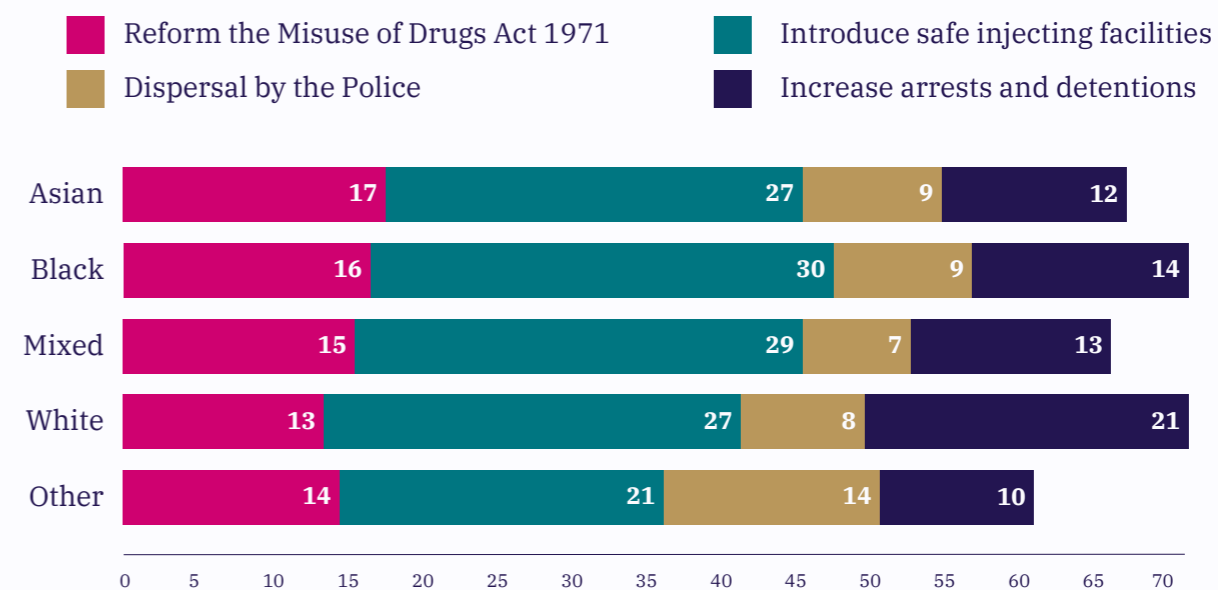


Figure 9. 'Which would be the most effective intervention for people struggling with Class A substance addiction?', by aggregated ethnic group.

Note: 'Don't know' and 'Neutral' responses have been removed.

We recognise that given the flaws of polling generally, it would be illogical to simply take the choice-based questions at face value. However, while they provide a more nuanced approach to understanding public attitudes, they are also aligned with the evidence based on the best ways to prevent harm: the social interventions that garner more public support than the police are also those that are most effective at preventing crime and harm. We explore this further in the next chapter.

The current picture



Figure 10. The disproportionate policing of Black communities (shown as comparative ratios). Note: the bars show how many times more likely than white people other groups are to experience the forms of policing shown.

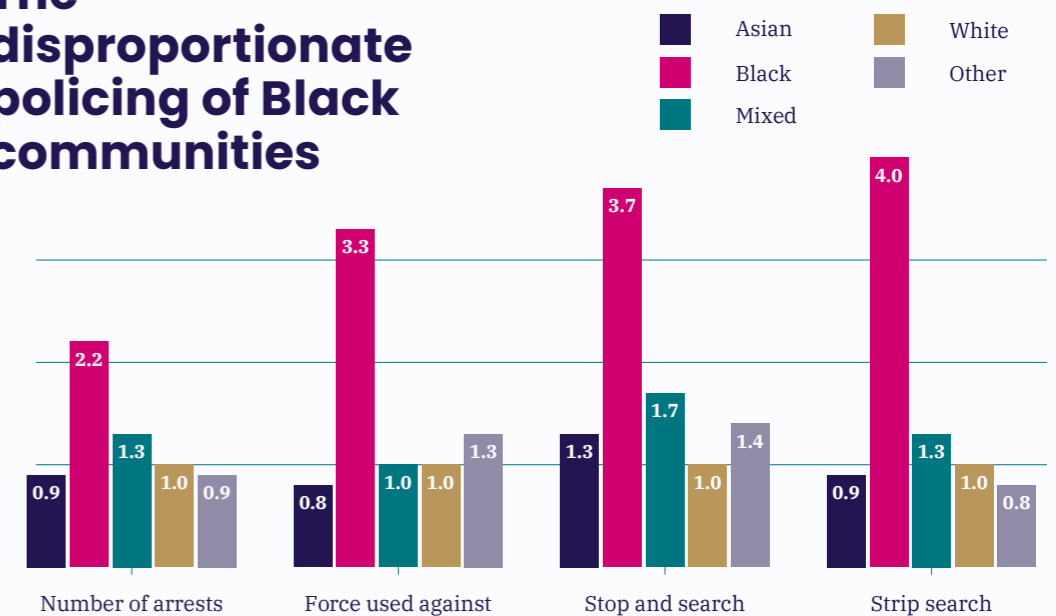
This chapter sets out how policing causes harm and demonstrates that, as reflected in the public attitudes revealed by our polling, the police cannot provide the best way to prevent harm. This is not an exhaustive exploration of all policing powers but reflects the most harmful – institutionally racist – practices and racial disproportionalities found in our evidence review.

Being ‘tough on crime’ is causing harm

A tranche of police powers are used disproportionately against people of colour, particularly Black people, as illustrated in Figure 10. The police are twice as likely to arrest, three times more likely to use force, almost four times more likely to stop and search, and four times more likely to strip search a Black person compared with a white person.⁴⁸ The continued expansion of police powers has been deemed ‘common sense’ by successive governments despite the lack of evidence base for their use. Below we explore some of the areas in which this has taken place.

48 Home Office (2024) ‘Police use of force statistics, England and Wales: April 2023 to March 2024: Data tables’, 5 December, www.gov.uk/government/statistics/police-use-of-force-statistics-april-2023-to-march-2024; Home Office (2024) ‘Stop and search, arrests and mental health detentions, March 2024’, 26 September, www.gov.uk/government/statistics/stop-and-search-arrests-and-mental-health-detentions-march-2024; Home Office (2025) ‘Police custody and pre-charge bail, year ending March 2024’, 27 February, www.gov.uk/government/statistics/police-custody-and-pre-charge-bail-year-ending-march-2024.

The disproportionate policing of Black communities



Stop and search

The evidence shows that stop and search consistently fails to achieve its stated aims of reducing and preventing criminalised behaviour and in fact is harmful, counterproductive and unjustified.⁴⁹ Despite political rhetoric emphasising the need for stop and search to prevent people from carrying weapons, and contrary to claims that there is a causal relationship between stop and search powers and reducing violence,⁵⁰

it has no statistically significant effect in deterring violence.⁵¹ The latest figures show that an overwhelming majority of stops and searches under the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 find nothing, and that just 14.3 per cent lead to an arrest.⁵² Section 60 stop and searches, which require no reasonable suspicion from a police officer, have an overall arrest rate of just 4.1 per cent, and 1.1 per cent for offensive weapons.⁵³ Of all stop and searches that do lead to an arrest, nearly a third (*31.1 per cent*) are for drugs and 12.4 per cent are for offensive weapons or firearms, while in 17.3 per cent of cases the reason for arrest is recorded as ‘unknown’.⁵⁴

In fact, evidence shows how stop and search can have a counterintuitive effect. UK-based research from two decades ago found that young people who are stopped, questioned, detained or charged are more likely to display criminalised behaviour and be arrested again, compared with those who

commit similar offences but are not known to the police.⁵⁵ More recent research examining the unintended life-course consequences of being stopped by the police before the age of 14 found associations with increased violent offending, reduced educational aspirations, and issues with behaviour and attention by the age of 17.⁵⁶

A US study found that adolescent (predominantly Black or Latino) boys subject to a police stop are more likely to engage in unlawful behaviour after the police interaction. This is independent of any previous unlawful behaviour.⁵⁷ In other words, while law-abiding behaviour does not necessarily reduce a person’s likelihood of being stopped, being stopped increases the likelihood of future unlawful behaviour.⁵⁸

This demonstrates the effect of ‘labelling’, where behaviour is influenced by how an individual is labelled by the state or others. Existing ‘labels’ projected onto communities of colour, in this context particularly young Black men, are perpetuated based on racist stereotypes about inherent violence and criminality.⁵⁹ This evidence also aligns with the life-course theory of cumulative disadvantage, whereby critical events alter young people’s developmental trajectory and life paths.⁶⁰

Evidence from the US also illustrates the negative physical

49 Runnymede Trust (2023) *Against Serious Violence Reduction Orders: Discriminatory, Harmful and Counterproductive*, London, [https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/61488f992b58e687f1108c7c/654e3ee9fc29a51c7a3a4dc6_Runnymede%20SVRO%20Report%20v6%20\(1\).pdf](https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/61488f992b58e687f1108c7c/654e3ee9fc29a51c7a3a4dc6_Runnymede%20SVRO%20Report%20v6%20(1).pdf); Bowling, B. and Phillips, C. (2007) ‘Disproportionate and discriminatory: Reviewing the evidence on police stop and search’, *The Modern Law Review* 70(6): 936–961.

50 UK Government (2021) ‘Beating Crime Plan: Fewer victims, peaceful neighbourhoods, safe country’, <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6135f34ed3bf7f05b7bcb54e/Crime-plan-v10.pdf>

51 Quinton, P., Tiratelli, M. and Bradford, B. (2017) *Does More Stop and Search Mean Less Crime? Analysis of Metropolitan Police Service Panel Data, 2004–14*, London: College of Policing, <https://library.college.police.uk/docs/college-of-policing/College-of-Policingdoes-more-stop-and-search-2017.pdf>; McCandless, R., Feist, A., Allan, J. and Morgan, N. (2016) *Do Initiatives Involving Substantial Increases in Stop and Search Reduce Crime? Assessing the Impact of Operation BLUNT 2*, London: Home Office, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/508661/stop-search-operation-blunt-2.pdf; Bradford, B. and Tiratelli, M. (2019) ‘Does stop and search reduce crime?’, *UK Justice Policy Review* 4: 1–11; Tiratelli, M., Quinton, P. and Bradford, B. (2020) ‘Does stop and search deter crime?’, *British Journal of Criminology* 60(6): 1321–1341.

52 Home Office (2024) ‘Stop and search: Arrests and mental health detentions, year ending March 2024’, 26 September, www.gov.uk/government/statistics/stop-and-search-arrests-and-mental-health-detentions-march-2024.

53 Ibid.

54 Ibid.

55 McAra, L. and McVie, S. (2005) ‘The usual suspects? Street-life, young people and the police’, *Youth Justice* 5(1): 5–22.

56 Kyprianides, A., Ali, A., Petnga-Wallace, P., Quinton, P. and Oliveira, T.R. (2025) ‘Unintended consequences of early exposure to policing: Assessing long-term effects of police stops during adolescence in England and Wales’, *The British Journal of Criminology*, 15 July: azaf068, <https://academic.oup.com/bjc/advance-article/doi/10.1093/bjc/azaf068/8201620#525983307>.

57 Del Toro, J., Lloyd, T., Buchanan, K.S. and Goff, P.A. (2019) ‘The criminogenic and psychological effects of police stops on adolescent Black and Latino boys’, *Psychological and Cognitive Studies* 116(17): 8261–8268.

58 Ibid.

59 Motz, R.T., Barnes, J.C., Caspi, A., Arsenaault, L., Cullen, F.T., Houts, R., Wertz, J. and Moffitt, T.E. (2020) ‘Does contact with the justice system deter or promote future delinquency?’, *Criminology* 58(2): 307–355.

60 Kyprianides, A., Ali, A., Petnga-Wallace, P., Quinton, P. and Oliveira, T.R. (2025) ‘Unintended consequences of early exposure to policing: Assessing long-term effects of police stops during adolescence in England and Wales’, *The British Journal of Criminology*, 15 July: azaf068, <https://academic.oup.com/bjc/advance-article/doi/10.1093/bjc/azaf068/8201620#525983307>.

and mental health impacts of police contact.⁶¹ Police stops can lead to psychological and biological stress responses, such as disrupted sleep and worse self-rated health. This in turn can be detrimental to academic performance at school, particularly for children of colour.⁶² In line with general strain theory, other research has found a statistically significant relationship between stop and search and anxiety, self-harm and increased suicide attempts,⁶³ not just for those in contact with the police but also among those who associate with people who have been stopped by the police, emphasising the vicarious nature of police-related trauma.⁶⁴ The indirect effects of police stops can also include a range of physical health issues such as diabetes, high blood pressure and increased body weight.⁶⁵

61 Del Toro, J., Thomas, A., Wang, M.-T. and Hughes, D. (2019) 'The health-related consequences to police stops as pathways to risks in academic performance for urban adolescents', Center for Research on Child Wellbeing Working Paper wp19-09-ff, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, <https://ideas.repec.org/p/pri/crcwel/wp19-09-ff.html>.

62 Ibid.

63 Jackson, D.B., Testa, A., Fix, R.L. and Mendelson, T. (2021) 'Adolescent police stops, self-harm, and attempted suicide: Findings from the UK Millennium Cohort Study, 2012–2019', *American Journal of Public Health* 111(10): 1885–1893.

64 Turney, K. (2021) 'Depressive symptoms among adolescents exposed to personal and vicarious police contact', *Society and Mental Health* 11(2): 113–133.

65 Sewell, A.A. and Jefferson, K.A. (2016) 'Collateral damage: The health effects of invasive police encounters in New York City', *Journal of Urban Health* 93(1): 42–67, 54.

Strip search

Police are 6.5 times more likely to strip search Black children than white children in England and Wales, with nearly half of strip searches of children in London being carried out on Black children, despite just 16.9 per cent of children in London being Black.⁶⁶ Meanwhile, police in England and Wales are 4.7 times more likely to strip search Black adults than white adults.⁶⁷

66 Runnymede Trust (2023) *The Racialised Harm of Police Strip Searches: A Response to the Home Office Consultation*, Lond, www.runnymedetrust.org/publications/the-racialised-harm-of-police-strip-searches-a-response-from-the-runnymede-trust-to-a-home-office-consultation.

67 Runnymede Trust (2023) *The Racialised Harm of Police Strip Searches: A Response to the Home Office Consultation*, Lond, www.runnymedetrust.org/publications/the-racialised-harm-of-police-strip-searches-a-response-from-the-runnymede-trust-to-a-home-office-consultation.

Drug policing

In 2023, 4,936 people died from drug misuse in the UK (3,618 in England and Wales,⁶⁸ 1,172 in Scotland⁶⁹ and 146 in Northern Ireland⁷⁰), representing the highest rate on record. 39.8 per cent of drug misuse deaths in the UK and EU (7,459) combined occur in the UK.⁷¹ Scotland has the highest drug-related death rate in Europe.⁷²

The outcomes of drug policing are racially disproportionate.⁷³ Around 70 per cent of stop and searches are for suspicion of drugs, and Black people are 4.5 times more likely to be searched for drugs,⁷⁴ despite being half as likely to self-report drug use.⁷⁵ This disproportionality is reflected in the policy which sees a £7 million budget to police Notting Hill Carnival yet little to no policing of drugs at majority-white festivals such as Glastonbury.⁷⁶ It was also reflected in our interview with Release, which provides community services and

68 ONS (Office for National Statistics) (2023) 'Deaths related to drug poisoning in England and Wales: 2023 registrations', 23 December 2024, www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/bulletins/deathsrelatedtodrugpoisoninginenglandandwales/2023registrations.

69 National Records of Scotland (2024) 'Drug-related deaths in Scotland in 2023', 20 August, www.nrscotland.gov.uk/publications/drug-related-deaths-in-scotland-in-2023/#.

70 NISRA (Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency) (2025) 'Drug-related and drug misuse deaths 2013-2023', 5 September, <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/publications/drug-related-and-drug-misuse-deaths-2013-2023>

71 EU Drugs Agency (2025) *Drug-Induced Deaths: The Current Situation in Europe* (European Drug Report 2025), Lisbon, www.euda.europa.eu/publications/european-drug-report/2025/drug-induced-deaths_en#:~:text=It%20is%20estimated%20that%20at,system%20is%20missing%20some%20cases.

72 Geddes, J. and Cook, J. (2024) 'Scotland's drug deaths still worst in Europe after 12% rise', BBC News, 18 July, www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c5y5l13ler7o.

73 Shiner, M., Carre, Z., Delsol, R. and Eastwood, N. (2013) *The Colour of Injustice: 'Race', Drugs and Law Enforcement in England and Wales*, London: Release.

74 Home Office, *Stop and Search: Arrests and Mental Health Detentions, Year Ending March 2024*.

75 ONS (2024) 'Drug misuse in England and Wales: Appendix table', 12 December, www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/datasets/drugmisuseinenglandandwalesappendixtable.

76 Purdy-Moore, S. (2023) 'Black people as perennial suspects: The racialised policing of music festivals', Runnymede Trust blog, www.runnymedetrust.org/blog/black-people-as-perennial-suspects-the-racialised-policing-of-music-festivals.

advocates for policy reform to drug laws:

drug use is ubiquitous across social classes, it's just when you intersect drug use alongside surveillance by the state, and a lack of resources, that it becomes a particularly pernicious harm for people.

Cannabis accounts for over half of drug offences globally and is therefore the drug that most often brings people into contact with the legal system.⁷⁷ It is the key driver of the disproportionate contact between people of colour and the police and the criminal legal system; one in three police searches are for cannabis possession, and Black and Asian people are respectively 11.8 and 2.4 times as likely to be convicted of cannabis possession, despite lower self-reported rates of use.⁷⁸

£1.4 billion is spent on drug-related policing and criminal justice costs per year in England and a further £5.5 billion on wider drug-related crime. The harms of drugs in England cost around £19 billion a year. The associated costs of homelessness, mental health and unemployment cost a further £4.5 billion.⁷⁹

77 United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) (2020) World Drug Report: Executive Summary, Vienna, www.wdr.unodc.org/wdr2020/field/WDR20_BOOKLET_1.pdf.

78 Shiner et al., *The Colour of Injustice*.

79 Home Office (2020) Review of Drugs: Evidence Pack, www.assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/882953/Review_of_Drugs_Evidence_Pack.pdf.

The Misuse of Drugs Act 1971

The Misuse of Drugs Act (1971) has failed to reduce drug consumption and has instead increased harm, worsened public health and exacerbated inequalities.⁸⁰ The ‘war on drugs’ is rooted in racism: the introduction of the Act was itself a response to emerging youth cultures and Black communities in the 1950 and 60s, designed to manufacture a moral panic around immigration.⁸¹ Given its historic and present-day outcomes, drug prohibition is unequivocally a racial justice issue.

In its review of the disproportionate use of police powers, Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS) recommended ‘an evidence-based national debate on the use of stop and search in the policing of controlled drugs’.⁸² This follows the decisions of many countries to decriminalise all drugs and others legalising cannabis.

Cannabis use is widespread, and its criminalisation causes significant harm. Not only is cannabis less harmful than alcohol,⁸³ its strength and quality cannot be regulated while it is prohibited.⁸⁴ In addition, a criminal record for a cannabis-related conviction limits education and employment opportunities,⁸⁵ ignoring the fact that suppliers are often driven into the market due to economic exclusion and lack of opportunities.⁸⁶

80 Transform Drug Policy Foundation (2021) ‘The Misuse of Drugs Act at 50’, <https://transformdrugs.org/mda-at-50>.

81 Transform Drug Policy Foundation (2021) ‘A short history of the Misuse of Drugs Act’, 4 November, <https://transformdrugs.org/blog/a-short-history-of-the-misuse-of-drugs-act>.

82 HMICFRS (2021) Disproportionate Use of Police Powers: A Spotlight on Stop and Search and the Use of Force, Birmingham, www.justiceinspectors.gov.uk/hmicfrs/wp-content/uploads/disproportionate-use-of-police-powers-spotlight-on-stop-search-and-use-of-force.pdf.

83 Hall, W., Degenhardt, L. and Caulkins, J.P. (2010) ‘The adverse health effects of cannabis use’, *The Lancet* 376(9743): 1383–1391.

84 Szalavitz, M. (2019) ‘Weed is way stronger than it used to be: That’s why it should be legal’, *Vice*, 12 September, www.vice.com/en/article/why-weed-should-be-legal-its-getting-stronger-more-potent.

85 Department for Education (DfE) (2018) ‘Permanent and fixed-period exclusions in England: 2016 to 2017’, www.gov.uk/government/statistics/permanent-and-fixedperiod-exclusions-in-england-2016-to-2017; Release and National Union of Students (2018) *Taking the Hit: Student Drug Use and How Institutions Respond*, London, www.release.org.uk/publications/taking-hit-student-drug-use-and-how-institutions-respond.

86 Global Commission on Drug Policy (2016) *Advancing Drug Policy Reform: A New Approach to Decriminalization*, Geneva, www.globalcommissionondrugs.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/GCDP-Report-2016-ENGLISH.pdf.

Mental health and Section 136

There is a growing mental health crisis in the UK, and the police are often first responders to people experiencing a crisis. In fact, over 40 per cent of calls to the police are for matters related to mental health.⁸⁷ There is significant evidence that police contact while a person is experiencing mental distress can make matters worse, particularly for people of colour. It is a social failing that we are reliant on the police to respond to a health issue, while the mental health treatment and support available in our health system is entirely insufficient and under-resourced – another example of ‘austerity-driven policification’.⁸⁸

Under Section 136 of the Mental Health Act (MHA), police officers can detain someone in a perceived ‘place of safety’, which includes a police cell, if they are suffering from mental distress in a public space. This is a symptom of a lack of appropriate NHS care, linked to chronic underfunding. It is also an approach that can significantly exacerbate symptoms, given that police cells are clearly not designed to support people, and, for many, do not offer safety.

Black people are 3.5 times as likely as white people to be detained under the MHA. When disaggregated, this is particularly acute for people in the ‘Black Other’ and ‘Mixed Other’ groups, who are respectively 11.3 times and 4.6 times as likely to be detained as White British people.⁸⁹

People detained under the MHA are most at risk of dying in custody. Over the last five years, an average of 263 people have died while detained under the Act.⁹⁰

87 UK Parliament (2021) ‘Written evidence submitted by the National Mental Health Policing Portfolio Business Area lead on behalf of all police forces’, [parliament.uk/writtenevidence/50659/html](https://www.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/50659/html).

88 Laub, ‘Austerity-driven policification’.

89 Gov.uk (2024) ‘Detentions under the Mental Health Act’, 16 August, www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/health/mental-health/detentions-under-the-mental-health-act/latest.

90 Martin, A.-C. (2024) ‘Most people who die in police custody have mental health issues, report finds’, Independent, 23 April, www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/deaths-custody-mental-health-act-report-b2532790.html.

Use of force and institutional police killings

Institutional police killings are not exceptional in England and Wales. Since 1990, 1,940 people have died in police custody or following police contact.⁹¹ IOPC data shows that Black people were at least two times more likely to die in or following police custody, or following police contact, between 2004/5 and 2020/21, than the proportion of the population they represent. INQUEST’s own data shows that between 2011 and 2021 Black people were four times more likely to die. Black people were also seven times more likely to die than white people when restraint was used between 2012/13 and 2020/21.⁹²

Analysis shows that Black people made up 8 per cent of institutional killings in the last ten years, despite representing only 3 per cent of the population.

91 INQUEST (2025) ‘Deaths of people in and following police custody’, <https://www.inquest.org.uk/deaths-in-and-following-police-contact>.

92 INQUEST (2023) *I Can’t Breathe: Race, death & British policing*, London, <https://www.inquest.org.uk/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=edfc7c01-e7bb-4a17-9c33-8628905460e6>

Analysis of the 17 custody-related deaths (*where force was used*) between 2017 and 2019 shows that five were Black (29.4 per cent), despite Black people making up only 4.2 per cent of the population in England and Wales.⁹³ The 2017 Angiolini Review also acknowledged the disproportionate number of institutional police killings and their connection with institutional and systemic racism.⁹⁴

Julian Cole

Not all institutional killings or cases of excessive use of force are widely reported. Julian Cole, a healthy sports science student, was involved in an altercation outside a nightclub in Bedford in 2013. He was violently arrested and handcuffed face down before being ‘dragged like a ragdoll’ to a police van. This experience sent him into cardiac arrest and left him with a broken neck and severe spinal injuries, paralysing him and causing brain damage. The police officers who arrested Julian Cole were found to have written up their records while in the same room and lied about his condition while restrained, and were later dismissed from their roles. Julian Cole spent the remaining 11 years of his life in a minimally conscious state, requiring round-the-clock care, before passing away in March 2025.⁹⁵

93 BBC News (2020) ‘George Floyd: UK protests over police brutality continue’, 3 June, www.bbc.co.uk/news/52890363.

94 Angiolini, E. (2017) *Report of the Independent Review of Deaths and Serious Incidents in Police Custody*, London: Home Office, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a821d1040f0b6230269ae98/Report_of_Angiolini_Review_ISBN_Accessible.pdf.

95 Bindmans LLP (2024) ‘Julian Cole, aged 31, passes away after 11 years in a minimal conscious state following an assault by Bedfordshire police officers’, 1 April, www.bindmans.com/news-insights/news/julian-cole-aged-31-passes-away-after-11-years-in-a-minimal-conscious-state-following-an-assault-by-bedfordshire-police-officers.

Desmond Ziggy Mombeyarara

On 19 June 2021, the IOPC found Greater Manchester police’s use of a Taser on NHS worker Desmond Ziggy Mombeyarara to be lawful. In May 2020, police had pulled Mombeyarara over for speeding. They proceeded to Taser him for making ‘no real attempt to comply’ with police. Mombeyarara’s distressed five-year-old son screamed ‘Daddy’ when his limp body slumped to the ground, believing that the police had shot his father. The IOPC found no reason to take disciplinary action over the case. The inquiry found ‘no evidence to suggest the complainant’s ethnicity was a factor in the decision to use force against him’. Many campaign groups have raised concerns about Taser use, which is lower than in 2020 but continues to be four times more frequent on Black people than white.⁹⁶

The problem with prisons

The fact that one interaction with the criminal legal system often leads to many more shows that it’s not working and they’re just punishing people rather than supporting people. (*4Front*)

Prisons are overcrowded. Imprisonment rates in England and Wales are rising, despite the opposite being true in the rest of Europe. The Ministry of Justice projects that the prison population will increase by a further 15 per cent by September 2028, primarily due to an increase in police activity.⁹⁷ A prison would have to be built every six weeks just to keep up with current demand, but demand is likely to increase given the impact of police officer recruitment on the number of people in prison.⁹⁸ Indeed, the current government has committed to building a further 14,000 prison places by 2031.⁹⁹

96 Resistance Lab (2021), *Despite Their Claims to the Contrary, Taser Usage by Greater Manchester Police Has Risen to Its Highest Ever Level*, Manchester, <https://resistancelab.network/our-work/gmp-taser-update/index.html>; Home Office, ‘Police use of force statistics, England and Wales: April 2023 to March 2024’.

97 Ministry of Justice (2024) ‘Prison population projections: 2024 to 2029’, 5 December, www.gov.uk/government/statistics/prison-population-projections-2024-to-2029.

98 Ministry of Justice (2021) ‘Prison population projections 2021 to 2026, England and Wales’, assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/619e2f2a8fa8f50382034da6/Prison_Population_Projections_2021_to_2026.pdf.

99 Ministry of Justice (2023) ‘Thousands of new prison places to be built to keep streets safe’, 11 December, www.gov.uk/government/news/thousands-of-new-prison-places-to-be-built-to-keep-streets-safe.

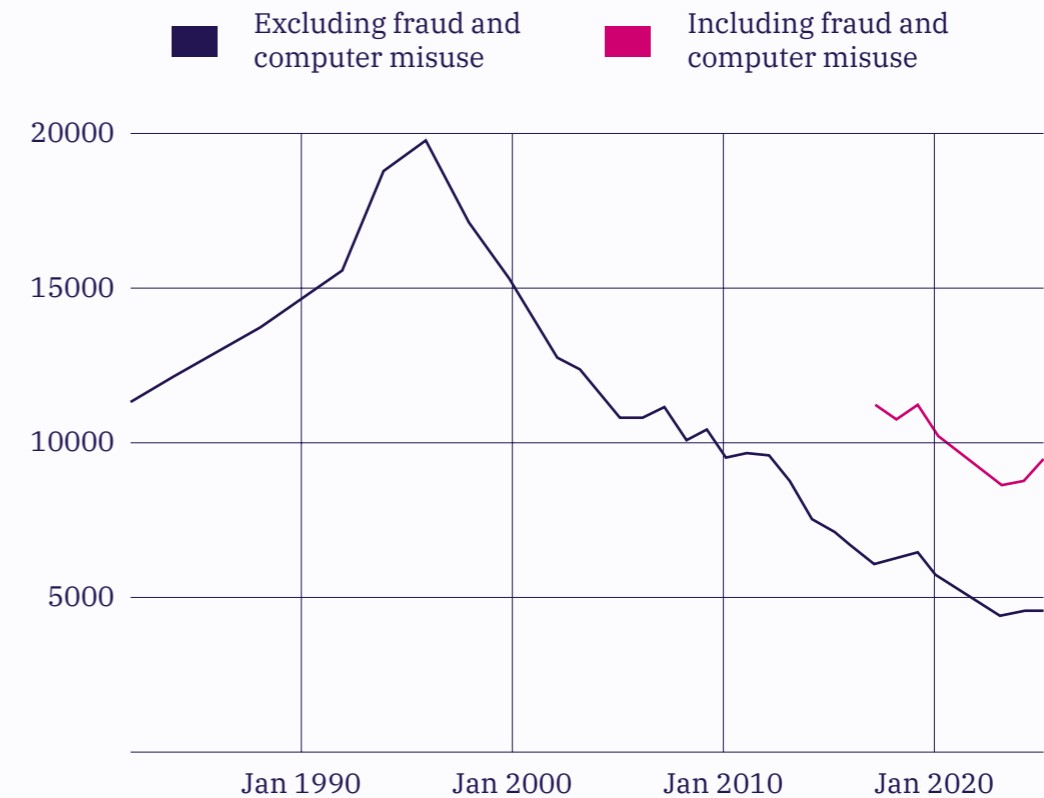


Figure 11. Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) estimated number of crime incidents (thousands).

These rates are not explained by crime rates: excluding fraud and computer misuse, these have fallen by around 77 per cent since 1995. While there have been increases in some crime types recently, rates are generally still far lower or no higher than in the 1990s (*see Figure 11*).¹⁰⁰

Our criminal legal system is reliant on the assumption that prison deters unlawful behaviour and that only through such punishment can justice be served. This is false in a number of ways. First, it is an individualised assumption whereby people must always take entire responsibility for their actions, ignoring structural conditions and adverse prior experiences which might partially explain criminalised behaviour.¹⁰¹

People of colour make up 27 per cent of the prison population, and 49 per cent of the under-18 prison population (*including 26 per cent Black people*). These figures do not reflect higher rates

100 ONS (2024) ‘Crime in England and Wales: Year ending December 2024’, www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/bulletins/crimeinenglandandwales/yearendingmarch2025.

101 Women Beyond Walls (2024) *From Poverty to Punishment: Examining Laws and Practices Which Criminalise Women due to Poverty or Status Worldwide*, www.womenbeyondwalls.org/_files/ugd/2d77c8_728255cde77e498189391b05638667ae.pdf.

of offending but rather the impact of institutional racism and structural disadvantage.¹⁰² Black people are 3.4 times more likely than white people to be in prison, despite similar or lower rates of offending for many crimes.¹⁰³ Research consistently shows that people of colour are more likely to be stopped, searched, charged and given custodial sentences for comparable offences.¹⁰⁴

The proportion of the British prison population who are Black is more disproportionate even than in the US.¹⁰⁵ And notably, while the Black prison population has remained relatively steady, the Asian and mixed-heritage prison populations have risen sharply, by approximately 90 per cent and 125 per cent respectively since 2004, and the white prison population has risen by about 20 per cent. The Muslim prison population has tripled since 2002, now making up 18 per cent of the prison population compared with 6 per cent of the general population.¹⁰⁶

These disparities are rooted in institutional racism in policing, prosecutorial decision-making and sentencing practices, compounded by broader structural inequalities such as poverty, lack of access to quality education and social marginalisation.¹⁰⁷ The over-representation of racialised groups in prison is not evidence of a greater propensity for criminality but a symptom of systemic racism and injustice in the legal system and society at large.

Second, prison does not rectify adverse conditions such as poor mental health, exposure to trauma and Adverse Childhood Experiences (*ACEs*), neurodevelopmental conditions, school exclusions, unemployment, and homelessness.¹⁰⁸ In fact, people's mental health worsens after being in prison, and a person is more likely to suffer with problem drug use after than before imprisonment.¹⁰⁹ Furthermore, criminal records are a significant barrier to employment, and with increased unemployment comes a lack of income, poor health and poverty, themselves drivers of criminalised behaviour.

Third, the logic that harsh prison conditions themselves can deter reoffending is clearly false,

102 Prison Reform Trust (2025) 'Bromley Briefings prison factfile', February, prisonreformtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Winter-2025-factfile.pdf.

103 Ministry of Justice (2024) 'Ethnicity and the criminal justice system: Chapter 6 offender management tables', www.gov.uk/government/statistics/ethnicity-and-the-criminal-justice-system-2022.

104 Ministry of Justice (2024), 'Statistics on Ethnicity and the criminal justice system, 2022', 19 March, [www.gov.uk/government/statistics/ethnicity-and-the-criminal-justice-system-2022/statistics-on-ethnicity-and-the-criminal-justice-system-2022-html#:~:text=In%20general%2C%20ethnic%20minorities%20\(excluding,minorities%20\(excluding%20white%20minorities\).](https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/ethnicity-and-the-criminal-justice-system-2022/statistics-on-ethnicity-and-the-criminal-justice-system-2022-html#:~:text=In%20general%2C%20ethnic%20minorities%20(excluding,minorities%20(excluding%20white%20minorities).)

105 Women in Prison (2020) 'WIP statement: Black Lives Matter', www.womeninprison.org.uk/news/wip-statement-black-lives-matter.

106 Prison Reform Trust, 'Bromley Briefings prison factfile'.

107 Monteith, K., Quinn, E., Dennis, A.L., Joseph- Salisbury, R., Kane, E., Addo, F. and McGourlay, C. (2022) *Racial Bias and the Bench: A Response to the Judicial Diversity and Inclusion Strategy (2020–2025)*, Manchester: University of Manchester, <https://documents.manchester.ac.uk/display.aspx?DocID=64125>; Lacey, N., (2022) 'Criminal justice and social (in)justice', Working Paper 84, London: LSE International Inequalities Institute, https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/116949/1/Lacey_criminal_justice.pdf.

108 Prison Reform Trust, 'Bromley Briefings prison factfile'.

109 Farrell, M. and Marsden, J. (2008) 'Acute risk of drug-related death among newly released prisoners in England and Wales', *Addiction* 103(2): 251–255.

given high rates of repeat offending: 42 per cent of adults released from prison are reconvicted within a year, and this rises to 58 per cent for women and 60 per cent for children.¹¹⁰ The Sentencing Council reports that 'the current evidence does not suggest that increasing the length of immediate prison sentences is an effective way to reduce reoffending'.¹¹¹ This was reflected in our interviews, with many organisations commenting on the ineffectiveness of punishment and the need for support and opportunities for people when leaving prison.

Communities of colour are becoming increasingly surveilled

Technology

Police surveillance is becoming increasingly sophisticated through the use of technology and artificial intelligence, with data-sharing, analytics and predictive policing tools raising serious concerns for communities of colour. Although these technologies are often presented as neutral and free of bias, they are built on assumptions about the perceived risk posed by individuals or entire communities rather than their actual behaviour. This reliance on perception intensifies the impacts of racial profiling, reinforcing harmful stereotypes and disproportionate targeting.

110 Prison Reform Trust, 'Bromley Briefings prison factfile'.

111 Gormley, J., Hamilton, M. and Belton, I. (2022) *The Effectiveness of Sentencing Options on Reoffending*, London: Sentencing Council, www.sentencingcouncil.org.uk/publications/item/the-effectiveness-of-sentencing-options-on-reoffending.

Scholars have demonstrated that such technologies contribute to a broader framework of perceived notions of risk and social order that underpin policing practices – where people of colour are seen as inherently threatening or disorderly. They therefore reproduce and justify racialised control under the guise of maintaining public safety.¹¹²

New police technologies have a two-fold impact on communities of colour. First, technology that identifies, surveils and analyses will reproduce existing disproportionalities and over-policing. For example, predictive policing initiatives, or hotspot policing, are likely to label ethnically diverse geographical areas as risky and warranting further policing. In other words, ‘the presence of new technologies both assists and drives over-policing’.¹¹³

Second, algorithmically driven technologies such as facial recognition have been proven to disproportionately misidentify people of colour.¹¹⁴

The DNA of people arrested is kept on record as part of a mass biometric data collection, regardless of whether the arrest was wrongful or not. As of 2024, the UK government has one of the largest DNA databases in the world, with 7.2 million records, 80.5 per cent are from males and 7.5 per cent are Black; 65 per cent of entries are people aged 34 or under at the time of loading onto the database.¹¹⁵ As of 2012, 27 per

cent of the entire Black population of the UK had a record on the National Database, demonstrating the racialised nature of biometric data collection and disproportionate policing.¹¹⁶

The effects of this practice are felt by a wider community too: police powers to dig into the background and social media of a ‘suspect’ – who their friends, family or music collaborators are – can criminalise people associated with those on the DNA database. Similar practices were uncovered in the Metropolitan Police’s Gangs Matrix and were ruled illegal, amounting to guilt by association.¹¹⁷

As technology develops, its ability to identify people becomes increasingly automated. Facial recognition cameras were first trialled at Notting Hill Carnival – notable given the significant presence of Black communities at the Carnival and the history of policing technologies being tested and used on Black communities. A larger rollout of the technology has received pushback from civil liberties groups, with particular concern about cameras misidentifying Black people.¹¹⁸ Further, over half of all facial recognition deployments in London in 2024 were in areas with a higher proportion of Black residents than the London average.¹¹⁹

Automated Number Plate Recognition (*ANPR*) technology enables the quick identification of vehicles ‘marked’ by the police as suspect. ANPR and other CCTV cameras have been placed in areas of Birmingham with large Muslim populations, where it was later revealed that the data was being sent to the West Midlands Counter Terrorism Unit – a clear case of racial profiling and collective surveillance.¹²⁰

112 Williams et al., ‘Omission, erasure and obfuscation’; Williams, P. (2018) *Being Matrixed: The (Over)Policing of Gang Suspects in London*, London: StopWatch, [https://e-space.mmu.ac.uk/621731/1/Being per cent20Matrixed.pdf](https://e-space.mmu.ac.uk/621731/1/Being%20Matrixed.pdf); Williams, P. (2025) ‘On the seductions of technology and the racialised harms of the criminal legal system of England and Wales’, Amnesty International blog, 26 February, www.amnesty.org.uk/blogs/human-rights-are-answer/seductions-technology-and-racialised-harms-criminal-legal-system.

113 Williams, P. and Kind, E. (2020) *Data-Driven Policing: The Hardwiring of Discriminatory Policing Practices across Europe*, Brussels: European Network Against Racism (ENAR), <https://e-space.mmu.ac.uk/624446/1/data-driven-profiling-webfinal.pdf>.

114 Williams, P. and Kind, E. (2020) *Data-Driven Policing: The Hardwiring of Discriminatory Policing Practices across Europe*, Brussels: European Network Against Racism (ENAR), <https://e-space.mmu.ac.uk/624446/1/data-driven-profiling-webfinal.pdf>.

115 Home Office (2024) *Forensic Information Databases Strategy Board Annual Report April 2023 – March 2024*, London, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/670793d2080bdf716392f102/E03188121_FIND+Strategy+Report+23-24_Accessible_v02.pdf.

116 Skinner, D. (2013) ‘“The NDNAD has no ability in itself to be discriminatory”: Ethnicity and the governance of the UK National DNA Database’, *Sociology* 47(5): 976–992.

117 Liberty (2022) ‘Met to overhaul ‘racist’ gangs matrix after landmark legal challenge’, <https://www.libertyhumanrights.org.uk/issue/met-to-overhaul-racist-gangs-matrix-after-landmark-legal-challenge/>

118 Liberty (no date) ‘Facial recognition’, www.libertyhumanrights.org.uk/fundamental/facial-recognition.

119 Greater London Authority (2024) ‘Over half of facial recognition deployments in 2023 were in areas with higher Black populations’, 25 March, www.london.gov.uk/over-half-all-facial-recognition-deployments-last-year-took-place-areas-higher-proportion-black.

120 Elliot-Cooper, *Black Resistance to British Policing*.

The Gangs Matrix

Launched by the Metropolitan Police in 2012, the Gangs Matrix (also known as the Gangs Violence Matrix)¹ was a database of suspected ‘gang’ members. Serious concerns were raised about how people were placed on the database, how information was shared with other agencies, and the adverse impact it had particularly on the Black boys and young men who were disproportionately represented on it.²

In October 2017, 78 per cent of the 3,806 people recorded in the Matrix were Black, despite Black people being responsible for 27 per cent of ‘serious youth violence’.³ In many cases there was no evidence of so-called ‘gang affiliation’.

Schools were known to have provided intelligence on suspected ‘gangs’ to the police, while Amnesty International’s Trapped in the Matrix report highlighted how the information-sharing mandated under the Matrix, including by social housing providers, created housing instability. There was evidence of families being evicted due to a family member being on the Gangs Matrix even though they were not proven to be a ‘gang member’. The report also highlighted cases of a young person’s university offer being revoked, and of others being excluded from school as a result of their inclusion in the Gangs Matrix.⁴

Following a landmark legal challenge by Liberty on behalf of Awate Suleiman and UNJUST UK, the Metropolitan Police agreed to overhaul its controversial Gangs Matrix, admitting that its operation was unlawful and disproportionately affected Black people.⁵

Interviewees and community members who participated in the research also told us how the now-disbanded Matrix worsened existing issues:

A lot of policing work, I would say, leads to further harms, we did a lot of work on the Gangs Matrix. And one of the big issues with [it] ... is that any services that were there to support them to not be involved in violence were then taken away as a punishment for apparently being involved in violence ... if their lifelines are taken away, then you can’t be surprised if they then end up involved in things that lead them to be further involved with the criminal legal system, kind of a self-fulfilling prophecy. And a lot of the way people are treated by the police, I think, does much more to push them towards violence and harm than it does to protect them from it. (4Front)

1 Nisha Waller (2023) ‘The “gang” as a facilitator of racialised state violence: The case of “joint enterprise”’, PhD thesis, University of Oxford, <https://ora.ox.ac.uk/objects/uuid:25afc27b-8615-41de-9407-293ee2f54770/files/rxd07gv14h>.

2 Amnesty International (2025) ‘What is the Gangs Matrix?’, 1 April, www.amnesty.org.uk/london-trident-gangs-matrix-metropolitan-police.

3 Amnesty International, ‘What is the Gangs Matrix?’

4 Amnesty International (2018) Trapped in the Matrix: Secrecy, Stigma, and Bias in the Metropolitan Police Gangs Database, www.amnesty.org.uk/files/reports/Trapped%20in%20the%20Matrix%20Amnesty%20report.pdf.

5 Liberty (2022) ‘Met to overhaul “racist” Gangs Matrix after landmark legal challenge’, 11 November, www.libertyhumanrights.org.uk/issue/met-to-overhaul-racist-gangs-matrix-after-landmark-legal-challenge.

Joint enterprise

‘Joint enterprise’ is the legal power to convict someone as a primary offender if there is evidence that they assisted or encouraged someone else to act unlawfully, even if they did not participate in the criminal act itself.¹ This has led to unequal treatment of people of colour, often associated with the prosecution of suspected ‘gang’ members.²

After Joint Enterprise Not Guilty by Association (JENGBA), supported by Liberty, challenged the CPS and Ministry of Justice for breach of the Equality Act 2010, the CPS agreed a pilot scheme to monitor data on the age, race, sex and disability of those prosecuted under joint enterprise, as well as to monitor when joint enterprise prosecutions have been presented as ‘gang-related’ cases in court. The data showed that more than half of those prosecuted under joint enterprise are from minority ethnic backgrounds (56 per cent of defendants), with Black people (30 per cent of defendants) 16 times more likely to be prosecuted.³ Children and young people make up over half (54 per cent) of the defendants in these CPS pilot cases, and these young people are disproportionately likely to be people of colour.⁴ According to a 2016 study, people of colour in prison under joint enterprise were on average significantly

younger than their white counterparts and serving longer sentences.⁵

A pertinent example is the Manchester 10 case where in 2022, ten Black boys were collectively sentenced to over 100 years for conspiracy. Though not technically convicted under joint enterprise, the case reflects the same principles of collective punishment⁶. The case was marked by the use of drill music and videos as evidence and racist ‘gang’ narratives in court.⁷ In 2025, following a community campaign led by Kids of Colour that denounced the sentences as racist and unjust, the Court of Appeal quashed one boy’s sentence and reduced the sentences of two others.⁸

This case also highlights growing concerns around Manchester’s ‘super courtroom’, which allows for trials of up to 12 defendants, launched to expedite large-scale convictions related to alleged ‘gang-related’ activity.⁹ While intended to streamline the judicial process, the super court risks clearing a path for more mass convictions.

In this way, prosecutions serve as a tool for instituting racial injustice rather than an anomaly, especially for Black young people who are disproportionately subject to harsh and excessive sentencing.

1 Liberty Human Rights (2022) ‘5 things you need to know about Joint Enterprise’, www.libertyhumanrights.org.uk/issue/5-things-you-need-to-know-about-joint-enterprise.

2 Lammy, Lammy Review: Final Report; Williams and Clarke, ‘The Black criminal other’.

3 IRR (2024), ‘Criminal justice system statistics’, 27 September, irr.org.uk/research/statistics/criminal-justice.

4 IRR, ‘Criminal justice system statistics’.

5 Williams, P. and Clarke, B. (2016), Dangerous Associations: Joint Enterprise, Gangs and Racism, Centre for Crime and Justice Studies, www.crimeandjustice.org.uk/dangerous-associations-joint-enterprise-gangs-and-racism.

6 Legane, R. (2024) ‘Against Police Power: Racialised young people’s resistance to carceral childhoods in Greater Manchester’, PhD thesis, Manchester Metropolitan University, https://e-space.mmu.ac.uk/639446/1/Against_Police_Power_-_Racialised_Young_People_s_Resistance_to_Carceral_Childhoods_in_Greater_Manchester.pdf

7 Monteith, K., Mogan, A.C., Papamichael, E. and Seagull, T. (2024) ‘The Manchester 10: Where a racialised “gang” narrative led to unsafe convictions’ Garden Court Chambers, 19 July, <https://gardencourtchambers.co.uk/the-manchester-10-where-a-racialised-gang-narrative-led-to-unsafe-convictions>.

8 Mohsin, A., (2025) ‘Manchester 21-year-old’s conviction quashed after rap video evidence refuted’, Guardian, 15 January, www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2025/jan/15/manchester-conviction-quashed-rap-video-evidence-refuted.

9 HM Courts and Tribunals Service and Ministry of Justice (2021) ‘“Super courtroom” opens in Manchester’, 10 September, www.gov.uk/government/news/super-courtroom-opens-in-manchester.

Prevent

Part of Prevent, the UK government's counter-terrorism strategy, seeks to 'stop people becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism'. This empowers authorities to intervene in the lives of individuals deemed 'at risk' but who have not yet committed a crime. Amnesty International UK has reported on how Prevent compromises the right to freedom of expression; freedom of thought, conscience and religion; freedom of peaceful assembly; and equality and non-discrimination.¹²¹

Muslim communities are disproportionately targeted by Prevent: 22 per cent of referrals are for Islamic extremism, despite Muslim people making up only around 6 per cent of the population. A Prevent referral can create negative mental health consequences, loss of trust in the state, financial costs, privacy concerns and hesitancy about legitimate political expression.¹²² It also widens the net of policing: public sector workers must now treat service users with suspicion and surveil and report people, enabling discrimination and criminalising a whole community.

The policing of protest

The state continues to introduce and expand police powers not based on evidence but led by a political agenda, with political parties competing to become the party of 'law and order'.

Successive pieces of government legislation have further entrenched police powers, such as the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act of 2022 and the Public Order Act of 2023. The Public Order Act includes increased powers for the police to impose conditions on protest, such as curtailing the duration and location of a protest to minimise disruption and restricting protests deemed likely to cause serious public disorder or serious damage to property. The Act also introduced prison sentences for protestors causing 'serious disruption' to national infrastructure and penalties for those obstructing public spaces through 'static' protests and making excessive noise. The Public Order Bill was initially rejected by parliament but passed as secondary legislation, requiring less scrutiny.¹²³

Research has concluded that at the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests, the police used excessive force against Black protestors in particular, failed to protect people against far-right violence, and broke their duty of care towards injured protestors.¹²⁴

These restricted protest rights are an attack on our democratic rights and civil liberties. Being able to challenge governments, public institutions and power is a fundamental pillar of democracy.

This legislative shift suggests that the government's solution to public safety involves expanding a police force already plagued by discrimination and misconduct, exacerbating the harm experienced by communities most affected by systemic discrimination.

121 Amnesty International UK (2025) 'The Prevent Duty and its chilling effect on human rights', 4 April, www.amnesty.org.uk/Prevent.

122 People's Review of Prevent (2022) 'The People's Review of Prevent: A response to the government's Independent Review of Prevent', peoplesreviewofprevent.org/prop-report; CAGE (2014) 'The Prevent policy: A politically motivated programme', 5 August, www.cage.ngo/articles/the-prevent-policy-a-politically-motivated-programme; IRR (2009) 'Spooked: How not to prevent violent extremism', 17 October, <https://irr.org.uk/article/spooked-how-not-to-prevent-violent-extremism>.

123 Liberty (2024) 'Court finds government anti-protest legislation unlawful after Liberty legal challenge', 21 May, www.libertyhumanrights.org.uk/issue/court-finds-government-anti-protest-legislation-unlawful-after-liberty-legal-challenge.

124 Elliott-Cooper, A. (2020) 'Britain Is Not Innocent': A Netpol Report on the Policing of Black Lives Matter Protests in Britain during 2020, London: Netpol, netpol.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Britain-is-not-innocent-web-version.pdf.

The police response to structural failures

Years of austerity have entrenched material deprivation and poverty and widened inequality.¹²⁵ Community resources have also been stripped back, with the most deprived council areas facing funding cuts of around 35 per cent between 2010/11 and 2019/20, compared with 15 per cent in the most affluent council areas.¹²⁶ Since 2010, Liverpool City Council's core spending power has fallen by £500 million due to austerity policies.¹²⁷ Areas subject to higher 'welfare reforms' have subsequently seen increases in crime rates, particularly violence and property crime.¹²⁸

While the police have faced their own cuts during austerity, a significant recruitment push has meant that police officer numbers are the highest they have ever been, with a further 13,000 planned by 2031. As we have evidenced, the police can cause further harm to communities and contribute to a lack of safety, and senior police leaders have themselves recognised that policing is not the solution to structurally enabled harm.¹²⁹

Upon his retirement, Sir Andy Cooke, formerly chief constable of Merseyside police, said: 'The best crime prevention is increased opportunity and reduced poverty. That's the best way to reduce crime. So there needs to be substantial funding into the infrastructure of our inner cities and our more deprived areas'. He went on to say that if he was given £5 billion to cut crime, he would spend 80 per cent on reducing poverty and increasing opportunity and 20 per cent on law enforcement.¹³⁰

Sir Mark Rowley, commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, has also recognised both the problems caused by disproportionate policing and how structural drivers can cause higher levels of harm and crime:

Disproportionately is the issue that concerns me most because it's really hard to get under the surface of the multiple causes. Whether it's internal disproportionality in different parts of what we do or external in terms of what we do with the public, some of that disproportionality will be systemic racism and other systemic failings in the

organisation, some of it will be about individuals, but some of it's about the history of society, the complexity of society and a whole range of disproportionality factors that play out in health, education, wealth and lots of other factors.¹³¹

Again, this echoes the concept of 'austerity-driven policification', where attempts are made to address the symptoms of state-created structural inequalities through policing.¹³²

The evidence explored in this chapter makes clear the prominence of institutional racism in policing – the collective failure of the institution to provide a fair and appropriate service to communities of colour as a result of internal processes, policies and behaviours. This both creates racial inequalities and makes existing inequalities worse.

125 White, J. (2020) *Terraformed: Young Black Lives in the Inner City*, London: Repeater Books.

126 Ogden, K. and Phillips, D. (2024) 'How have English councils' funding and spending changed, 2010–2024?', Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS), 7 June, www.ifs.org.uk/publications/how-have-english-councils-funding-and-spending-changed-2010-2024.

127 Liverpool Echo (no date) 'Liverpool: Austerity City', <https://austeritycity.liverpoolecho.co.uk>.

128 Giulietti, C. and McConnell, B. (2020) 'Kicking you when you're already down: The multipronged impact of austerity on crime', 15 December, <https://arxiv.org/abs/2012.08133?utm>.

129 Dodd, V. (2021) 'Tackle poverty and inequality to reduce crime, says police chief', *Guardian*, 18 April, www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/April/18/tackle-poverty-and-inequality-to-reduce-says-police-chief.

130 Ibid.

131 London Assembly (2024) 'Mayor's Question Time: 25 January 2024', webcasts.london.gov.uk/Mayoral/Event/Index/ca90093a-5433-4aa3-9d5f-9d01d63cf2f1.

132 Laub, 'Austerity-driven policification'.

The limits of police reform



Our polling found significant agreement among the English and Welsh public that the police have a history of racism, that they are currently racist and that they should acknowledge it.

As we described earlier, polling results do not necessarily indicate fact – but in this case these conclusions are also shared by a string of independent commissions. Successive governments, policymakers and police forces themselves have acknowledged these repeated findings and have attempted to implement changes to tackle institutional racism and reform the police. As we explore in this chapter, such attempts have so far fallen short.

Public views on racism in policing

As Figure 12 shows, our polling found that:

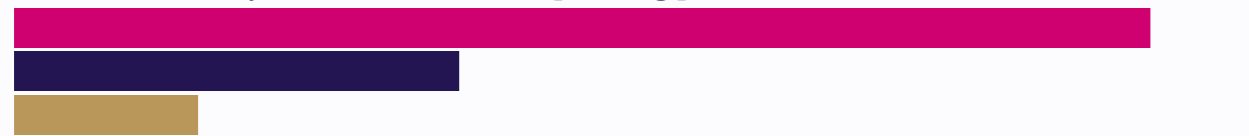
- 60 per cent of the British public agree there is a history of racism in British policing practices, with just 9 per cent disagreeing
- 44 per cent of the public agree that there is currently racism in British policing practices, with just 13 per cent disagreeing
- 63 per cent of the public agree that the police should acknowledge racism in their practices, with just 8 per cent disagreeing

Figure 12: British views on racism in policing

British views on racism in policing

■ Agree
 ■ Disagree
 ■ Neither agree nor disagree

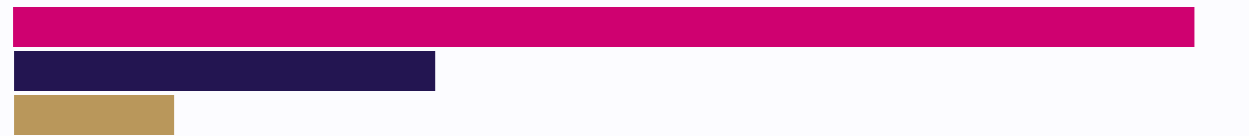
There is a history of racism in British policing practices



Racism currently features in British policing practices



The police should acknowledge racism in British police practices



0 5 10 15 20 25 30 35 40 45 50 55 60 65

Inquiry fatigue

Over the decades, a series of high-profile reports have exposed the harms and failures of policing, most notably the 1981 Scarman Report, the 1999 Macpherson Report and the 2023 Casey Review. Each of these inquiries found that racism, and later misogyny and homophobia, remained entrenched in the UK's largest police force – the Metropolitan Police – and these findings have been extended across all police forces.¹³³

The Scarman Report was commissioned in the wake of the 1981 Brixton uprisings. It concluded that 'racial disadvantage' was a significant factor behind the unrest.¹³⁴ It acknowledged that the police had exacerbated tensions through discriminatory use of powers, particularly stop and search. While Scarman did not go so far as to label the police institutionally racist, his report did recommend reforms to improve community relations and training to address discrimination within the force.

133 Dodd, V. (2024) 'Head of Britain's police chiefs says force is "institutionally racist"', Guardian, 5 January, www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2024/January/05/head-of-britains-police-chiefs-says-force-is-institutionally-racist-gavin-stephens.

134 Scarman, L.G. (1981) The Scarman Report: The Brixton Disorders 10–12 April 1981, London: HMSO, <https://archive.org/details/scarmanreportrep0000scar>.



The Metropolitan Police investigation into the racist murder of Stephen Lawrence in 1993 – later found to have been undermined by the covert actions of undercover police officers (commonly referred to as ‘spycops’¹³⁵) – was the subject of the Macpherson Report in 1999. This report officially recognised institutional racism within the Metropolitan Police. It included 70 recommendations, including changes to the Race Relations Act, more robust measures to ensure police accountability and better recruitment of officers of colour. Macpherson’s findings prompted both legal and procedural reforms, but many of these were inadequately implemented or have since been rolled back. Changes to the Race Relations Act made public institutions, including the police, liable for acts of racial discrimination. However, the evidence of continued institutional racism today shows that progress and commitment has been insufficient.

Since Macpherson, numerous other reports have scrutinised the Metropolitan Police’s conduct, each reiterating similar criticisms. These have included Lord Adebowale’s 2013 report on mental health and policing; the 2014 Young Review on outcomes for Black and Muslim young men in the legal

system; the report of the 2015 Angiolini Inquiry into deaths in police custody; the 2017 Lammy Review of the treatment of and outcomes for people of colour in the legal system; and the 2021 HMICFRS review on the use of police powers.

In the wake of the 2020 BLM protests, the government launched another inquiry into racial inequality – the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities. MP David Lammy criticised the decision, telling the Guardian: ‘It is time for action on the countless reviews, reports and commissions on race that have already been completed’.¹³⁶ The Commission went on to deny evidence of institutional racism in the UK.¹³⁷

In 2023, Baroness Casey’s independent review of the Metropolitan Police’s standards of behaviour exposed the deep-rooted culture of racism, misogyny, homophobia and impunity that exists within the Met. It criticised the force for failing to act on previous recommendations, including those of the Macpherson Report, and underscored that without urgent and systemic change, the public’s trust in the police would remain eroded.

In particular, the Casey review criticised police leadership for failing to take responsibility for systemic issues. This is exemplified by the Metropolitan Police Commissioner Sir Mark Rowley’s refusal to accept the term ‘institutional racism’, reflecting the wider culture of denial and defensiveness that has hindered progress.¹³⁸ Casey’s findings laid bare how the Metropolitan Police has failed at every level to serve and protect marginalised communities.

One of the clearest indications of the failure of reform is how these reports, spanning nearly half a century, reach many

135 Rather than investigating the perpetrators of racist violence, undercover officers infiltrated the Lawrence family’s campaign for justice as well as allied anti-racist and civil rights groups. They secretly monitored grieving families, attempted to discredit campaigners and gathered intelligence on those calling for police accountability. These actions obstructed the family’s search for truth and accountability, and exemplified the institution’s prioritisation of protecting its own reputation over delivering justice. As revealed in the Undercover Policing Inquiry, ‘spycops’ operations were far-reaching beyond the Lawrence inquiry and deeply invasive: officers infiltrated hundreds of political and justice campaigns, stole the identities of deceased children, entered intimate and long-term relationships under false pretences (including parenting children), testified in court under fake names and failed to disclose exculpatory evidence to secure convictions.

Metropolitan Police (no date) ‘Undercover Policing Inquiry’, www.met.police.uk/police-forces/metropolitan-police/areas/about-us/about-the-met/undercover-policing-inquiry; Bindmans LLP (no date) ‘Families of deceased children, whose identities were taken by undercover police officers, give evidence to the Undercover Policing Inquiry’, www.bindmans.com/news-insights/news/families-of-the-deceased-children-whose-identities-were-taken-by-undercover-police-officers-give-evidence-to-the-undercover-policing-inquiry; Woodman, C. (2018) ‘Why #Spycops victims walked out of the public inquiry’, Novara Media, 21 March, <https://novaramedia.com/2018/03/21/why-spycops-victims-walked-out-of-the-public-inquiry>; Lewis, P. and Evans, R. (2011) ‘Undercover police and the law: The men who weren’t there’, Guardian, 19 October, www.theguardian.com/uk/2011/October/19/undercover-police-law-men-there.

136 Lammy, D. (2020) ‘Britain needs leadership on race and inequality. Not just another review’, Guardian, 16 June, www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/June/16/britain-race-inequality-review.

137 Runnymede Trust (2021) ‘Statement regarding the report from the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities’, 31 March, www.runnymedetrust.org/news/statement-regarding-the-cred-report-2021.

138 Thompson, M. (2023) ‘Met Police chief again rejects use of term “institutional” to describe force’s problems after damning report’, Sky News, 22 March, <https://news.sky.com/story/met-police-chief-sir-mark-rowley-again-rejects-use-of-term-institutional-to-describe-forces-problems-after-damning-report-12840225>.

of the same conclusions. Both Scarman and Macpherson highlighted police targeting of communities of colour, particularly working-class Black communities, and recommended better training and accountability to reduce racial bias. Yet, as we have set out, the discriminatory use of stop and search – a key concern in both reports – remains widespread and disproportionately harms Black communities.

This shows a systemic reluctance to address deep-rooted issues and an insufficient, piecemeal approach to reform. In turn, this is reflected in growing evidence that public consent – historically a cornerstone of UK policing – has eroded. The Casey Review makes it clear that current policing practices do not align with the values of equality and justice that the force is supposed to uphold according to the law. Minoritised communities, in particular, do not consent to policing that is violent, discriminatory and unaccountable.

Baroness Casey’s report, like its predecessors, highlights the urgent need for a systemic overhaul of the Metropolitan Police. There is a growing call for a reduction in the scope of policing and for greater investment in community-based solutions. Alternative approaches that focus on addressing the root causes of crime, such as poverty, education, health and housing, offer a more sustainable and equitable path to public safety.¹³⁹

139 Liberty (2023) Holding Our Own: A Guide to Non-Policing Solutions to Serious Youth Violence, London, www.libertyhumanrights.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/HoldingOurOwn_Digital-DoubleSpreads.pdf.

Failing police reform

In this section we question popularly espoused strategies for police reform, including investment in training, diversity and neighbourhood policing, as well as greater scrutiny and avenues for police accountability. These proposed reforms have done little to confront institutional and structural racism and instead have contributed to expanding the scope and scale of policing, exacerbating inequalities and injustices. Essentially, we show how they have individualised the issue, while failing to address the institutional nature of racism in policing.

The most current attempt to reform the police is the Police Race Action Plan (*PRAP*), drawn up following the 2020 BLM movement. This aims to create a police service that is anti-racist and trusted by Black people by focusing on increasing workforce diversity and changing police culture, reforming the use of powers, improving community engagement, and better protecting Black communities.¹⁴⁰

In our view, the PRAP focuses on the wrong issue. Reducing harm and criminalised behaviour should be its ultimate goal. There is an evidence base showing that diversity initiatives are not effective in reducing racially disproportionate outcomes¹⁴¹ and that policing and punitive measures are not the best way to prevent harm.¹⁴²

140 College of Policing (no date) ‘Police Race Action Plan’, www.college.police.uk/support-forces/diversity-and-inclusion/action-plan.

141 Nicholson-Crotty, S., Nicholson-Crotty, J. and Fernandez, S. (2017) ‘Will more Black cops matter? Officer race and police-involved homicides of Black citizens’, *Public Administration Review* 77(2): 206–216.

142 Runnymede Trust, *Against Serious Violence Reduction*

Rebuilding trust

Initiatives to build trust and confidence assume policing practices are legitimate and that policing is the most effective mechanism for safety. They reinforce the erroneous notion that the problem lies in public perception rather than policing practices themselves.

The Casey Review states that stop and search practices have contributed to a ‘generational mistrust’ in the police. Neighbourhood policing is often heralded as a way to repair relationships between the police and the public, particularly in communities of colour. But this ignores the historical use of policing as a method of control and expands the scope of policing into people’s everyday lives, often increasing the over-policing of working-class communities of colour. It can lead to greater harassment and criminalisation of communities.

Initiatives to improve police legitimacy do not consider alternative meaningful safety for communities because they decentre what communities need in order to be safe and instead prioritise what the police need to enhance their reputation among the public.

Police training

Successive inquiries have recommended reformed and expanded training for police officers. Like calls to ‘rebuild trust’, this assumes that policing is a legitimate means to provide safety and that racism can be addressed through procedural justice – that is, by improving how the law is enforced. It reinforces the ‘rotten apples’ narrative, which blames individual officers for misconduct and leaves the institution itself intact and unexamined. It individualises what is, in reality, a systemic problem: institutional racism embedded in policies, priorities and core functions of policing.

The idea that training can solve these issues ignores the nature of the harm. Officers should not need further education to know that posting racist messages, sharing degrading photos of murdered Black women or dragging children across floors is unacceptable. These are not knowledge gaps: they are expressions of a culture where racism and dehumanisation are enabled, normalised and rarely challenged. The harms created or exacerbated by policing are not side effects that can be corrected with workshops or procedural tweaks. They are central features of a system designed to manage inequality and uphold the status quo. The fact that police training is often designed and delivered by current or former officers contributes to reproduced internal cultures, hierarchies and practices rather than disrupting them.

A further key issue is that the training industry needs significant resources: this inflates police budgets under the banner of reform while at the same time diverting investment away from community-led initiatives and material support that could actually prevent harm.

Diversity

Police forces across England and Wales are not representative of local communities of colour.¹⁴³ This has led to calls to diversify the police service, including new laws to enable positive discrimination.¹⁴⁴ But while there has been an increase in diversity among police officers, racist practices and recruitment discrimination still persist. Research examining the relationship between police shootings in the US and police officer diversity found that ‘increasing the proportion of the force that is black does not appear to be an effective strategy’.¹⁴⁵ There are numerous reasons for this.

First, diversity and inclusion initiatives can be superficial, offering symbolic representation without targeting racist structures that have discriminatory outcomes. Institutional processes can continue to uphold a racist system even when carried out by people of colour or people with no racist intent.¹⁴⁶ It also assumes that all people of colour are anti-racist, but research shows that tackling police racism is not a significant motivation for Black officers joining the police.¹⁴⁷ Even if it were,

it is neither effective nor fair to delegate responsibility for eliminating racism onto individuals of colour.

Second, officers of colour often experience racism within the police, further illustrating that the problem lies in the systems and structures of policing, not the ethnic composition of police forces. Officers of colour are more likely to leave the police early in their careers, more likely to face misconduct hearings, and less likely to be promoted or even recruited in the first place. In 2023, 21-year-old Anugrah Abraham, a West Yorkshire Police student officer, tragically took his own life following experiences of racist bullying at work.¹⁴⁸ The following year, the National Black Police Association urged people of colour to boycott joining the Metropolitan Police in the wake of a ‘racist and vexatious’ misconduct investigation into a leading officer.¹⁴⁹ In any case, increasing police diversity in an attempt to shift police culture ignores how discrimination is the outcome rather than the source of racism.

143 Ethnicity Facts and Figures (2024) ‘Police workforce’, www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/workforce-and-business/workforce-diversity/police-workforce/latest/#by-ethnicity-and-area-police-officers.

144 Dodd, V. (2019), ‘Police leader calls for laws to allow positive race discrimination’, *Guardian*, 22 February, www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2019/February/22/police-leader-calls-for-laws-to-allow-positive-race-discrimination.

145 Nicholson-Crotty et al., ‘Will more Black cops matter?’

146 Bourne, J. (2019) ‘Unravelling the concept of unconscious bias’, *IRR*, 3 January, <https://irr.org.uk/article/unravelling-the-concept-of-unconscious-bias>.

147 Forman, J. (2017) *Locking Up Our Own: Crime and Punishment in Black America*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

148 Barton, A. (2023) ‘Anugrah Abraham: IOPC to investigate student police officer’s death’, *BBC News*, 31 March, www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-leeds-65138742.

149 National Black Police Association (2024) ‘Press release on the racist targeting of the chair of the Met Black Police Association’, www.nationalbpa.com/wp-content/uploads/NBPA-Press-Release_05-02-2024.pdf.

Accountability

The current mechanisms for holding the police to account are inadequate. It's extremely rare for officers in England and Wales to be prosecuted for misconduct or violence: only one officer has been convicted in connection with an institutional police killing in the last three decades. Obstacles to meaningful accountability include the broad legal latitude that officers have under the 'reasonable force' standard, the CPS's high thresholds for bringing charges against officers and the compromised impartiality of the IOPC, which has faced criticism for perceived proximity to the police it is tasked with investigating.¹⁵⁰ Officers are legally permitted to use lethal force in many circumstances, making prosecutions for institutional police killings during arrests or in custody exceedingly difficult.

150 Lock, L. (2022) 'Why are we still pretending this police watchdog is independent?', Novara Media, <https://novaramedia.com/2022/11/21/why-are-we-still-pretending-this-police-watchdog-is-independent/#:~:text=When%20questioned%20about%20the%20overrepresentation,complacent%20on%20matters%20of%20race%E2%80%9D>.

Hate crime

'Hate crime' is defined in law as an offence which is motivated by prejudice on the basis of ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity or disability, and which can involve verbal abuse, harassment, sexual violence and/or physical violence. This positions harm as the product of individual bigotry, obscuring its structural and systemic roots. While such incidents are undoubtedly serious, the legal and political use of the 'hate crime' category often fails to provide meaningful safety or justice for targeted communities. Instead, it entrenches criminal justice responses that reproduce inequality.¹⁵¹

In the year ending March 2024, before the racist riots of summer 2024, the police recorded 140,561 hate crimes in England and Wales; 70 per cent were racially motivated.¹⁵² However, despite rising figures, most people affected by hate do not report to the police. Only 24 per cent of the 1,421 victims who took part in the University of Leicester's Hate Crime Project – the UK's largest study on the subject – had reported their most recent experience to the police, with most citing distrust, fear of inaction or previous negative experiences as their reason for not doing so.¹⁵³

Hate crime laws funnel more people into the criminal legal system without addressing the social and political conditions that produce hate. They reinforce the idea that the problem lies with isolated individuals with bad intentions rather than with the state, institutions, media or politicians that fuel and legitimise racism, xenophobia, Islamophobia and other forms of hate.¹⁵⁴

Critically, hate crime laws also reflect and reproduce existing power imbalances. In 2021, in over half of hate crime prosecutions the complainant was a police officer, despite police making up a very small fraction of reported hate crime victims overall.

Addressing harms in society means challenging the systems that produce them and addressing the root causes of violence. For example, people who participated in the Hate Crime Project overwhelmingly supported educational and restorative approaches rather than harsher sentencing or increased police powers.¹⁵⁵

151 CPS (no date) 'Hate crime', www.cps.gov.uk/crime-info/hate-crime.

152 Home Office (2024) 'Hate crime, England and Wales, year ending March 2024', 10 October, www.gov.uk/government/statistics/hate-crime-england-and-wales-year-ending-march-2024.

153 University of Leicester (no date) 'The Centre for Hate Studies: Our reports', <https://le.ac.uk/hate-studies/research/the-leicester-hate-crime-project/our-reports>.

154 Lambie, S. (2021) 'The false promise of hate crime laws: Abolitionist futures', Birkbeck Institutional Research Online, <https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/id/eprint/43898/1/Lambie-false-promise-hate-crime-laws-final.pdf>.

155 University of Leicester, 'The Centre for Hate Studies: Our reports'.

Alternative approaches to achieving justice



It's very hard to imagine a world where there's any other way to be kept safe ... but the wider world is waking up to the fact that policing is harmful and that reform is not working. (4Front)

Through an extensive literature review and by working with our partners, we have identified a number of alternative, effective approaches to ensuring safety that represent a shift away from coercive policing powers and a criminal legal system that harms all communities, particularly working-class communities of colour.

These approaches should be adopted in conjunction with each other. For example, models of restorative justice would be largely ineffective without transforming the social and material conditions in which criminalised behaviour and harm thrive.

Transformative justice

Transformative justice is a community-based approach which seeks not only to address individual, immediate harm but also to confront and dismantle the systemic and structural conditions – such as racism, patriarchy and economic exploitation – that produce harm in the first place. It centres community accountability, collective care and ensuring that all people have their basic needs met.¹⁵⁶ Rather than individualising harmful behaviour or relying on punitive state systems to respond to it, transformative justice recognises that violence is often a symptom of structural injustice and that real safety requires addressing this root cause.

This is not a new model. It has been developed, practised and led by Indigenous, racialised and marginalised communities who have long been targeted by criminal punishment systems. These communities have never relied on – or wished to engage with – the state for protection or justice. Instead they have built forms of repair, healing and accountability that exist outside state institutions, rooted in collective survival and resistance to systemic violence.

One key challenge for transformative justice is that it often relies on communities to sustain long-term responses, without structural support or resources. This is not an inherent flaw of the approach but rather a reflection of broader social and political conditions – conditions shaped by centuries of disinvestment in non-carceral alternatives and marginalisation of the communities most impacted by harm. The fact that transformative justice remains outside state infrastructure is both its power and a key reason why it continues to be sidelined.

While transformative justice is not a quick or easy solution, it offers a powerful reimagining of what justice could mean – grounded in care, accountability and transformation rather than punishment and exclusion. If we are serious about ending cycles of harm, transformative justice should be resourced as part of a broader political project that addresses

¹⁵⁶ Dixon, E. and Piepzna-Samarasinha, L.L. (2020) *Beyond Survival: Strategies and Stories from the Transformative Justice Movement*, Chico, CA: AK Press.

poverty, state violence, racial injustice and dispossession at their roots. It involves consistent efforts to shift power, redistribute resources and rethink the systems that produce harm. Investment in policy, funding and organising is required, to build the community infrastructures necessary to make this a viable, scalable and real alternative.

Reparative justice

Reparations could address historical and continued damage, and the social and economic inequalities that deprive communities of colour. The call for reparations and repair acknowledges the historical and ongoing harm caused by colonialism, slavery and systemic racism. It is a call for material and symbolic acts of restitution, including the redistribution of wealth and power.¹⁵⁷

Internationally, the Caribbean Community Reparations Commission (*CARICOM*) has been a leading advocate for reparations for slavery and colonialism. In the UK, Stop the Maangamizi aims to stop the harm of racial capitalism through its research, mobilisation and campaigning.¹⁵⁸ While they are rooted in arguments around justice, fairness and repair, demands for reparations also challenge dominant ideas about what is considered criminal. Some of the most harmful behaviour is done in the name of profit and social control – whether that is the ecological damage caused by fossil fuel extraction or policies that knowingly push people into poverty. But centuries of history show us that instead it is the working class and people of colour who are labelled criminals for interpersonal behaviour, and often for resisting structural racism and inequality. Reparations are not merely a financial compensation package but an opportunity to redesign our political and economic systems, to address the persistence of these legacies in the here and now.

¹⁵⁷ Runnymede Trust (2025) 'Reparations', <https://www.runnymedetrust.org/publications/reparations>

¹⁵⁸ Stop the Maangamizi Campaign (no date) 'About', <https://stopthemaangamizi.com>.

Stop the Maangamizi: We charge genocide/ ecocide!

Stop the Maangamizi is a UK-based grassroots campaign that is part of the international reparations movement. 'Maangamizi' is a Swahili term which speaks to the intentional harm caused by the continuum of chattel, colonial and neocolonial enslavement.

The campaign makes it clear that reparations should be understood as far more than financial compensation. They should encompass a wide range of material and non-material forms of redress, including institutional transformation, educational and cultural repair, environmental justice, and psychological healing. The campaign argues that reparatory justice must involve a fundamental redistribution of wealth and power, and an acknowledgement and dismantling of the historical and contemporary systems that perpetuate harm.

Stop the Maangamizi sets out several core demands. These include public recognition and accountability for the UK's role in the 'transatlantic traffic of enslaved Africans'; the implementation of policies that address systemic racial injustice; and support for self-determination, sovereignty and collective agency for people of African descent and other communities of colour. Crucially, the campaign insists that reparations must be shaped and led by those most affected, not imposed from above.

Public health approaches

A public health approach treats violence as a social epidemic, aiming to address root causes rather than symptoms. It draws on health and disease control theories to frame violence as a sickness or contagion that spreads through communities,¹⁵⁹ influenced by socioeconomic and environmental factors. It argues that violence can be 'interrupted' through social interventions. Central to this model is an understanding that violence has social determinants which must be addressed to create sustainable change, such as poverty, inequality and lack of access to social services.¹⁶⁰ Approaches employing this model use outreach workers and violence interrupters to prevent violence before it happens, focusing on early intervention and harm reduction.

Cure Violence Global

Notable examples of public health approaches include Cure Violence Global, which has been implemented in cities including Santiago, Chile; New York City, Philadelphia, and Washington, DC, in the United States; and Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago. In these programmes, local community members, often with lived experience of violence, act as violence interrupters. They identify and mediate conflicts before they escalate, working with both victims and potential perpetrators to provide support, such as employment assistance, counselling and mentoring. Evaluation studies suggest that the approach is very effective in reducing violence, with reductions in homicides of up to 75 per cent in Charlotte, US, and 90 per cent in Culiacan, Mexico; and a 63 per cent reduction in shootings in New York City.¹⁶¹ When the Cure Violence programme in Chicago lost its funding and was disbanded in 2015, there was an immediate increase in violence, reaching a 20-year high.¹⁶²

159 Slutkin, G. (2013) 'Violence is a contagious disease', in Patel, D.M., Simon, M.A. and Taylor, R.M. (ed.) *Contagion of Violence: Workshop Summary*, Washington, DC: National Academies Press.

160 Wilkinson, R. and Pickett, K. (2009) *The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better*, London: Allen Lane.

161 Community Violence Intervention and Prevention Initiative (no date) 'Impact', <https://cvg.org/impact>.

162 Armstrong, S. (2020) 'Can we cure violence by treating it like a contagious disease?' *Wired*, 11 May, www.wired.com/story/violence-glasgow-disease-treatment-research.

Restorative justice

Restorative justice is a framework which shifts the focus from punishment to healing and reconciliation. It seeks to resolve conflict and repair the harm caused by criminalised behaviour by facilitating dialogue between victims, perpetrators and their communities, often facilitated by a trained practitioner. The goal is to foster mutual understanding, accountability and reparation, including by making amends, rather than isolation or retribution.

Restorative practice can be used anywhere to prevent conflict, build relationships, and repair harm by promoting open and respectful communication. It helps people to understand how their actions impact others and to take responsibility in a way that emphasises healing and growth¹⁶³ and community integration.¹⁶⁴ Through this approach, people involved in causing conflict or harm can be supported to rebuild connections, set positive goals and take responsibility for their actions, while also giving those affected by harm a space to be heard.¹⁶⁵

163 Catch 22 (2023) 'Understanding violence in young people: Explanations, approaches and resources', 6 September, www.catch-22.org.uk/resources/understanding-violence-in-young-people.

164 UNODC (2020), Handbook on Restorative Justice Programmes, Vienna, www.unodc.org/documents/justice-and-prison-reform/20-01146_Handbook_on_Restorative_Justice_Programmes.pdf.

165 Newbury, A. (no date) 'Restorative justice and young people's

Restorative justice interventions

Restorative conferences: This involves a face-to-face meeting between the person who caused harm and the person affected, led by a trained facilitator.

Community conferences: A restorative conference involves several members of the community who may have been affected and may involve more than one responsible person.

Indirect mediation: In this approach the people taking part do not meet in person; instead, messages are passed between them, usually by a trained mediator, to facilitate mutual understanding and healing.

Restorative justice predates the modern criminal legal system and is used in many different countries and cultures.¹⁶⁶ The integration of restorative justice into the legal justice system in New Zealand – particularly within the Māori justice system – is a standout example. The country's approach, rooted in indigenous Māori concepts of justice, emphasises communal responsibility, healing and the restoration of social harmony, offering a compelling model for justice reform globally.

The UK has seen growing implementation of restorative justice initiatives, especially in the youth justice sector. Programmes such as Thames Valley Restorative Justice Service and Remedi facilitate mediation between victims and offenders, enabling those affected by crime to actively participate in resolving the aftermath of the harm. Studies by the Ministry of Justice show that restorative justice has an 85 per cent victim satisfaction rate and leads to a 14 per cent reduction in reoffending, which saves £8 for every £1 spent.¹⁶⁷

One challenge of restorative justice is its reliance on voluntary participation and the capacity of facilitators to maintain safety and balance in dialogues, particularly in cases of severe violence (although there is evidence that the approach is effective in resolving serious offences¹⁶⁸). Critics also argue that restorative programmes risk being co-opted

offending: Project details', University of Brighton, <https://research.brighton.ac.uk/en/projects/restorative-justice-and-young-peoples-offending>.

166 UNODC, Handbook on Restorative Justice Programmes.

167 Restorative Justice Council (no date) 'MoJ evaluation of restorative justice', <https://restorativejustice.org.uk/resources/moj-evaluation-restorative-justice>.

168 UNODC, Handbook on Restorative Justice Programmes.

by state systems without the necessary structural reforms, becoming a 'softer' extension of punitive systems rather than a true alternative. This highlights the need for restorative justice initiatives to be non-police-led. The positive effect in terms of reducing reoffending is also dictated by social and material conditions – it is limited if poverty and inequality are left unaddressed. While there was unanimous support for restorative justice among community members who took part in our workshops, they raised specific concerns about such initiatives being prioritised in middle-class areas and less likely to be rolled out for working-class communities who 'needed policing'.

Trauma-informed practice

Trauma-informed practice is generally understood as 'an approach to health and care interventions which is grounded in the understanding that trauma exposure can impact an individual's neurological, biological, psychological and social development'.¹⁶⁹

The Substance and Mental Health Services Administration defines trauma as 'experiences causing intense physical and psychological stress reactions'.¹⁷⁰ While the effects of trauma may occur immediately after an event, they may also be delayed and long lasting.¹⁷¹

Trauma-informed practice therefore involves taking life experiences into account during social interventions. This can include socioeconomic background, family history, peer relationships and previous experiences of harm.¹⁷² Importantly, the police can be a source of trauma, particularly for communities of colour, which raises questions about the claims of some police forces that their work is trauma-informed.

There are four principles of trauma-informed approaches:¹⁷³

- realising the prevalence of trauma and understanding potential pathways for recovery and understanding potential barriers to positive outcomes
- recognising how trauma directly or indirectly impacts individuals, families and communities
- responding by incorporating knowledge into practice, policies and procedures
- resisting re-traumatisation of those who have experienced trauma as they interact with services or organisational systems and cultures

169 Office for Health Improvement and Disparities (2022) 'Working definition of trauma-informed practice', 2 November, www.gov.uk/government/publications/working-definition-of-trauma-informed-practice.

170 Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (2014) *Trauma-Informed Care in Behavioural Health Services: A Treatment Improvement Protocol*, Rockville, MD.

171 Bainborough, E. and Ord, J. (no date) 'Trauma-informed practice: A solution to some of the problems of targeted youth work', *Youth and Policy*, www.youthandpolicy.org/articles/trauma-informed-practice.

172 Robinson, L. (2022) *Youth Justice Services: Good Practice Guide*, London: Why Me? <https://why-me.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Youth-Justice-Good-Practice-Guide-4.pdf>.

173 Bainborough and Ord, 'Trauma-informed practice'.

First Nations Mental Wellness Continuum Framework

This is a trauma-informed approach co-developed by Indigenous communities and the Canadian government. It was created in response to the urgent need for culturally appropriate mental health services for First Nations people, many of whom live with the intergenerational impacts and legacies of colonialism, residential schools and racism. The framework acknowledges that these historical and ongoing traumas cannot be addressed by Western biomedical approaches alone.

Instead, the model integrates trauma-informed principles with Indigenous worldviews, placing culture, language, spirituality and community at the centre of healing. Wellness is defined as encompassing mental, physical, emotional and spiritual dimensions. Services developed under this framework focus on strengthening connections with traditional knowledge and building community resilience. The principle of self-determination is central: First Nations communities lead the design and delivery of programmes that reflect their unique histories and healing traditions.¹⁷⁴

Healing Justice Ldn

Healing Justice Ldn seeks to build 'life-affirming infrastructures that support community health and healing'.

Its work is grounded in the belief that healing from harm and violence – whether interpersonal, institutional or state-sanctioned – must be imaginative, collective and community-led. Rather than pathologising trauma or treating it in isolation, Healing Justice Ldn locates mental distress within wider systems of oppression, including racism, ableism and economic exploitation.

Its programmes combine political education with somatic and embodied healing practices. This includes initiatives such as Movement Medicine, supporting grassroots movement leaders and health and healing practitioners; evidence-led resources and tools for community-led health and healing; and regular healing events such as breath circles and yoga spaces. Crucially, the work of Healing Justice Ldn treats healing not as a depoliticised, individual project but as part of a broader struggle for liberation.

Healing justice

Healing justice emerged from Black feminist and disability justice movements, emphasising collective healing from both interpersonal and systemic harm. It recognises that structural oppression – such as racism, capitalism and colonialism – inflicts trauma on individuals and communities that needs to be healed as part of any justice process. It focuses on collective liberation from oppressive systems.¹⁷⁵

In the UK, healing justice frameworks have been used in grassroots organisations addressing racist and gender-based violence. Groups such as Sisters Uncut focus on addressing the trauma of gender-based violence within a framework that also seeks to dismantle the systemic oppressions that perpetuate that violence, while others such as Healing Justice Ldn focus their healing practices on community-led health justice.

While healing justice offers a holistic approach to addressing harm, it faces similar challenges to transformative justice: **resource constraints, the need for sustained community involvement and difficulties in scaling solutions.**

Harm prevention and community safety beyond policing

As we have made clear, the police are called on to respond to a wide range of social issues, many of which should not be criminalised. A public service with deeply rooted institutional racism, which holds powers to criminalise and incarcerate people in crisis, causes further harm, in particular to communities of colour.

It is only with a non-hierarchical and power-balanced response that we can be serious about improving safety and preventing harm from occurring in the first place.

We need mechanisms which are better placed to respond to, protect and meet the needs of those in crisis. As we have shown in this chapter, approaches are already being enacted which we can draw on for inspiration to provide care, support and safety without relying on punitive systems.

At the same time, there is still much to develop and learn. And this is not a matter of choosing one approach over another in isolation. These strategies should be seen not as an either/or choice but as complementary practices that, when used together, can build a more just and genuinely safe society.

174 Health Canada (2015) First Nations Mental Wellness Continuum Framework: Summary Report, Ottawa, www.sac-isc.gc.ca/eng/1576093687903/1576093725971.

175 Williams, E. (2023) 'Policing the crisis in the 21st century: The making of "knife crime youths" in Britain', *Crime, Law and Social Change* 82: 799–820.

'Serious youth violence'



Introduction

'Serious youth violence' refers to the social issue of harm inflicted on young people by other young people, resulting in serious injury or death.¹⁷⁶

It is often discussed with reference to 'knife crime' – a category of crime constructed in the early 2000s¹⁷⁷ which incorporates numerous offences involving a sharp object, including threats, sexual assault, robbery, assault and homicide. It has become a wedge issue,¹⁷⁸ used by politicians and the media to justify significant increases in police power, and the rhetoric surrounding it is highly racialised.

In the year to March 2024, there were over 50,000 knife offences recorded in England and Wales; 262 of them resulted in homicide.¹⁷⁹ Every one of these deaths is a tragedy and action must be taken to prevent them, but the numbers don't bear out the idea of an epidemic that exists in the popular imagination. A further exploration of the data provides important context that goes beyond the headlines.

¹⁷⁶ Liberty, Holding Our Own.

¹⁷⁷ Williams, 'Policing the crisis in the 21st century'.

¹⁷⁸ A rhetorical strategy of constructing public polarisation on a social issue for the purposes of political gain.

¹⁷⁹ Allen, G. and Wong, H. (2025) 'Knife crime statistics England and Wales', House of Commons Library, 27 January, <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/sn04304>.

In the year to March 2024 there were 9.5 homicides per million people. With the exception of 2012–16 and the early pandemic period in 2020 this is the lowest rate since 1983, and significantly lower than the peak of 17.9 in 2003.¹⁸⁰

Homicides involving a ‘sharp object’ consistently made up just 5 to 8 per cent of total homicides between 1997 and 2017 – throughout the supposed epidemic.¹⁸¹ In 1997 there were 200 homicides with a ‘sharp object’. This rose to 271 in 2006/07; the number then fell to an all-time low of 186 in 2014/15 before peaking again at 282 in 2017/18.¹⁸²

Rates of ‘knife crime’ are generally higher among younger age groups. One in five perpetrators of ‘knife crime’ are between 10 and 17, while four in five knife possession offences recorded and four in five admissions to hospital for assault with a sharp object are of individuals over 18 years old.¹⁸³ If we extend this to those aged 10–24, they make up 41 per cent of admissions to hospital for sharp instrument assault injuries, while 38 per cent of admissions are people aged 25–39.¹⁸⁴ These figures suggest that serious

violence is not a specific ‘youth’ problem.

The homicide rate in London has steadily declined since the 1990s. Between 1991 and 2008 the rate did not fall below 2.0 per 100,000 people, and it peaked at 3.0 in 2003. Since 2009, the rate has stayed between 1.1 and 1.7 every year.¹⁸⁵

The imagined issue

As Stuart Hall demonstrates in Policing the Crisis, the moral panic about ‘muggings’ in the 1970s didn’t stand up to statistical scrutiny.

Crime rates in the years before 1972 had been rising at a slower rate than between 1955 and 1965. The sudden bolstering of the policing of Black communities was manufactured based on a need to demonstrate that ‘something was being done’ in a time of economic and political crisis where strikes, the Black Power movement, inflation and unemployment were rising.¹⁸⁶

Today, a similar moral panic has been manufactured around ‘serious youth violence’ – particularly ‘knife crime’ – and used to justify expanding policing, surveillance and carceral responses in young people’s lives. Scholars and campaigners have argued that the state’s focus on youth violence operates as a form of racialised social control, shifting attention away from structural inequality, austerity and the withdrawal of public services.¹⁸⁷ Instead

of addressing the root causes of violence – such as poverty, school exclusions, housing insecurity and the decimation of youth services – policymakers construct violence as the moral failing of individuals.

Central to this moral panic is the figure of the ‘gang’, a label often invoked in media and policy responses to youth violence but rarely defined with any consistency. The ‘gang’ serves as a catch-all category that racialises and criminalises groups of young people, regardless of actual involvement in crime. Even if the ‘gang’ is regarded as a legitimate concept, the College of Policing itself recognises that just 5 per cent of knife-related crime is ‘gang-related’.¹⁸⁸ Williams and Clarke argue that:

the ‘gang’ has been appropriated by the state as an ideological device that drives the hyper-criminalisation of Black, mixed, Asian and other minority ethnic communities ... which in turn (re)produces racialised objects to be policed ... legitimises intrusive racist policing and surveillance, and justifies the imposition of deliberate harms upon racialised communities.¹⁸⁹

180 ONS (2025) ‘Homicide in England and Wales: Year ending March 2024’, 6 February, www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/articles/homicideinenglandandwales/yearendingmarch2024.

181 Williams, ‘Policing the crisis in the 21st century’.

182 Home Office (2009) ‘Annex: Victims of homicide, method of killing sharp instrument, by ethnicity’, <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7ab3e7e5274a34770e686c/6459-ethnicity-homicide-sharp.pdf>; ONS (2024) ‘Homicide in England and Wales: The most common methods of killing’, www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/articles/homicideinenglandandwales/yearendingmarch2024#the-most-common-methods-of-killing.

183 Allen and Wong, ‘Knife crime statistics England and Wales’.

184 Williams, ‘Policing the crisis in the 21st century’.

185 Metropolitan Police (2019) ‘Crime data dashboard’, 13 April, www.met.police.uk/sd/stats-and-data/met/crime-data-dashboard; Dodd, V. (2019) ‘Number of homicides in London climbs to 10-year high’, Guardian, 31 December, www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2019/dec/31/number-of-homicides-in-london-climbs-to-10-year-high.

186 Hall et al., Policing the Crisis.

187 Pandian, J. (2020) ‘The policing of Black youth projects: From Broadwater Farm to the present’, IRR, 20 October, <https://irr.org.uk/article/policing-of-black-youth-projects>; Mohdin, A. (2019) ‘Drill music crackdown “fails to address root causes of youth violence”’, Guardian, 10 February, www.theguardian.com/music/2019/February/10/drill-music-crackdown-fails-to-address-root-causes-of-youth-violence; Dodd, V. (2018) ‘Police cuts “likely contributed” to rise in violent crime, leaked report reveals’ Guardian, 9 April, www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/apr/08/police-cuts-likely-contributed-to-rise-in-violent-leaked-report-reveals.

188 College of Policing (2019) ‘Knife crime evidence briefing 2019’, www.college.police.uk/guidance/knife-crime-evidence-briefing.

189 Williams and Clarke, ‘The Black criminal other’.

This is similar to the racist idea that Black men are inherently violent and the persistence of the ‘Black on Black crime’ narrative – suggesting that violence is only a problem in certain communities, among people of a certain ethnicity. Yet in Glasgow, labelled the ‘knife crime capital of Europe’ by the World Health Organisation in 2005,¹⁹⁰ neither race nor ethnicity were seen as the problem (*95 per cent of the population is white*). Instead, high levels of poverty and criminalised substance misuse were widely understood as causal factors. This demonstrates the need to disentangle the assumption that Blackness is casually linked to ‘gang culture’ and instead understand the socioeconomic factors which can create youth violence. This is a contrived attempt to pin the full responsibility for harm on individuals, and it points to the way that forms of cultural racism are employed to work through the contradictions of social and economic failure.¹⁹¹ Vitaly, empirical research shows no statistical association between ethnicity and youth violence¹⁹²

190 Kelbie, P. (2003) ‘Glasgow is Britain’s murder capital as knife crime spirals’, Independent, 29 November, www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/glasgow-is-britain-s-murder-capital-as-knife-crime-spirals-80548.html.

191 Williams, ‘Policing the crisis in the 21st century’.

192 Haylock, S., Boshari, T., Alexander, E.C., Kumar, A., Manikam, L. and Pinder, R. (2020) ‘Risk factors associated with knife-crime in United Kingdom among young people aged 10–24 years: A systematic review’, *BMC Public Health* 20: 1451, <https://bmcpubhealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12889-020-09498-4>; Home Office (2019) *An Analysis of Indicators of Serious Violence: Findings from the Millennium Cohort Study and the Environmental Risk (E-Risk) Longitudinal Twin Study 2019*, London; College of Policing, ‘Knife crime evidence briefing 2019’.

Writing about the second supposed ‘knife crime epidemic’ in 2007/08, academics found a ‘relentless, almost daily, reporting on yet more stabbings on the front pages of our national newspapers’ and that the social outrage this created was used to justify a significant expansion of police enforcement powers.¹⁹³ This included new stop and search powers as well as the criminalisation of Black cultures, including, for example, drill music.¹⁹⁴ New offences, legislation and enhanced sentences were introduced to combat the ‘epidemic’.¹⁹⁵ Expanded policing and the creation of new offences can inflate official ‘knife offence’ figures, worsening the issue in the public imagination and creating a vicious cycle to justify still-heavier policing.¹⁹⁶

In short, the manufactured association of ‘knife crime youths’ with Black working-class inner-city young people¹⁹⁷ serves to ‘other’ communities of colour, particularly Black communities, providing the justification for heavy policing, surveillance and, ultimately, collective punishment of Black communities.

193 Squires, P. (2009) ‘The knife crime “epidemic” and British politics’, *British Politics* 4(1): 127–157.

194 Thapar, C. (2023) ‘What kind of society sends young men to jail and ruins lives because of the lyrics in a song?’ *Guardian*, 31 January, www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/January/31/rap-music-young-men-fail-lyrics-conviction.

195 Williams, E. and Squires, P. (2001) *Rethinking Knife Crime: Policing, Violence and Moral Panic?* Cham: Springer Nature.

196 Williams, ‘Policing the crisis in the 21st century’.

197 Williams, ‘Policing the crisis in the 21st century’.

The reality

The available data shows that most perpetrators and victims of homicide by sharp instrument are white, victims and perpetrators are disproportionately Black, and Black victims are generally younger than white victims.¹⁹⁸

From April 2021 to March 2024, there were 126 homicides in England and Wales where both the victim and the principal suspect were Black. Where both the victim and suspect were white, this figure rises to 599, nearly six times higher.¹⁹⁹ In the same three years, there were 210 Black principal suspects. While this is disproportionate to the Black population, we must also keep in mind the small size of the numbers overall. On average there were 70 Black principal suspects across the three years to March 2024 – just 0.003 per cent of the Black population of England and Wales,²⁰⁰ reinforcing that presenting serious violence as a problem inherent to Black communities is entirely unjustified.

In the year to December 2024, the highest rate of knife crime offences was recorded by the Metropolitan Police at 188 per 100,000 population, followed by the West Midlands

198 ONS, ‘Homicide in England and Wales: The most common methods of killing’.

199 ONS, ‘Homicide in England and Wales: Year ending March 2024’.

200 ONS (2025) ‘Appendix tables: Homicide in England and Wales’, 6 February, www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/datasets/appendix-tableshomicideinenglandandwales.

and Cleveland forces.²⁰¹ However, contrary to the idea that London is ‘lawless’ and has a particular issue with violence, there were five police force areas with higher rates of overall homicide: Cleveland, Bedfordshire, West Midlands, Gloucestershire and South Yorkshire.²⁰²

In this way, ‘serious youth violence’ has been manufactured as being more prevalent and racialised than the evidence tells us, and this has been used to justify heavier policing. At the same time, and equally true, it is a real issue that is disproportionately causing harm to Black communities, especially young Black men.²⁰³

The existence of a moral panic around young people in conflict should not diminish the real harm that ‘serious youth violence’ can cause, but the approach to tackling this needs to be more evidence-led. Our research workshops attempted to consider the broader picture: not simply whether experiences of the police have been positive or negative, but the role of the police in preventing ‘serious youth violence’.

201 ONS (2025) ‘Crime in England and Wales: Police force area data tables’, 24 July, www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/datasets/policeforceareadatatables. We recognise that the police recorded data provides an inaccurate assessment of crime rates because it is influenced by police recording practices, reliant on public reporting and dependent on local police priorities.

202 ONS, ‘Homicide in England and Wales: Year ending March 2024’.

203 Liberty, *Holding Our Own*.

Our workshop

Our workshop on this theme took place at the Black Cultural Archives, Brixton, London, with 14 community members participating. Many had been either directly or indirectly affected by ‘serious youth violence’, and most were of Black Caribbean or Black African heritage.

We partnered with two grassroots organisations. The first of those, the 4Front project, a recently closed community service, aimed to build peace, power and knowledge. Its ‘peace’ strand of work responded directly to community harms and provided emergency harm reduction and aftercare responses after violence, serious violence, contact with the criminal legal system and mental health crises, providing space to heal after different traumas. Its ‘building knowledge’ strand provided political education on causes and responses to harm, giving space to think about what reimagined justice might look like. Its ‘building power’ strand looked to empower people to take action to eradicate systemic harms and shift from harm to healing.

The second was Poetic Unity, a Brixton-based charity that supports young people of Black and mixed Black heritage to find space to learn, express and find joy through poetry. It also supports young people with education, employment and mental health, and to find healing in spaces of harm.

Drivers of ‘serious youth violence’

The workshop focused on addressing the root causes of ‘serious youth violence’. The most common responses were poverty, lack of opportunity, loss of community and experiences of trauma.

Evidence on the drivers of violence

Research from the Nuffield Foundation using longitudinal cohort data shows how those most likely to be convicted for serious offences are likely to have experienced early family poverty, neighbourhood deprivation and school exclusion.

This demonstrates that the most sustainable and effective way to prevent ‘serious youth violence’ is to address the root causes of violence: entrenched poverty, insufficient educational support, lack of access to quality housing and healthcare, and a lack of essential provisions such as food, welfare and childcare.²⁰⁴ Empirical evidence also makes it clear that adverse childhood experiences, poor mental health, discrimination and economic inequality are associated with youth violence.²⁰⁵

Yet, according to Williams, ‘the impact of extreme inequality and structural violence on children has not been central in the response to youth-on-youth knife homicides in the 2000s and 2010s. Instead, these decades have been characterised by punitiveness and surveillance, increasing discriminatory stop and search practices and extending powers that target and control young people.’²⁰⁶

204 McAra, L. and McVie, S. (2022) Causes and Impact of Offending and Criminal Justice Pathways: Follow-up of the Edinburgh Study Cohort at Age 35. Report to the Nuffield Foundation, Edinburgh: Edinburgh Law School, www.nuffieldfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Causes-and-Impact-of-Offending-and-Criminal-Justice-Pathways.pdf.

205 Haylock et al., ‘Risk factors associated with knife-crime’.

206 Williams, ‘Policing the crisis in the 21 century’.

Poverty

Community members pinpointed four elements which defined their or others' experiences of poverty: lack of educational opportunities; lack of income, putting stress on families and in turn children and young people; lack of employment opportunities and having to navigate discriminatory recruitment practices; and lack of housing security.

Their cumulative impact was seen to create a 'fight to survive' mindset, whereby people in poverty feel the need to compete, at the expense of others, for scarce resources and opportunities.

We heard from 4Front how poverty creates the conditions in which young people who struggle to see a future for themselves and feel they cannot achieve anything financially can be susceptible to or exploited by criminalised 'work'. As one community member in our workshop described it, they become 'trapped in trapping', increasing the likelihood of becoming involved in 'serious youth violence'.

Poetic Unity described how:

Poverty might be the main driver [of 'serious youth violence'], to be honest. Most of the youth violence that we see comes from people that are poor ... The issue I have is that people are trying to make knife crime and youth violence a Black thing. It's ... a poverty thing.

Similarly, 4Front told us:

if you don't know where your next meal is coming from, or you haven't got safe housing, or your family environment doesn't feel safe, if your basic needs aren't met in that way it's very hard to feel safety anywhere.

Lack of opportunity

Community members also saw lack of opportunity as a driver of 'serious youth violence' that overlaps with poverty.

Without educational, employment or other opportunities, young people can find themselves with little to strive for and without agency in their own lives. This makes criminalised behaviour, such as involvement in the illegal drugs market, seem a feasible way to make money. As one community member stated, 'the devil finds work for idle hands'.

Alongside this, Poetic Unity discussed experiencing poverty and deprivation in London, where wealth and income gaps feel particularly pronounced. For young people this can feed feelings of helplessness, resentment and bitterness towards a system that does not provide equal opportunities for all:

I think London is a unique place to be impoverished, because you have so many opportunities around you ... There's so much money around you, but you can't access it. You can't touch it ... that's going to affect your mental health ... You have someone across the road who is living the high life, while you're literally living in a dump. (community member)

Community members again spoke about the wider social and economic conditions which create a lack of opportunity, particularly for communities of colour. For example, being excluded from school closes many doors for individuals later in life, and community members recognised the importance of nurturing all children and recognising their value to prevent the school-to-prison pipeline. This was illustrated in our interviews too, with 4Front telling us:

The education system has a big part to play in it. Most of the young people we work with have been excluded, either temporarily or permanently. Most of the young people who end up in young offenders institutes have also been excluded at some point. It's no coincidence that exclusion from schools leads people to further interaction with the criminal legal system, and again, the issues of poverty and lack of housing also leads people to be excluded.

We discuss school exclusions further in Chapter 8.

Loss of community

Workshop attendees described the various ways in which community has been lost, and how that has created the conditions for criminalised behaviour and harm, including the harm that has come to be understood as 'serious youth violence'.

It was recognised that people becoming 'bored' or having 'too much time on their hands' was due to structural decisions such as the disinvestment in community centres, youth clubs and charities. This was seen as amounting to a loss of community, with charities, themselves underfunded and under-resourced, attempting to make up where governments fall short.

Some community members described how young people used to be accountable to local youth workers or community leaders, who could provide support and guidance. As discussed earlier, cuts to community infrastructure have resulted in a decline in youth workers, and the police were seen to have filled the gaps, in what academics have labelled 'austerity-driven policification'.²⁰⁷ However, community members felt that the police do not provide the equivalent support because 'young people either run away or get arrested', neither of which were seen as helpful solutions to the problem.

The impact of the loss of community was seen as profound. A reduction in community spaces has reduced the amount of contact among community members; one person spoke about how it used to take 'a village to raise a child' but that has become increasingly difficult. This was essentially a community accountability mechanism, where experiences and opportunities could be shared, where young people could reason with elders and get advice and support, but now many young people feel isolated from their communities.

²⁰⁷ Laub, 'Austerity-driven policification'.

Gentrification

This was also raised as a contributor to the loss of community, particularly in London.

Many community members drew on their experiences of living in areas that might have been deprived in some ways but had strong communities and culture. However, much of that has been stripped away through regeneration programmes and the influx of middle-class homeowners, resulting in increased prices and pushing communities out.

The issue of gentrification had also been felt by the organisations we worked with for this research. For example, 4Front supported predominantly Black young people living on the Grahame Park estate in West London, many of whom have had negative experiences with the criminal legal system. Despite the ongoing need within the community, the organisation has lost the space from which it operated for over a decade due to redevelopment of the estate.

Experiences of trauma

Unresolved trauma was commonly identified as one of the drivers of ‘serious youth violence’, due to its impact on thoughts and behaviour: ‘You react to certain issues because of how you’ve experienced life’.

People also saw this as connected to harmful and limiting forms of masculinity and the social stigma that comes with expressing emotions.

Trauma was seen as operating on various levels. First, it resulted from personal circumstances – for example, financial issues or neglect and abuse can have a long-term negative impact on people’s mental health.

Second but related, trauma as a result of structural inequalities, including structural racism, can traumatise entire communities. Community members used the example of the Grenfell Tower tragedy and the collective trauma

it represented for wider working-class communities of colour, even if they did not personally know the victims. Incidents such as Grenfell have a ripple effect on communities who share similar conditions and also have experience of large-scale, long-standing institutional neglect.

Even if you don’t know somebody who passed in that situation, there’s still a hopelessness that comes from growing up in a council estate or social housing. I think that’s the biggest problem – if we had a level playing field, things would be so much different.
(Poetic Unity)

Third, community members highlighted the impact of intergenerational trauma and the ripple effect on future generations and communities. They used the example of the legacy of trauma that institutional police killings can have decades later: research from the US shows that ‘police killings of unarmed black Americans have adverse effects on mental health among black American adults in the general population’.²⁰⁸ There is also evidence of the negative impacts on policing being transmitted intergenerationally.²⁰⁹

208 Bor, J., Venkataramani, A. S., Williams, D. R. and Tsai, A. C. (2018) ‘Police killings and their spillover effects on the mental health of black Americans: A population-based, quasi-experimental study’, *Lancet* 392(10144): 302–310.

209 Akintoye, B. (2023) ‘The long shadow: The intergenerational experience of policing for Black British communities’, PhD thesis, University of Kent.

Experiences of policing

[Police] authority is seen as God-given.
(community member)

Community members were asked to reflect on their experiences with the police and assess how effective the police are at tackling ‘serious youth violence’. Most community members shared their experiences of disrespectful and aggressive policing, and associated embarrassment, which were thought to escalate situations even when cooperating with the police. They were clear that racist policing was ‘dehumanising’ and ‘trauma-inducing’.

Community members recognised that the locations chosen for police patrols were based on statistics on levels of crime. However, they also understood this as a self-fulfilling prophecy: that those statistics were themselves a consequence of policing decisions. In other words, over-policing of Black communities produces stereotypes about crime in Black communities, which in turn are used to justify continued over-policing. As one community member said, ‘knowledge and understanding are different things. They might have knowledge of what’s

going on but they don't understand it.' There was unanimous agreement that the actions of the police can make issues worse: 'They understand the statistics, [but] the patrolling isn't actually helping'.

As community members made clear, the police assume they are the solution to the problem of crime, but in fact there was a belief that the police can make situations worse – in their attempts to de-escalate tensions, they only escalated the wider situation.

Community members discussed how the police are an inherently reactive service, which calls into question their function: 'call if you lose your cat, and for violence, they're being asked to do things beyond their remit'. Instead, community members made clear, there is a need to look at those targeted by the police not as perpetrators but as victims of wider harm.

Solutions

Our workshops presented non-policing alternatives to address the causes of 'serious youth violence' that had been identified in collaboration with our grassroots partners and academic evidence. These were then discussed in small groups.

Community members pointed to how a lack of government investment in communities creates a vicious cycle of poverty. They wanted to see reinvestment in youth and community services, childcare support, free breakfast clubs, and employment skills support. Community members made clear that addressing poverty would be the most effective way to address 'serious youth violence', because it was proactive whereas policing is reactive.

Restorative justice

As we set out earlier, restorative practices aim to create an environment where everyone feels respected and valued rather than focusing on punishment and authority.

By fostering empathy and open communication, they give young people the skills and confidence to handle conflict constructively and create spaces for mutual understanding and healing.²¹⁰

The work of 4Front emphasises restorative justice initiatives as an alternative to formal legal justice approaches:

We are told that the police are there to keep us safe, and some of that should surely be around care. Yet in instances where the police are involved in conflict, they often make it worse. There should be ways to deal with conflict through methods that are not punitive, yet when you bring the police into it suddenly it's a serious incident and there's

no real option for reconciliation outside of the criminal legal system. That's the way you're meant to get justice, rather than having a one-to-one reconciliation, where both parties can feel positive.

Community members broadly supported expanding restorative justice initiatives. They thought it was a particularly productive way to approach conflict mediation, recognising that 'serious youth violence' can sometimes start as minor disagreement and dealing with it early on can prevent escalation. Attendees pointed out how this can build solidarities, and that people living in poverty and at the sharp end of structural injustice need to find common ground: 'we're fighting over scraps, when some people have whole meals'.

Despite the positivity, community members identified two key limitations to restorative practices. First, while it can be effective in preventing the escalation of violence, there is a need to also address external conditions such as poverty and inequality. Second, restorative justice and conflict are not currently well understood by the public, so there needs to be community education around this.

²¹⁰ 4Front Project (no date) 'How restorative justice can be used as a mechanism to repair harm', www.4frontproject.org/post/how-restorative-justice-can-be-used-as-a-mechanism-to-repair-harm.

Trauma-informed practice

If you have no support to deal with your grieving process, then there's much more chance that you're going to retaliate in a way that leads to further violence. (4Front)

Trauma-informed approaches seek to build young people's strengths and attachment to community in order to minimise the impact of complex lives and traumatic experiences.²¹¹ There were high levels of support for this, but attendees highlighted some important principles for implementing it:

- It must involve building long-term relationships with young people and a shift away from outcome- and target-driven policies.
- It must be not only 'person-centred' but culturally informed and carried out by practitioners who understand racialisation.
- It should be led not by police but by 'people from the community supporting the community', using an approach tailored to different community needs and contexts.

Alongside trauma-informed social and public services, significant investment is still needed to make free mental health services and therapeutic interventions available.

211 Beyond Youth Custody (2016) Developing Trauma-Informed Resettlement for Young Custody Leavers: A Practitioner's Guide, London, www.beyondyouthcustody.net/wp-content/uploads/Developing-trauma-informed-resettlement-for-young-custody-leavers-a-practitioner-per-centE2-per-cent80-per-cent99s-guide.pdf.

Public health approaches to violence prevention

A public health approach to 'serious youth violence' involves viewing harm and conflict not as isolated, individual incidents but as something that can be prevented by addressing root causes.

Public and social services need to come together to implement early interventions, aiming to prevent violent situations from occurring rather than waiting until it does and then responding with punishment. The approach focuses on training professionals and the wider community to recognise risk factors and understand the reasons behind what they regard as 'challenging behaviour', enabling them to work with young people in a more constructive way.²¹² This might mean, for example, referring someone found to be in possession of drugs to voluntary sector organisations rather than prosecuting them for a drugs offence.²¹³

While the public health approach has been successful in many contexts, there is a risk of 'medicalising' social problems without addressing their roots. For example, focusing too heavily on individual behavioural change obscures the broader societal inequities – such as poverty and racism – that contribute to violence.

212 Catch 22, 'Understanding violence in young people'.

213 Downs, W. and Law, M. (2024) 'Policing: A public health approach', UK Parliament Horizon Scanning, 7 October, <https://post.parliament.uk/policing-a-public-health-approach/#:~:text=These%20initiatives%20are%20sometimes%20referred,into%20contact%20with%20the%20police.>

Violence Reduction Units

Public health approaches have proven to be effective.

For example, the Violence Reduction Unit (VRU) created by Strathclyde Police in Scotland brought together schools, social services and other agencies to provide information on a variety of factors that put young people at risk of violence. This allowed for targeted areas of focus and initiatives.

For example, a 'school focus' emphasised understanding young people's challenges outside the school setting, focused on early years, and referred young people experiencing difficulties at home to support and counselling services.

Violence was reduced by treating it as a public health issue and addressing underlying social and material conditions. The VRU works with both the NHS and youth workers, called 'Navigators'. These are stationed in A&E departments and help to support victims of 'serious youth violence' and those who are admitted as a result of repeated violence. Navigators help to connect the individual with community-based organisations and support them to access support services such as housing, therapy and rehabilitation.²¹⁴ The highly successful Glasgow VRU has since been used as a blueprint across the UK.²¹⁵

While VRUs are founded on the principle that violence can be reduced by addressing its root causes, in practice they retain a strong policing and enforcement element, as seen in Glasgow. This reliance on law enforcement raises serious concerns about their effectiveness and suitability, particularly in communities of colour with histories and present day realities of police violence and racism, underscoring that addressing the root causes of violence requires social and community-based interventions rather than policing and punitive measures.

Our workshops were supportive of the general emphasis on preventing 'serious youth violence' by addressing underlying social and material conditions, but there were some serious concerns with the approach.

First, there was a clear lack of trust in public institutions and therefore a lack of confidence that they would approach this in a non-discriminatory way. One community member recalled a generic hospital visit at which they were assumed by a healthcare professional to be taking drugs: 'if that's an attempt to prevent violence, it's not going to work'. This points to the broader concern of the surveillance of racialised communities and discriminatory practice justified as a public safety measure. The risk is that institutions that are already found to discriminate or are institutionally racist will reproduce these practices, misidentifying those at risk.

This is exemplified by the Serious Violence Duty, which requires non-police services to share information and monitor people suspected of being involved in or at risk of serious violence. This represents a shift from services such as healthcare or schools being places of care and learning, to assessing people through a lens of criminality, in a similar discriminatory way to the counter-terror Prevent Duty. Community members who took part in the workshop raised concerns about the co-optation of third-sector organisations into quasi-policing roles.

Second, community members pointed to bias and a lack of cultural competence in institutions, meaning that a public health

approach to 'serious youth violence' is not a neutral approach. As one community member stated, 'there should be training on recognising, but it has to be decolonised and not rooted in discrimination and racist assumptions'.

Third, there was a concern that asking public and social services to pick up another responsibility is either unrealistic or would not be implemented properly, given that significant government cuts have left many public institutions already strained for resources and many workforces burned out.

Finally, community members recognised the success of the VRU in Glasgow, but were not confident that the same approach would be successful for different communities and contexts. The core of this concern is that because 'serious youth violence' and its drivers disproportionately impact Black communities, it would be dealt with more aggressively. Because the violence in Glasgow predominantly impacted white communities, racist policing was not a concern in this way. Given the ineffectiveness of police powers and how they can in fact worsen inequalities, a public health approach must be anti-racist if it is to be extended to other contexts. Currently, in contrast, community members who took part in the workshop felt that whole communities were criminalised:

you would never call on all white people to condemn the actions of other white people in Glasgow, but somehow incidents of Black knife crime are the product of the whole Black community. (community member)

214 Goodall, C., Jameson, J. and Lowe, D.J. (2020) Navigator: A Tale of Two Cities, Glasgow: Scotland Violence Reduction Unit, www.svru.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Navigator-12-month-report-2_0.pdf.

215 Catch 22, 'Understanding violence in young people'.

Investment in community resources

‘Community resources’ refers to spaces for young people such as creative projects, youth clubs, gyms and boxing clubs.

These spaces provide a safe environment for young people to spend time with friends and community members outside of school hours, access the support of youth workers, and participate in workshops and activities including poetry, music and sport. Our interview with 4Front emphasised the importance of young people having a safe space and trusting relationships in which they can express their feelings of injustice.

Research suggests that youth clubs provide wide benefits for young people that spill over into other areas of life, such as school performance.²¹⁶ In the short term, young people who attend youth clubs are less likely to miss school and more likely to have good health and to want to go to university.²¹⁷ Youth clubs often provide mentoring, which helps young people to form long-term relationships, creating stability and contributing to their wellbeing and positive development.²¹⁸

216 Villa, C. (2024) ‘How cuts to youth clubs affected teen crime and education’, IFS, 13 November, www.ifs.org.uk/articles/how-cuts-youth-clubs-affected-teen-crime-and-education.

217 Understanding Society (2024) ‘Youth clubs improve teens’ health, wellbeing and education’, 4 March, www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/news/2024/03/04/youth-clubs-improve-teens-health-wellbeing-and-education.

218 Kids Inspire (no date) ‘Why I am committed to volunteering as a mentor for young people’, www.kidsinspire.org.uk/blog/why-i-am-committed-to-volunteering-as-a-mentor-for-young-people.

In the past such services were typically funded by local councils, and the significant cuts to local government funding during the 2010s have led to many youth club closures.²¹⁹ Community members felt that there had been a clear decline in community infrastructure as a result of austerity measures. The impact of this was seen in a reduced sense of community solidarity. Even where resources do exist, the high demand means they are often not used to build long-term harm reduction.

There was a clear appetite among community members who took part in the workshop for more community-led initiatives and reinvestment in community resources.

219 Villa, ‘How cuts to youth clubs affected teen crime’.

Fight for Peace

The Fight for Peace project combines boxing and martial arts with educational and personal development to realise the potential of young people in communities affected by violence. It has three aspects: an academy for young people to train in, alliances with community partners to help build knowledge and support, and establishing collectives focused on strengthening youth services.²²⁰

Art Against Knives

Art Against Knives (AAK) embeds creative spaces in London’s communities, co-designed with young people, to build on their strengths and create opportunities. In these spaces, a trauma informed team provides creative skills training, mentoring and specialist support to keep young people safe and help them thrive. Based in Barnet, AAK has reached more than 2,000 young people since 2011, with independent evaluation reporting positive outcomes and better coordination with local services.²²¹

220 Fight for Peace (2024) Impact Report 2023, London, Rio de Janeiro and Kingston, https://fightforpeace.net/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Fight-for-Peace_2023_Impact-Report.pdf.

221 Art Against Knives (2023) A Blueprint for Creating Change, London, https://static1.squarespace.com/static/6491b129e1700149e3ebcfaf/t/65256ad8c22315505b19c3de/1696951043567/43993+Art+Against+Knives+Impact+Report_AW+WEB+JG+%281%29.pdf.

Education



Introduction

Over recent years there has been an increase in government policies and initiatives aimed at addressing ‘disruptive’ behaviour in UK schools.

These measures are primarily concerned with the establishment of a ‘culture of respect’ and the maintenance of authority and control, as demonstrated in the Steer Report (2005), the Education Act (2011) and the Department for Education’s guidance on promoting ‘fundamental British values’ in schools (2014).²²² Such policies are framed as neutral or universal principles, but they are in fact deeply ideological. They construct students – particularly working-class students of colour – as in need of discipline, surveillance and assimilation into a narrow vision of national identity. In practice, they have contributed to an increasingly securitised curriculum and school environment, often under the guise of safeguarding and harm prevention. Far from improving student wellbeing or educational experiences, research and lived experience demonstrate that such approaches intensify harm and exacerbate inequalities.

222 Steer, A. (2005) Learning Behaviour: The Report of the Practitioners’ Group on School Behaviour and Discipline, London: Department for Education and Skills, www.education-uk.org/documents/pdfs/2005-steer-report-learning-behaviour.pdf; DfE (2014) Promoting Fundamental British Values as Part of SMSC in Schools: Departmental Advice for Maintained Schools, London, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a758c9540f0b6397f35f469/SMSC_Guidance_Maintained_Schools.pdf.

The presence of police in schools has gained significant attention in the wake of high-profile incidents, such as the strip-search of 15-year-old ‘Child Q’ in 2020.²²³ This was not an isolated incident, but it drew national attention to the racialised violence that can occur when policing enters the school space.²²⁴ Since the 1950s, moral panics about young people – particularly young Black people – have prompted police liaison with schools.²²⁵ In 2002, the Labour government formalised the placement of police officers in schools as part of its ‘tough on crime’ agenda – a policy that has since been expanded by politicians across the spectrum. In 2023, analysis by the Runnymede Trust found that nearly a thousand officers were operating in UK schools, disproportionately in working-class areas and schools with high numbers of students of colour.²²⁶ However, official statistics are incomplete and fail to capture the full scale of police presence in schools, and do not account for the recent removal of Safer Schools Officers by the Metropolitan police.

Research and community testimony show the consequences of this trend. The No Police in Schools campaign in Greater Manchester, through its Decriminalise the Classroom report, has documented how young people of colour, disabled students, girls and LGBTQ+

students are disproportionately targeted by school-based policing, often for minor or ordinary adolescent behaviour. They show how police in schools contribute to a culture of low expectations, stigma and fear, which undermines wellbeing and entrenches social inequalities. They reveal how teachers, under pressure from policy directives and resource limitations, often facilitate these harms by calling in the police, enforcing zero-tolerance policies or conducting searches, blurring the lines between education and punishment.²²⁷

These practices are part of a broader system of surveillance and control in schools. Programmes such as Prevent, the Gangs Matrix, and statutory reporting duties place an onus on teachers and other school staff to monitor and refer children and young people deemed ‘at risk’. These approaches disproportionately target Muslim, Black, disabled, and working-class young people. They intersect with austerity, academisation, and cuts to mental health and social support services. As a result, schools increasingly ‘manage’ pupils through punishment and exclusion rather than care, support and education.²²⁸

Resistance to policing and carceral approaches in schools is longstanding and growing. Campaigns, groups and organisations such as No More Exclusions, the Alliance for Inclusive Education (ALLFIE), the Coalition of Anti-Racist Educators (CARE) and the Black Educators Alliance (BEA), as well as No Police in Schools, highlight both the harm caused by policing and exclusion in schools and the potential for alternatives grounded in care, anti-oppression and restorative practices.²²⁹ These alternatives draw on a rich history of anti-racist struggle in education, including the Black parents’ movement and supplementary education projects, emphasising that education can and should be a site of safety, learning and community rather than surveillance and punishment.²³⁰

223 Runnymede Trust (2023) *Over-Policed and Under-Protected: The Road to Safer Schools*, London, <https://www.runnymedetrust.org/publications/over-policed-and-under-protected-the-road-to-safer-schools>.

224 Runnymede Trust, *The Racialised Harm of Police Strip Searches*.

225 Nijjar, J. (2020) ‘Police–school partnerships and the war on black youth’, *Critical Social Policy* 41(3): 491–501.

226 Thomas, T. and Mohdin, A. (2023) ‘Nearly 1,000 police officers operating in UK schools, figures show’, *Guardian*, 16 January, www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/jan/16/police-officers-operating-uk-schools.

227 No Police in Schools (2020) *Decriminalise the Classroom: A Community Response to Police in Greater Manchester’s Schools*, Manchester, <https://nopoliceinschools.co.uk/resources/Decriminalise%20the%20Classroom%20-%20A%20Community%20Response%20to%20Police%20in%20Greater%20Manchester%27s%20Schools.pdf>.

228 Holmwood, J and O’Toole, T. (2020), *Countering Extremism in British Schools? The Truth about the Birmingham Trojan Horse Affair* (Bristol: Policy Press); Joseph-Salisbury, R. (2020) *Race and Racism in Secondary Schools*, London: Runnymede Trust, https://assets.website-files.com/61488f992b58e687f1108c7c/61bcc0cc2a023368396c03d4_Runnymede%20Secondary%20Schools%20report%20FINAL.pdf; Elliott-Cooper, *Black Resistance to British Policing*; Legane, R. (2020) ‘Racism and police in schools’, *Surviving Society* podcast, October.

229 Perry, K.H. (2022) ‘Black Futures Not Yet Lost’, *South Atlantic Quarterly* 121(3): 541–560; No More Exclusions (2021) ‘What About the Other 29?’ And Other FAQs, www.nomoreexclusions.com; Bei, Z., Knowler, H. and Butt, J. (2021) ‘How do we progress racial justice in education?’ *IPPR Progressive Review* 28(1): 76–84.

230 Coard, B. (1971) *How the West Indian Child is Made Educationally Subnormal in the British School System*, London: New Beacon Books; Warmington, P. (2014) *Black British Intellectuals and Education: Multiculturalism’s Hidden History*, London: Routledge; Gerrard, J. (2012) ‘Self-help and protest: The emergence of black supplementary schooling in England’, *Race, Ethnicity and Education* 16(1): 32–58; Andrews, K. (2013) *Resisting Racism: The Black Supplementary School Movement*, London: Institute of Education Press.

This chapter examines the role of policing and punitive measures in UK schools. It explores their disproportionate impact on racialised and marginalised young people, and the forces shaping these interventions. It also highlights evidence-based alternatives – such as restorative practices, trauma-informed support and community-led approaches – that offer the possibility of schools as spaces of safety, learning and community-building, free from the harms of policing and exclusion.

Our workshop

Our workshop for this theme was hosted at the Windrush Millenium Centre in Manchester, where we spoke with 21 local community members, a mixture of teachers, parents and youth workers. Of the sample, 27 per cent had been impacted by school exclusions and 18 per cent by removal rooms and school-based police officers. 55 per cent were Black Caribbean, 27 per cent of 'Mixed' or 'Multiple' ethnic backgrounds, 9 per cent White British, and 9 per cent of 'Any Other Ethnic Group'.

We ran the workshop jointly with Kids of Colour, an anti-racist youth work organisation, and the Northern Police Monitoring Project. Alongside their other work, these two groups formed the No Police in Schools community campaign in 2019 in light of growing concern about the presence of police in schools in Manchester.²³¹ In addition, we conducted an interview with Kids of Colour.

231 No Police in Schools, Decriminalise the Classroom.

Increased policing and punitive measures in schools

We've got to the position increasingly where police are seen as the solution for everything. (*Kids of Colour*)

It's easier to go down the policing route than to give pastoral support. (*Kids of Colour*)

Kids of Colour described how concerns about interpersonal violence had been portrayed as the reason for the increased use of police and punitive measures in schools, especially in schools that are chronically under-resourced. However, this has not reduced these forms of harm.

If the so-called drivers [of policing and punitive measures in schools] are young people's safety and their wellbeing, then I have not heard of the effective presence of police in schools ... I don't really hear anything about how a School Based Police Officer [SBPO] is reducing interpersonal harm. *(Kids of Colour)*

Kids of Colour argued that this justification for increased policing and punitive measures in schools was a disingenuous distraction from the real reason: to control and restrict young people of colour and those from working-class backgrounds. This was echoed by some community members participating in the workshop, who thought that institutional, interpersonal and systemic racism were behind the approach.

Community members acknowledged that schools lacked the resources and capacity to adequately respond to harm but felt that this did not justify using policing and punitive measures as the solution.

School-Based Police Officers

Police officers have been present in schools in the UK since the 1950s, but their presence and scope has increased significantly and been formalised since then.

In 2002, the Labour government introduced the direct placement of police officers in schools as part of its cross-departmental Safer Schools Partnership Programme. This was rapidly expanded by the subsequent governments after nationwide protests following the killing of Mark Duggan in 2011.²³² Freedom of information requests by the Runnymede Trust found that as of 2022, 979 police officers from 45 forces were operating in UK schools, over half of them based in London.²³³ Research suggests that School Based Police Officers are disproportionately placed in schools with high proportions of working-class students and young people of colour;²³⁴ that SBPOs act in ways that discriminate against students of colour, particularly Black students;²³⁵ and that their presence feeds a school-to-prison pipeline.²³⁶

Community members who took part in the workshop reported that police officers in schools disproportionately target young

people of colour. In one incident, SBPOs singled out Black and Muslim pupils in schools to be searched due to their dress.

Community members reported difficulties in challenging SBPOs due to the legal grey area they operate in, lacking clear legal definitions, roles and accountability frameworks. Incidents were reported where police had interviewed young people in schools without informing their parents and no appropriate adult was offered. It was felt that in some cases, routine meetings slowly became interviews. One community member reported having seen students arrested, and voiced concern that the behaviour that prompted this did not meet the usual threshold justifying arrest: instead the response was being used as a deterrent and to make pupils afraid. Another community member raised concerns that safeguarding protocols were being abused in order to get police into schools.

As a parent, you presume that teachers have a duty of care to your child, that they should advocate for your child's rights. *(community member)*

Community members reported that teaching staff often facilitated the involvement of SPBOs. One community member had witnessed searches of students by SPBOs after they had been directed to do so by teachers, who suspected the child of carrying weapons or drugs. It appears that SBPOs are used as extra capacity to discipline students.

232 Nijjar, 'Police-school partnerships'.

233 Runnymede Trust, Over-Policed and Under-Protected.

234 No Police in Schools, Decriminalise the Classroom.

235 No Police in Schools, Decriminalise the Classroom.

236 No Police in Schools, Decriminalise the Classroom.

Teachers and police are mirroring each other, and young people can't distinguish between the behaviour of SBPOs and teachers in schools. *(Kids of Colour)*

One teacher participating in the workshop described an occasion where the police were called to the school due to a student threatening to harm herself. Six officers surrounded the girl and she was searched before the mental health services were able to help her. Although the teacher didn't call the police themselves, they commented:

I felt guilty and [like I was] the catalyst for this, even though I did not want to see the police involved. *(community member)*

Community members who took part in the workshop also said that the involvement of SBPOs often expedites the process of permanent exclusions.

Permanent exclusions and suspensions

Students from some demographic groups are disproportionately likely to be permanently excluded from school. As of 2023, the highest permanent exclusion rate was for Gypsy or Roma (43 per 10,000) and Irish Traveller children (35 per 10,000). Mixed White and Black Caribbean and Black Caribbean pupils had the next-highest exclusion rates (24 per 10,000 and 18 per 10,000 respectively).²³⁷

The use of Pupil Referral Units (PRUs; local-authority-run settings providing education for children who have been pushed out of mainstream schools for various reasons, including exclusion) are accelerating the school-to-prison pipeline, particularly for Black children. These are over-policed, segregated environments where there is a particular risk of criminal exploitation²³⁸ and teachers see themselves as prison guards.²³⁹

Rates of school suspension have the same disparities. Children of Romani (Gypsy) or Roma heritage (3,371 per 10,000) and Travellers of Irish Heritage (2,177 per 10,000) have the highest suspension rates, followed by Mixed White and Black Caribbean, and Black Caribbean pupils (1,736 and 1,358 per 10,000, respectively).²⁴⁰

237 DfE (2024) 'Permanent exclusions by ethnicity', www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/education-skills-and-training/absence-and-exclusions/permanent-exclusions/latest/#permanent-exclusions-by-ethnicity.

238 Liberty, Holding Our Own.

239 Little Red School House (2020) 'A conversation with No More Exclusions (NME)', podcast, 15 June, <https://littleredschoolhouse.libsyn.com/40-a-conversation-with-no-more-exclusions-nme>; Just for Kids Law (2020) Excluded, exploited, forgotten: Childhood criminal exploitation and school exclusions, London, https://www.justforkidslaw.org/sites/default/files/fields/download/JfKL%20school%20exclusion%20and%20CCE_2.pdf.

240 DfE (2024) 'Suspensions', 18 December, www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/education-skills-and-training/absence-and-exclusions/pupil-exclusions/latest.

In-school exclusions

‘Removal rooms’ are used as a form of in-school exclusion: a designated space where students are temporarily isolated when their behaviour is judged to be ‘disruptive’.²⁴¹ Removal rooms exist in most British schools. Schools have autonomy over how this practice is implemented and managed, and there is little statutory or legislative regulation and oversight of the practice. Evidence suggests that students placed in removal rooms are being denied access to the curriculum, physical activities, adequate stimulation and social interaction.²⁴² With no formal statistics recorded on the use of removal rooms and no comprehensive monitoring in place, their efficacy is unclear.

Community members who took part in the workshop had found this form of punishment to be disproportionately used against children and young people of colour, particularly Black young people. They reported that Black young people in particular were punished more severely than white young people for the same behaviour.

241 Sealy, J., Abrams, E.J. and Cockburn, T. (2021) ‘Students’ experience of isolation room punishment in UK mainstream education: “I can’t put into words what you felt like, almost a dog in a cage”, *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 27(12): 1336–1350.

242 Sealy et al., ‘Students’ experience of isolation room punishment’.

Prevent

Prevent is part of the UK government’s counter-terrorism strategy, CONTEST, and aims to ‘stop people becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism’. It thus operates in the pre-crime space, enabling authorities to intervene in the lives of people they deem ‘at risk’ of committing acts of terrorism but who have not yet done so. Most referrals to Prevent come from public sector institutions, particularly educational settings.

Decisions about who to refer to Prevent rely on the judgement of individuals, which has resulted in Islamophobic stereotypes playing a major role in referrals and Muslim communities being disproportionately impacted.²⁴³ Prevent violates the rights to freedom of expression; freedom of thought, conscience and religion; freedom of peaceful assembly; and equality and non-discrimination.²⁴⁴ Community members who took part in the workshop reported racialised young people being reported to Prevent for a variety of reasons, including wearing a ‘Palestine t-shirt’.

Regardless of what training you give the police, if you’ve got Prevent and such policies operating, that harm is never going to be undone.
(community member)

243 Amnesty International UK (2023) ‘This Is the Thought Police’: The Prevent Duty and Its Chilling Effect on Human Rights, London, www.amnesty.org.uk/files/2023-11/Amnesty_per_cent20UK_per_cent20Prevent_per_cent20report_per_cent20per_cent281_per_cent29.pdf.

244 Amnesty International, ‘This Is the Thought Police’.

Legislation affecting Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller communities

Recent changes to education policy and enforcement disproportionately and adversely affect Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller families. In particular, the 2025 Children’s Wellbeing and Schools Bill sets many Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller children up for failure by not only failing to recognise the systemic racism and system failures that surround their way of living, but also by imposing standards that are detached from the reality of their lives.

The Bill proposes stricter standards and enforcement around home education – including compulsory registration and monitoring, with significantly harsher penalties for non-compliance. Fines have been raised to ‘Level 4’ (£2,500), alongside potential imprisonment. Research by the Traveller Movement documents how the communities experience ‘institutionally coerced exclusions’, where policies and practices limit the success of Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller children in formal educational settings. This includes persistent bullying, perceived hostility from teachers, a lack of engagement from school staff and a curriculum that can be oppositional to Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller cultural values. As a result,

families often chose to withdraw their children from school and educate them at home.¹ Rather than providing support or addressing the drivers of institutionally coerced exclusions, the Bill increases punitive responses for local authorities. As the Traveller Movement explained to us:

[Families] will pull children out of school, often for their own safety, and then they’ll receive fines from the local authority. This can escalate to court involvement if the fines go unpaid.

Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller families often face logistical challenges which this Bill fails to recognise, increasing the risk of Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller families experiencing harsh and punitive measures. For example, many live on sites with limited access to libraries, the internet or stable electricity, and financial constraints mean that access to academic tutoring is severely limited. This makes it hard to meet compulsory standards of home education. Similarly, those who live nomadic lifestyles may miss correspondence from local councils, making it harder to comply with compulsory home education registration.²

A particular concern under the Bill is the use of Single Justice Procedure Notices, which allow court decisions to be made without a hearing. The Traveller Movement explained how this was particularly problematic for Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller families who move frequently and may not receive legal letters on time – raising serious concerns about due process and fairness.

1 The Traveller Movement (2024) *Fought Not Taught: Addressing Coercive Exclusions of Romani (Gypsy), Roma, and Irish Traveller Children*, London, www.wp-main.travellermovement.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/TTM-Fought-not-Taught_web.pdf.

2 Travellers’ Times (2024) ‘The Children’s Wellbeing Bill: A threat to Gypsy and Traveller home education or a call for reform?’ 15 January, www.travellerstimes.org.uk/features/childrens-wellbeing-bill-threat-gypsy-and-traveller-home-education-or-call-reform.

Solutions

A public health approach

In a schools context, a public health approach would bring together different services within schools to implement early interventions, tackling pupils' needs at the root and promoting social and emotional wellbeing. Examples of this include racially literate counselling programmes, youth workers and teacher training. Such interventions have been shown to be effective in addressing behavioural issues.²⁴⁵ Community members who took part in the workshop highlighted the importance of tackling socioeconomic causes of harm:

Are kids getting breakfast? Do they have heating at home? How does this impact what's going on in schools?
(community member)

Another example is the 'nurture group' approach in primary schools. Nurture groups are small, structured teaching groups for pupils showing signs of social or emotional difficulties. They provide a safe, comfortable, home-like environment, with clear routines and adults modelling positive relationships. There is evidence that pupils' social and emotional skills improve as a result of nurture group provision.²⁴⁶

However, many so-called public health approaches have been criticised due to a focus on pre-emptive surveillance,

245 DeSouza, L., Hitchcock, R.J., Murray, A., Ekberg, S. and Bobis, J.L. (2020) 'Preventing school exclusions: A systematic review of practices and programs', *Review of Educational Research* 90(4): 556–586.

246 Education Development Trust (2015), *Supporting Children with Challenging Behaviour Through a Nurture Group Approach*, London: DfE.

which can result in both the surveillance of already over-policed communities and the misidentification of those who are at risk.²⁴⁷ The dominance of 'public health' approaches that are punitive and police-led means that those involved are often still at risk of being criminalised. Community members who took part in the workshop were concerned that if implemented in the current context, public health initiatives could be seen as 'an add on, it'll be ignored or seen as a tick box'.

Investment in and development of teachers and schools

You need to instil the concept that teachers are not going to just teach a subject, but to shape people.
(community member)

Schools have faced increasing financial pressure in recent years in light of reduced budgets. A survey conducted by NAHT (the National Association of Head Teachers) of 11,000 school leaders explored the impact of rising costs and the action that school leaders need to take to balance budgets, many of which will negatively impact staff and pupils. Almost half (44 per cent) said they would reduce spending on targeted intervention for pupils requiring additional support, and 40 per cent said they would reduce non-educational support and services for children. Two-thirds of respondents said that in the longer term they would have to reduce the number of teaching assistants, and half said they would have to reduce the number of teachers or teaching hours.²⁴⁸

247 Liberty, *Holding Our Own*.

248 National Association of Head Teachers (2022) *The Cliff Edge: The Nation's Underfunded and Overstretched School Budgets*, London, www.naht.org.uk/Portals/0/PDF%27s/Funding/NAHT%20Funding%20report%20%28THE%20CLIFF%20EDGE%29%20Proof-5.2-pages.pdf?ver=2022-11-08-091942-923.

Teachers don't have time. The structure of a teacher's day needs to change, so they have more time to spend with pupils after class ... Teachers are just racing between classes and lessons. In the space of your day, when are you going to have the time to be with students and understand their issues? (community member)

Evidence suggests that training teachers in skills relating to social and emotional development is effective in improving both mental health and behaviour. For example, the Alex Timpson Attachment and Trauma Awareness Programme provides strong evidence about the value of attachment and trauma awareness training. An evaluation of the programme suggests that the training had a positive impact on pupils' wellbeing, their enjoyment of school and their relationships with school staff.²⁴⁹ Staff across a range of roles felt there had been a reduction in behaviour-related incidents and the use of sanctions as a result of the introduction of the approach.

249 Alex Timpson Attachment and Trauma Awareness in Schools Programme (2022) 'Attachment and trauma awareness training: school staff perspectives during the COVID-19 pandemic', Working Paper 7, Oxford, www.education.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Timpson-working-paper-7.pdf.

Community members who took part in the workshop were unanimous in believing that more investment is needed in the teaching workforce. However, they warned that investment alone would not solve the problems and raised the importance of having an anti-racist curriculum and teacher training that better reflect the diversity of the classrooms. A lack of racial literacy in the teaching workforce was also highlighted.

The New School, Norwood

Opened in 2020, the New School, based in Norwood, South London, operates a democratic decision-making model for pupils and staff. Instead of a behaviour policy, the school uses a form of community accountability, meaning that there is no system of punishment, only restorative justice circles in which behaviour and actions are discussed and apologies given.²⁵⁰ While it is an independent school, meaning that it does not have to take part in statutory testing (SATs), it has no fees.²⁵¹

250 Staufenberg, J., (2021) "A community of equals": The private school with no fees, set up by a south London teacher', Guardian, 13 March, www.theguardian.com/education/2021/mar/13/a-community-of-equals-the-private-school-with-no-fees-set-up-by-a-south-london-teacher.

251 The New School (no date) 'We're a new type of school on a mission to positively change the way we educate our children in the UK', www.thenewschool.org.uk.

Restorative practices

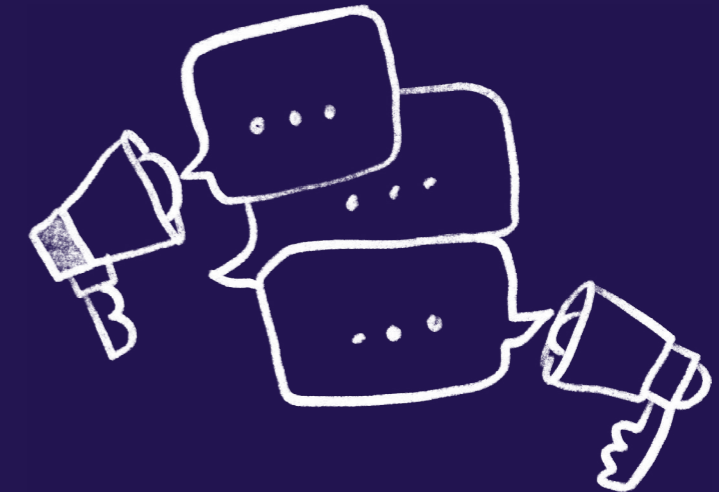
There is little evidence that permanent exclusions are effective. Conversely, research does show that preventative approaches that focus on targeted interventions are effective in addressing behavioural issues and preventing school exclusions.²⁵²

Community members who took part in the workshop believed that children in schools naturally adopted restorative practices, but that the approach needed to be implemented from the top down. Restorative approaches can promote accountability, resolve conflict and work with pupils to address the harm caused by their behaviour. This gives pupils responsibility for decision-making on issues that affect their lives, their learning and their experience of school, including their behaviour.

Gloucestershire County Council has been implementing restorative practice across children's services since 2016.²⁵³ In 2016/17, Gloucestershire was the county with the fourth-highest rate of exclusions in the UK, with 141 permanent exclusions.²⁵⁴ Restorative practice was chosen as a way to tackle this due to strong evidence that it supports the reduction of exclusions,

improves attendance, and supports wellbeing and staff retention. The council implemented pilots across children's services, including in two schools. Outcomes included reduced exclusions, increased attendance, and better relationships between staff and pupils.²⁵⁵ Following this success, a five-year investment plan was implemented to roll out restorative practice across more schools. Today the council is working with six secondary schools, four specialist and alternative settings, and 43 primary schools to embed a whole-school restorative practice approach.²⁵⁶

Community members who took part in the workshop were generally enthusiastic about the prospect of a better integrated system of restorative justice, but some concerns were raised that on its own, it is too individualistic a solution to deal with the societal causes of harm, and that it needs to be implemented in conjunction with other approaches.



252 DeSouza et al., 'Preventing school exclusions'.

253 Gregory, A. (2021) A Report Evidencing the Use of Restorative Practice in Organisations, London, www.actionaces.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/The-Restorative-Lab-Restorative-Practice-Evidence-Report-for-Gloucestershire-County-Council.pdf#:~:text=This%20desk-based%20research%20has%20been%20commissioned%20by,restorative%20practice%20in%20organisations%20other%20than%20GCC.

254 DfE (2025) 'Suspensions and permanent exclusions in England: Academic year 2023/24', 10 July, <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/suspensions-and-permanent-exclusions-in-england/2023-24>.

255 Gregory, A Report Evidencing the Use of Restorative Practice.

256 Gloucestershire County Council (no date) 'Where are we now?' www.gloucestershire.gov.uk/education-and-learning/school-improvement-strategy/where-are-we-now.

Housing and homelessness



There are currently more than 1.5 million households on social housing waiting lists in the UK, with waiting times sometimes stretching to 55 years.²⁵⁷

The UK's housing crisis is a result of political and economic failures, including the scarcity of social housing, which can be traced back to decisions made almost half a century ago.

In 1979, the social rented sector (*encompassing local authorities and housing associations*) let 5.5 million homes. By 2022 this number had declined to 4.1 million.²⁵⁸ Between 1979 and 2009/10, this sector shrank from 31 per cent of English housing stock to 17 per cent, and the proportion is likely to be significantly smaller today.²⁵⁹ This was primarily a result of the Thatcher government's 1980 Housing Act, which included a policy to allow council tenants to buy their home at a discounted price.²⁶⁰

257 Cleary, D. (2024) 'The hidden cost of the housing crisis', Lloyds Banking Group, 29 October, www.lloydsbankinggroup.com/insights/the-hidden-cost-of-the-housing-crisis.html.

258 Cromarty, H. and Barton, C. (2024) 'Social rented housing in England: Past trends and prospects', House of Commons Library, 4 March, <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-8963>.

259 Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2023) Housing Affordability since 1979: Determinants and Solutions, York, www.thinkhouse.org.uk/site/assets/files/2769/jrf0123.pdf.

260 Crisis UK (2025) 'Housing crisis in the UK', www.crisis.org.uk/ending-homelessness/key-homelessness-policy-areas/housing/housing-supply; Kerslake, B. (2022) 'Right to buy put homes in the hands of landlords: Rehashing it will do the same', Guardian, 9 June, www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/June/09/right-to-buy-homes-landlords-rentals-housing.

Many properties bought under the 'Right to Buy' scheme have been 'recycled' into the private rented sector,²⁶¹ with 40 per cent of ex-council flats sold via the policy now being privately rented.²⁶²

Meanwhile, the continued failure to replace the depleted social housing stock has contributed further to the expansion of the private rental sector and created a significant affordability crisis.²⁶³ Between 1970 and 2022, house construction fell by 46 per cent despite surging demand. This led to house prices increasing by 441 per cent over the period.²⁶⁴ One of the most widely used measures of housing affordability is the ratio of house prices to income. Houses are considered affordable if median prices are no more than three times median salaries. In England and Wales, where the median income is £33,400, this would mean an affordable home would be valued at £100,000. Instead, the median house price is £270,000.

Property wealth is at the core of the growing wealth divide.

Homeownership is highest among White British (67 per cent) and Indian households (69 per cent), with all other ethnic groups experiencing homeownership below the national average. Arab (25 per cent), Black African (22 per cent) and Roma (17 per cent) groups have the lowest rates of homeownership, rising to 42 per cent for Black Caribbean groups.²⁶⁵ Homeownership is now viewed as a route to building wealth and financial security, but this route is not open to all communities. As of 2018, the median value of property wealth accumulated by a White British and an Indian household was £115,000 and £176,000 respectively. For Black African and Black Caribbean households it was zero.²⁶⁶

Property wealth is at the core of the growing wealth divide. For homeowners, the wealth accumulated through property can be reinvested in their home or in purchasing further property, driving up housing prices and making ownership even more unreachable for those less fortunate. It also means huge differences in levels of inherited wealth, fuelling an intergenerational vicious cycle. A failure to redistribute this wealth, and generally increasing wealth inequality, is another key driver of today's housing crisis.

The housing experiences of private renters are defined by unaffordable rent prices, insecure tenancies and poor-quality living conditions. This is disproportionately experienced by people of colour, meaning that political decisions have created not only a two-tier housing system but one that is also heavily racialised.

261 Cole, I., Green, S., McCarthy, L. and Pattison, B. (2015) *The Impact of Right to Buy and the Role of Local Authorities: Headline Findings from the Evidence Review*, London: Communities and Local Government Committee, www.parliament.uk/globalassets/documents/commons-committees/communities-and-local-government/Full-Report-for-Select-Committee-141015final.pdf.

262 Apps, P. (2015) 'Revealed: 40% of ex-council flats now rented privately', *Inside Housing*, 14 August, www.insidehousing.co.uk/news/revealed-40-of-ex-council-flats-now-rented-privately-44502.

263 Almeida, A. (2021) *Pushed to the Margins: A Quantitative Analysis of Gentrification in London in the 2010s*, London: Runnymede and CLASS, https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/61488f992b58e687f1108c7c/61d6fc536143d6219ea19fa4_Pushed-to-the-Margins-Gentrification-Report-min.pdf.

264 Economics Observatory (2023) 'How can UK policy-makers make homes more affordable?' www.economicsobservatory.com/how-can-uk-policy-makers-make-homes-more-affordable.

265 Positive Money (2023) 'The impacts of the housing crisis on people of different ethnicities', 21 April, <https://positivemoney.org/uk/publications/housing-crisis-different-ethnicities-2023>.

266 Positive Money, 'The impacts of the housing crisis'.

The picture in Bristol

Bristol is at the sharp end of the national housing crisis, defined by low rates of social housing supply and a ratio of salary to house prices that is higher than in any other English Core City.²⁶⁷

Between 2015 and 2024, private rent in Bristol rose by 67 per cent, compared with 38 per cent on average across England and Wales.²⁶⁸

A significant number of households of colour require Local Housing Allowance (LHA) – a housing benefit available to private tenants – in order to afford private rental rates. LHA rates however are low compared with private rents, and as the gap increases, more people are finding it challenging to make up the difference, increasing the risk of homelessness.²⁶⁹ Use of temporary accommodation in Bristol is the third-highest among the UK's Core Cities²⁷⁰ and

the local authority of Bristol has the fifth-highest number of rough sleepers, with only Somerset, the City of London, Camden and Westminster higher.²⁷¹

Between 2022 and 2023, 42 per cent of applications owed a prevention or relief duty under the Homeless Reduction Act 2017 in Bristol were from communities of colour – an over-representation compared with the Bristol population (29 per cent of whom are people of colour). Black African and Caribbean communities were the most over-represented, with Black African communities making up 17 per cent of all applications despite only being 6 per cent of the population.²⁷²

267 Bristol Living Rent Commission (2023) Living Rent Commission Report 2023, Bristol, www.bristoloncity.com/wp-content/pdf/Living-Rent-Commission-combined-report-2023b.pdf.

268 ONS (2024) 'Private rent and house prices, UK: July 2024', 17 July, www.ons.gov.uk/economy/inflationandpriceindices/bulletins/private-rent-and-house-prices-uk/july2024.

269 Bristol Living Rent Commission, Living Rent Commission Report 2023.

270 Bristol City Council (2025) Health and Homelessness: Bristol JSNA Health and Wellbeing Profile 2024/25, [www.bristol.gov.uk/files/documents/1522-jsna-homelessness-file#:~:text=Health%20and%20Homelessness,-2&text=Bristol%27s%20figure%20\(per%20thousand%20households,on%20accommodation%20for%20homeless%20households](http://www.bristol.gov.uk/files/documents/1522-jsna-homelessness-file#:~:text=Health%20and%20Homelessness,-2&text=Bristol%27s%20figure%20(per%20thousand%20households,on%20accommodation%20for%20homeless%20households).

271 Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (2025) 'Rough sleeping snapshot in England: Autumn 2024', 15 July, www.gov.uk/government/statistics/rough-sleeping-snapshot-in-england-autumn-2024/rough-sleeping-snapshot-in-england-autumn-2024.

272 Bristol City Council, Health and Homelessness.

Our workshop

During our workshop, at the Malcolm X Community Centre, we spoke to 22 local community members.

Of these, 60 per cent were either currently experiencing homelessness or had experienced it previously; 60 per cent had lived in either temporary accommodation or unstable accommodation, including sofa surfing or staying in squats. Most had lived in Bristol their whole life, and all were from racialised communities. Almost 80 per cent were Black British, Black African, Black Caribbean or of 'Mixed Black' ethnicity.

The workshop was co-hosted with two local organisations. Mwanzo Project was established in response to a gap in services for young people in Bristol who find themselves at risk or involved in youth offending, 'serious youth violence' and criminal exploitation. The project pioneered the Call In Programme in 2019, which arose due to concern about the increase in drug-related activities and 'serious youth violence' among young people in East Central Bristol. The programme was designed to redirect individuals away from the criminal legal system by offering one-on-one mentoring support and a bespoke programme of activities aimed at facilitating positive life changes.

The Black South West Network (BSWN) is a Black-led racial justice organisation based in Bristol which supports the development of dynamic, independent, and strong communities of colour.

The drivers of homelessness

Housing supply and gentrification

Community members had experienced high levels of gentrification and were both disappointed and aggrieved by local building priorities.²⁷³ Community members felt that there was too much investment in commercial properties and student housing, rather than in housing for local residents. They also reported landlords opting to rent their properties on Airbnb to tourists or remote workers, putting pressure on local housing stock. There was a recognition that this was in part a symptom of wealth inequality. As Black South West Network described it:

people are getting priced out and being moved out of Bristol or being left on the street. And on top of that, the monopolisation of land and buildings by universities building these high-rise buildings that are primarily for students means that there's no space for those who permanently dwell within the city. People [are] being priced out, or they're being left homeless.

As noted by a number of community members, the over-reliance on the rental sector has meant that when rents go up, residents have little choice but to move out of the area and away from their community. This has contributed to changing demography in areas such as St Pauls (a historically Black Caribbean neighbourhood), and a feeling that there has been a decline in the sense of community. This has a

273 Deeney, Y. (2023) 'Fears gentrification in St Pauls and rise in house prices is "killing" culture', Bristol Post, 12 February, www.bristolpost.co.uk/news/bristol-news/fears-gentrification-st-pauls-rise-8136485.

knock-on effect, as the current generation of young Black people has less access to informal collective saving schemes (such as the pardner system) and other forms of informal community support that might help them in times of need. Now, community members expressed, they are more likely to 'fly under the radar' and be at risk of homelessness.

Community members noted that private landlords impose rent increases at will, meaning that tenants are unable to save and move on from private-rented property. In Bristol the average house price is almost 12 times the average salary – higher than the affordability ratio for the UK as a whole and significantly higher than any other English city.²⁷⁴ This affects some communities disproportionately: communities of colour in the South West are three times more likely to be renting than White British people.²⁷⁵

Community members complained about the quality of housing stock, explaining that most households suffered from damp and overcrowding, and recognised the resulting lack of safety for tenants.

While the housing crisis was seen as the main driver of homelessness, community members also noted its complex relationship with other social factors. Problematic drug use and poor mental health can exacerbate the implications of homelessness, but drug dependency and poor mental health are also made worse by homelessness. Complicating this further, mental health services largely exclude people who are drug dependent on the basis that they need to be drug-free, or at least reduce their use, before being offered support.

274 Bristol Post, 'Fears gentrification in St Pauls'.

275 Black South West Network (2020) 'We are not all in this together: The racial divide of COVID-19', www.blacksouth-westnetwork.org/covid-19/bswn-statement-covid-19.

Mental health

Community members felt the lack of mental health support exacerbated people's challenging housing situations and contributed to homelessness. The Black South West Network described how long NHS waiting times contributed to homelessness in the city:

a lot of times, those with mental health issues are not being supported by the mental health system. I mean, seeing a therapist on the NHS, [the waiting time is] minimum six months, maximum, a few years. And so much can happen within that time, including being kicked out of the home, losing your job, and being put in the street – and what can you do after that?

We discuss mental health further in Chapter 12.

Problem drug use

Community members stressed that problem drug use and substance addiction were the fault not of those who suffer with them but rather of systems which had failed to support them. They also felt that drug use is not a primary driver of homelessness but is often a coping mechanism for those who are already homeless, entrenching the harm of their situation.

This was echoed by Release:

there is a very problematic misconception that people end up homeless because of their drug use rather than the systems that are failing around us ... it's a rational response to deal with the trauma of living on the streets.

They also described to us a revolving door whereby people are housed in a homeless shelter but kicked out due to drug use, so they end up back on the streets: 'people who use drugs have been harmed by housing policies that have perpetuated that cycle'.

People experiencing homelessness often suffer with multiple forms of trauma and are therefore susceptible to substance dependency. As discussed earlier, drug prohibition legislation has racist roots. The criminalisation of drugs has failed to support people with addiction and does nothing to reduce the harms of drug use. Among the concerns expressed in our workshop were the lack of harm reduction services such as safe injection, needle and syringe programmes and drug testing facilities: the prohibition of drugs makes these services harder to fund and implement. It was also felt that funding around drug addiction in the city had too often gone to short-term pilot schemes, and there was a need for more and longer-term investment.

Harm reduction services

In a context of lack of movement on policy conversations about drug decriminalisation, Release has adapted its services to provide support and reduce harm. For example, its drugs monitoring network provides information about local drug supply chains and alerts the public to health risks. Release has also set up a harm reduction hub in its office, which commits to anonymity and provides people with sterile equipment, testing strips and the overdose reversal medication Naloxone. Alongside this, the organisation provides community legal services at drug support services and homelessness intervention projects, supporting people who are experiencing homelessness or facing housing insecurity. It works closely with sex-worker-led groups and trans groups, to build community around the issue and spread the word about harm reduction services.

The community members we spoke with in Bristol also voiced frustrations with local healthcare provision, feeling that those who use opioids had been discarded by the health system. While the current healthcare system might provide reactive care for those suffering with drug addiction, it was felt that longer-term care and support to combat and eventually overcome addiction was harder to access.

As Black South West Network commented:

I think it's more of a systemic issue. When it comes to drugs, the proliferation of it is quite prevalent in Bristol, and the support available is few and far between. And even then, the NHS can only help so much, and the police itself I don't think are fully equipped to deal with these issues. Those are drivers of homelessness, but also in terms of the housing stock, everything's unaffordable.

As with mental health, respondents felt that there was a lack of access to the right kinds of support, and that this had a knock-on effect on homelessness. For example, those who are consuming drugs face barriers in accessing certain forms of accommodation.

Experiences of policing

Community members recognised the many ways in which the housing crisis led to police contact and criminalisation.

First, high housing costs (*and broader costs of living*) are driving people into poverty, leaving them with no choice but to survive through alternative means such as shoplifting, inevitably increasing the risk of police contact.

Second, poor housing outcomes and policies that enable landlords to evict private tenants can lead to homelessness. Increasing rates of homelessness and cuts to support services have meant that people are unable to get the help they need, in a continuation of the criminalisation of rough sleeping. The police are often tasked with 'moving on' people experiencing homelessness, in turn increasing the likelihood of arrest. The government has confirmed that it will repeal the Vagrancy Act by Spring 2026, which will mean that rough sleeping is no longer a criminal offence. While this is positive, it is proposing replacement powers that may disproportionately impact migrant communities sleeping rough.²⁷⁶ People experiencing homelessness are also more likely to be victims of crime.

In 2022 an investigation by the Bristol Cable showed an increase in the number of community protection notices (CPNs) issued by the city's street intervention team. This is

²⁷⁶ NACCOM (The No Accommodation Network) (2024) 'Statement and blog: Repeal of the Vagrancy Act', <https://naccom.org.uk/statement-and-blog-repeal-of-the-vagrancy-act>.

a body led by Bristol City Council, Avon and Somerset Police, Bristol Drugs Project, and the homeless charity St Mungo's. The use of CPNs on rough sleepers risks trapping them in a circle of criminalisation and can stop people from accessing the help that they need. A CPN can be given for 'persistent' begging and can ban people experiencing homelessness from entering certain areas or 'exclusion zones'. Failing to comply with a CPN can lead to a fine up to £2,500 and a criminal conviction.²⁷⁷

Community members who took part in our workshop in Bristol felt that the police were not concerned about the welfare of people experiencing homelessness and treat people based on stereotypes rather than offering them protection. Those present in the community centre felt that they were looked down on by the police, that they rarely had good interactions and that 'the police act as bailiffs'.

Community members commented that people of colour and those who speak English as an additional language had particularly bad experiences relating to homelessness, often as a result of their treatment by public institutions. Black South West Network works in collaboration with Bristol City Council and Housing Matters to hold bi-monthly social housing clinics for council tenants of colour.

One staff member commented that:

After our research, we realised that Black and minoritised people can't seem to access local housing offices so easily because of language barriers, because of large families and childcare responsibilities, or even the fact that they have to work all the time because they don't have enough money. They don't have that space where they feel safe or they feel like they could be heard accurately by these housing officers as racialised people.

²⁷⁷ Morrison, S. (2022) 'From exclusion zones to convictions: How Bristol's rough sleepers can be criminalised under controversial notices', Bristol Cable, 1 June, <https://thebristolcable.org/2022/06/homelessness-from-exclusion-zones-to-convictions-how-brisstols-rough-sleepers-can-be-criminalised-under-controversial-notice>.

Our interview with Mwanzo Project touched on experiences of hidden homelessness – something that was seen as affecting Black men in particular due to fear of stigma:

I would say that a lot of the male homelessness is a bit more hidden. So a number of women will talk quite openly, particularly mothers, who have challenges around housing, whether that's ... social housing, etc. That's talked about quite a lot, and lots of people relate to some of those challenges. I think that there's a lot more hidden homelessness for the men in our community. There's something about what that looks like in terms of status, but also how might they present, and would they present to services, or are they more likely to sleep on a friend's sofa and not have that conversation?

Third, and related to this, was the sense of a loss of community. There was anger expressed at the gentrification which has happened in Black Caribbean areas of the city. Residents raised questions about why people from areas such as Easton and St Pauls had been displaced into other, often majority-white, parts of the city sometimes described as racist. At the same time, they questioned why homelessness was

more visible or 'allowed' in places such as St Pauls, which historically had been centres of community, solidarity and pride.

The concern was that there is a racialised element to this: historically Black areas such as St Pauls are expected to be deprived and run down, while other neighbourhoods are not. The displacement of the Caribbean community, through rising housing costs and the influx of new residents, was seen as contributing to this loss of shared community identity, leaving behind an area that perhaps feels neglected compared with its past vibrancy. Similarly, the dispersal of the community in St Pauls means that the community safety net available to previous generations was seen as being less strong or disappearing altogether. This makes it more likely that community members will experience financial and social hardship, leaving them more vulnerable to experiences of homelessness.

The hollowing out of community and cuts to the services used by 'pushed-out' residents can create the conditions for criminalised behaviour. The resulting segregation and deprivation sees places labelled as 'dangerous estates', in turn justifying the need for policing.

Despite this, a minority of community members felt that Bristol was a good example compared with the rest of the country. Those with experiences of homelessness in the city felt that there was good service provision, and that 'you can never be hungry in Bristol'. However, the overwhelming observation that this work was too often done by small organisations, such as the local hot food service Feed the Homeless, where there is always a risk of funding cuts and burnout. Instead, the group wanted to see long-term and joined-up thinking to alleviate homelessness in the city, saying that this should be the remit of homelessness workers and not the police.

The over-policing of Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller sites and homes and the criminalisation of a way of life

Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller communities (settled and nomadic) in the UK face constant criminalisation, impacting their mobility and sense of safety. Legal tools such as dispersal orders, injunctions and powers under the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act – reinforced by the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act – are used to monitor, move on or prevent Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller encampments and sites, creating a climate of fear and surveillance among Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller communities. In our interview, Traveller Movement explained how those living on sites:

would get police coming and knocking on your doors around random incidents that you wouldn't even know had occurred and had nothing to do with the community. If there had been a theft in a local shop, or if a window had been smashed at a pub, they would come around and ask questions ... police regularly drive in, walk around and look behind caravans or underneath cars. Just to show

the community that they had a presence there.

Such regular and intrusive police visits, regardless of the occurrence of incidents or offences, contribute to the increased suspicion and surveillance experienced by Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller families and the marginalisation and criminalisation of Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller identity.

At the same time, those living in bricks-and-mortar housing are not shielded from experiences of over-policing. They still report a strong police presence on streets where Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller families are known to live. Our interviewees told us that police presence often intensifies during incidents, regardless of whether community members are involved or not.

The effects of this pervade daily life, creating fear, anxiety and isolation in the community. Social stigma also acts as a form of control, with those living in houses often feeling policed in more symbolic ways. For example, when applying for jobs, living in a neighbourhood where Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller families are known to live can mark applicants out for discrimination and rejection.

This level of policing, whether formal or symbolic, suppresses traditional ways of life, limits access to services and work, and erodes trust between the community and wider society. All of this contributes to a sustained and pervasive culture of suspicion and exclusion for Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller communities.

Solutions

Community members discussed the hostility of the police towards people experiencing homelessness and unanimously wanted to see more investment in community resources and in long-term strategies for tackling homelessness in the city.

Highlighting this need, Mwanzo Project described how:

Our voluntary sector organisations that are housing providers also are the big traditional organisations. Their track record around anti-racism is nil. Their track record around diversity within their leadership is nil. So how well equipped are they to recognise some of the barriers that individuals and families are facing around their house, and whether that is instances of racism, whether that is failures of the system or navigating the system. Are they equipped to be able to navigate? And I'm not sure they are ... There's definitely a role for community-led initiatives, and particularly with expertise around working with Black and racially minoritised communities.

This need for community-based approaches was also felt by the Black South West Network:

I also think community-based approaches are really the way to go. So community-based efforts to feed the homeless, community-based efforts to provide them training, give them accommodation to get up on their feet. Also greater realisation of the issue of mental health and drugs within our communities, being able to speak out more about it, and being able to share experiences so that people don't feel alone, so they feel like they have a support system.

I think the lack of third spaces and lack of community that's currently being experienced in societies really plays a role in homelessness. People don't feel like they can turn to their neighbour for help when in the past, maybe that could have been something that would have stopped someone from being homeless.

A number of local and national initiatives exist in Bristol with the aim of reducing homelessness. Among these are charities such as 1625 Independent People, which provides accommodation, life skills mentoring and employment opportunities to young people at risk of homelessness.²⁷⁸ Another service is Project Z, part of Caring in Bristol, which creates spaces for young people to access shelter, support and development opportunities.²⁷⁹ People of colour also have some access to culturally competent services in the city, for example the Bristol Somali Resource Centre, which provides free advice on a range of issues including welfare, housing, education and employment.²⁸⁰

Community members wanted to see these services being scaled up, and were frustrated with funding allocation in the city. It was felt that too often, worthwhile interventions were

funded as pilot programmes only, and this ultimately led to people feeling let down. As expressed by Mwanzo Project, 'I think there's ... a frustration and a fatigue all around we're having the same conversations'. Local residents desperately wanted to see better-established and more long-term solutions. The community members made clear that it wanted to see repair and redistribution locally – with wealthy property developers whose projects have driven up housing costs and displaced lower-income residents providing money towards solutions.

We asked community members taking part in the workshop what services existed in Bristol already, then we encouraged them to consider a range of community-based solutions and assess their ability to alleviate homelessness in the city.

278 1625 Independent People website, www.1625ip.co.uk.

279 Caring in Bristol (no date) 'Project Z', www.caringinbristol.org.uk/project-z.

280 Bristol Somali Resource Centre website, www.somalicentre.org.uk/#:~:text=Home,and%20to%20help%20reduce%20isolation.

Housing-first schemes

'Housing first' is an approach to ending homelessness through 'wrap-around' support provision.

Such schemes prioritise access to permanent housing for those with histories of cyclical homelessness and who have complex needs. They provide housing without conditions, and those who are housed often make improvements in their health, wellbeing, and social and economic circumstances.²⁸¹

Housing-first schemes provide holistic support that take into account mental and social factors which have contributed to homelessness (for example, alcohol use). The need for housing is put first and maintained regardless of any other challenges faced.²⁸²

281 National Housing Federation (no date) 'Housing first', www.housing.org.uk/our-work/homelessness/housing-first.

282 Connection at St Martin's (no date) 'Housing First', www.connection-at-smartins.org.uk/housing-first.

The local community felt that this type of intervention would help to provide long-term support to those experiencing homelessness, but felt, perhaps pessimistically, that the initiative would not be financially viable. Despite this, it was noted that existing provision in the city was not sustainable without providing guidance and life skills and that the key was to provide long-term support without conditions and judgement. The Mwanzo Project told us:

I think the housing-first model works really well. So I was able to learn quite a lot about that because it was hosted by the organisation I was working with, which is this idea that you can't support a person around addressing their mental health needs or their substance misuse or their offending without meeting their basic needs of housing.

Housing-first schemes were seen as giving those experiencing homelessness more autonomy than emergency accommodation does. Ultimately, this would lead to better and more effective support.

The problem with this whole system [contingency accommodation] is that there's often no autonomy. People might not want to be in that area, and it could be because it doesn't feel safe, or it's not diverse enough. That's not going to be accepted in emergency housing. I guess the good thing about housing first was about people having the ability to be offered accommodation and to say, no, that's not suitable for me, and to eventually have that element of choice of where they're housed. It's also that intense support that front-loads when they move in. (Mwanzo Project)

Overall, the group felt that this would be a much more effective solution than any kind of police intervention. However, they were also clear of the urgent need for far more social and affordable housing to be built, which was a pre-requisite for initiatives such as Housing-first.

Housing-first case study

Three pilot housing-first programmes have been run in Greater Manchester, Liverpool and West Midlands. A year after entering housing first, 92 per cent of clients had gone from homelessness to living in long-term, socially rented accommodation. Large numbers of those housed in such schemes felt benefits in terms of their health, wellbeing and safety. In year one:

- 51 per cent of clients had received treatment for drug dependency
- significantly more clients reported eating and sleeping well: just 10 per cent reported eating well upon entry but this had risen to 36 per cent after a year
- the number of clients registered with a GP rose from 60 per cent to 92 per cent
- 55 per cent reported not having been a victim of a crime, compared with 30 per cent a year previously

Housing-first schemes have also resulted in clients having less contact with the legal system. A year after entering, those housed were significantly less likely to report being involved in antisocial behaviour (*notices, orders, injunctions*) or criminalised behaviour, with the figure falling from 34 to 15 per cent. Similarly, 29 per cent of clients had been cautioned, arrested or convicted in the year before entering Housing First but this had fallen to 12 per cent 12 months later.²⁸³

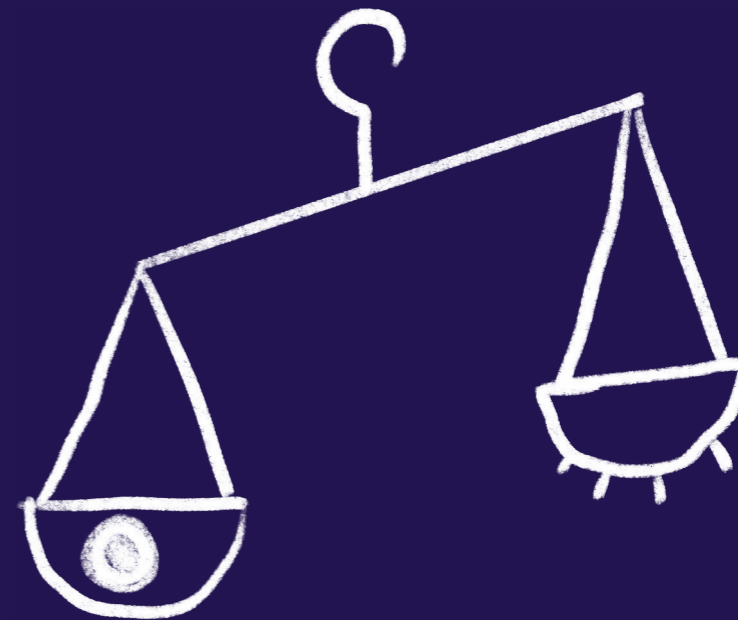
283 Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (2024) Evaluation of the Housing First Pilots: Report on Clients' Outcomes Twelve Months after Entering Housing First, London, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/65a1503ce96df5000df845ba/Housing_First_Pilots_report_on_clients__12-month_outcomes.pdf.

Specialist housing advice services within the NHS

These services would provide those experiencing homelessness and who have been in contact with public services (for example an NHS accident and emergency department) with one-on-one support. This could be in the form of education, training, or help to develop community connections. An organisation that uses this approach is the Single Homeless Project in London: it has worked with the NHS and provided housing support for people with mental health needs and prior contact with the criminal legal system as part of specialist NHS teams.²⁸⁴

Broader economic change

We recognise that the UK's housing crisis is not simply a result of a shortage of housing but is part of a global asset-price crisis. This is a symptom of widening wealth inequality, which is racialised, whereby the richest continue to accrue wealth and grow their asset portfolios, increasing asset costs for others.²⁸⁵ The Runnymede Trust therefore also advocates for radical measures to redistribute wealth including through progressive taxation and reparations.



284 Single Homeless Project (no date) 'Working with offenders', www.shp.org.uk/what-we-do/prevention/offender-support.

285 Bukata, E., Madmoudzadeh, M., Oliver, A. and Savage, M. (2025), Why the UK Racial Wealth Divide Matters: A Call for Action, London: Runnymede Trust, https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/61488f992b58e687f1108c7c/683edc099b54305c7566058d_UK%20racial%20wealth%20divide_perspectives%20paper_v2.pdf.

Policing the border



Introduction

Policing has always been racialised. The border has always been racialised, and in Britain in particular, it feels quite crucial to an analysis of the immigration system, to connect it to this legacy of British colonialism, when we see the drivers of migration very much as linked to Britain's historical past and then continued presence in other places, whether that's through ongoing wars or climate chaos or investments, almost as an extension of previous drivers of migration from Britain's former colonies. (*Migrants Organise*)

Britain's border regime as we know it has not always existed. Prior to the twentieth century, there were no formal, comprehensive border controls. The 1905 Aliens Act marked the beginning of increasingly strict and racist bordering: it was introduced primarily to restrict the movement of Jewish refugees fleeing persecution.²⁸⁶ The border regime is a continuation of Britain's colonial legacy, replicating who is and is not desirable enough to enter the country, replicating and perpetuating global structural inequality. By extension, immigration control contributes to the production of 'race'.²⁸⁷

286 Our Migration Story (no date) 'Jewish immigration and the Aliens Act', www.ourmigrationstory.org.uk/oms/jewish-immigration-and-the-aliens-act-1905.

287 De Noronha, L. (2019) 'Deportation, racism and multi-status Britain: Immigration control and the production of race in the present', *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 42(2): 1–18.

The reasons for people wanting to migrate to the UK are directly connected to our historic and present position in the world, whether because of family ties following migration here after decolonisation or because of the widespread use of the English language that followed the British Empire around the world. That people have to migrate to the UK for economic opportunities is a direct legacy of colonial wealth extraction and the continued inequalities that were created. Similarly, people seek asylum from persecution that exists as a result of the political instability that the British Empire created and today's 'strategic' foreign policy decisions. For as long as these inequalities and endeavours exist, people will always cross borders.

Who the border is for is also undoubtedly a question of class and wealth. For example, the EU Settlement Scheme, which enabled EU citizens to remain in the UK after the UK left the EU, and investor-style visas as a pathway to residency for wealthy elites are at odds with more complex, expensive routes to settlement for others. The securitisation of the border is itself in the interests of the wealthy: the visa system and detention centres, for example, are run for profit by private companies.

Ultimately, border controls and immigration laws merely make migration journeys more dangerous and expensive, and expand the risk of exploitation and harm for people who cross borders. At the same time, a focus on the border regime serves to distract the voting public from the chronic underfunding and under-resourcing of essential services, by scapegoating people crossing borders as 'the problem'. This is fuelled by reactionary nationalism that frames the border and

migration as crises.²⁸⁸ The use of racist rhetoric by politicians and mainstream press has violent consequences. This rhetoric, which has a firm foundation in hostile-environment policies, culminated in the racist riots in summer 2024, where people attacked asylum accommodation while chanting slogans popularised by politicians and the media.

288 De Genova, N. (2024) 'Migration, race and the racializing strategy of borders', *International Migration* 62(5): 273–276.

The hostile environment

The UK has an extremely harsh asylum system. Successive governments have made political decisions to design a hostile environment for people seeking asylum and people who are undocumented, with the intention of making seeking asylum in the UK difficult and making it almost impossible to thrive as someone who is undocumented and/or seeking asylum. As part of this attempt, many people seeking asylum are criminalised before even entering the UK, as the Nationality and Borders Act (2022) increased criminal sentences for arrival or entry into the UK without prior permission. Research by the Runnymede Trust which analysed parliamentary and media debates from 2010 to 2024 shows that large sections of these debates encouraged widespread hostility to migrants.²⁸⁹

289 Julios-Costa, M. and Montiel-McCann, C. (2025) *A Hostile Environment: Language, Race, Politics and the Media*, London: Runnymede Trust, www.runnymedetrust.org/publications/a-hostile-environment-language-race-politics-and-the-media; Montiel-McCann, C. and Julios-Costa, M. (2025) *A Hostile Environment: Language, Race, Surveillance and the Media* (phase two), London: Runnymede Trust, [https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/61488f992b58e687f1108c7c/688b6bacccebeb036f9e0f022_A%20hostile%20environment_Phase%20Two_v6%20\(1\).pdf](https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/61488f992b58e687f1108c7c/688b6bacccebeb036f9e0f022_A%20hostile%20environment_Phase%20Two_v6%20(1).pdf)

To be a person navigating the UK's border regime is to be policed. As we heard from Refugee Action:

We've seen the proliferation of regressive legislation on immigration and asylum. Most notably under the previous governments, we saw the Nationality and Borders Act and the Illegal Migration Act, [but also the more recent 'good character' policy] which together criminalised arrival in the country for people seeking safety, and introduced a whole range of measures to prevent people from exercising their right to apply for asylum in the UK ... [This] blurs questions of security, national security and border security into issues of asylum.

Justice for migrants is unequivocally a racial justice issue. The 1971 Immigration Act marked a fundamental shift in the UK's immigration laws, defining who had the right to stay and restricting entry for Commonwealth citizens. By extension this defined whiteness, or proximity to whiteness, as being essential to Britishness and citizenship claims. As demonstrated by the Windrush scandal or the stripping of Shamima Begum's British citizenship, for racialised communities the right to be in the UK is precarious.

A clear example of this can be found in the comparison between the treatment of Ukrainian refugees fleeing the Russian invasion and that of people fleeing persecution in the Global South. The EU triggered the Temporary Protection Directive to provide around 4.2 million Ukrainians with basic rights and protections across Europe.²⁹⁰ In the UK, most Ukrainian refugees had immediate access to family reunification initiatives as well as to work, study and public funds.²⁹¹

290 European Commission (no date) 'Temporary protection', https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/migration-and-asylum/asylum-eu/temporary-protection_en.

291 UNHCR (2024) 'Information for Ukrainians', <https://help.unhcr.org/uk/unhcr-uk-information-and-links-regarding-ukraine>.

Meanwhile, 68 per cent of asylum applications between 2001 and 2023 were from countries that experienced British colonial rule or high levels of violence and resource extraction to benefit Britain.²⁹² Even so, the overall numbers of people seeking asylum are tiny.²⁹³

People fleeing African and Asian countries, where much of the unrest can be attributed to Western colonialism, imperialism and foreign policy, are forced to risk their lives in the absence of safe and legal routes: 'the hostile environment and the UK's immigration system [are] an extension of structural racism and legacies of colonialism' (*Migrants Organise*).

Despite having no option but to take precarious routes to reach the UK, these routes themselves have now been deemed illegal. Given that an overwhelming majority of people seeking asylum are from the Global South, this criminalisation is racialised and extends to all communities of colour.²⁹⁴ While the experiences of people

292 Refugee Action (2024) Asylum in the UK: A Front Line for Racial Justice, London, www.refugee-action.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Asylum-In-The-UK-A-Front-Line-For-Racial-Justice-Briefing.pdf.

293 Refugee Action (2025) 'Quarterly Home Office immigrations statistics report. Statistical release: Q1 2025', www.refugee-action.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Refugee-Action-stats-report-Q1-2025-FINAL.pdf.

294 Refugee Action, Asylum in the UK.

seeking asylum and refugees are centred in this work, the impacts of enhanced surveillance, policing and criminalisation extends to all recently arrived and long established migrant communities and communities of colour.

This chapter focuses on the relationship between migration and policing. The hostile environment extends the UK border beyond its physical, geographical boundary, into many aspects of everyday life such as housing, work, healthcare, education, and more. It also extends responsibility for surveillance and enforcement of the border beyond the Border Force – the UK's frontline border control agency – to the police service and other public agencies. This 'deputisation' - which defines the way in which organisations and people become de facto immigration officers - is enacted both through immigration checks and controls, and through policies that exclude people from social security, employment, essential services, support and basic rights and, in this way, relies on internal controls to 'police' migration.²⁹⁵ The NRPF policy, for example, excludes 3.3 million people with visas from the welfare state plus an estimated 594,000 to 745,000 people with irregular migration status (including those who missed the EU Settlement Scheme deadline, visa overstayers and undocumented people).²⁹⁶

295 Montiel-McCann, C. and Julios-Costa, M. (2025) A Hostile Environment: Language, Race, Surveillance and the Media (phase two), London: Runnymede Trust, [https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/61488f992b58e687f1108c7c/688b6baccbeb036f9e0f022_A%20hostile%20environment_Phase%20Two_v6%20\(1\).pdf](https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/61488f992b58e687f1108c7c/688b6baccbeb036f9e0f022_A%20hostile%20environment_Phase%20Two_v6%20(1).pdf)

296 Leon, L. and Broadhead, J. (2025), Understanding Migrant Destitution in Wales, Oxford: Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS), www.compas.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025-Understanding-Migrant-Destitution-in-Wales.pdf.

Governments and politicians have been explicit in their naming of the hostile environment and its intentions – to make life untenable for many people, and to deter (some) people coming to the UK by creating obstacles to ‘getting on’ and diverting materials away from migrants.

As Migrants Organise told us:

the hostile environment is a suite of policies that technically wasn’t introduced [until] a little over a decade ago but which formalised things that were already happening, to make daily life really difficult and unbearable for migrants and refugees here with this misguided logic of deterrence.

Everyday bordering

Some use the term ‘everyday bordering’ to capture the fluidity of the border and its attachment to individuals and their socioeconomic circumstances.²⁹⁷ This creates ordinary citizens as either border guards or, for those perceived to be migrants, suspected illegitimate border crossers, in what has ‘become a major technology of control of both social diversity and discourses on diversity, in a way that threatens the convivial co-existence of pluralist societies, especially in metropolitan cities, as well as reconstructs everyday citizenship’.²⁹⁸

Everyday borders manufacture a sense of fear and the idea that White British people are being prioritised in order to gain their political support and consent for heavy policing practices. These anti-migrant and pro-policing ideologies embed the portrayal of migrants as ‘invaders’ and contextualise the racist riots of summer 2024 – upholding racialised and nationalist constructs of belonging.

297 Yuval-Davis et al., ‘Everyday bordering’.

298 Yuval-Davis et al., ‘Everyday bordering’.

The impacts of this are extensive and, given the objectives of the hostile environment, are racialised by design. It is through this lens that we analyse and report on our community research workshop.

Our workshop

We conducted the workshop for this theme at Ayeeyo’s Kitchen in Cardiff. We hosted two sessions – one for women only and one for men only – with a combined total of 48 community members participating. All community members had experience of migrating to the UK, predominantly including people currently seeking asylum but also some who had refugee status or leave to remain and some who were undocumented. We recognise how the use of categories of migration can be used to divide, differentiate and influence perceptions of the legitimacy of someone’s claim to migration and protection. These categories are socially and politically constructed and do not adequately represent shared, real world experiences of the UK’s border regime, but nonetheless there are different legal stipulations depending on how a person is categorised.²⁹⁹

Of the total, 31 per cent were Arab, 19 per cent were Black African, 8 per cent gave their ethnicity as ‘Other Asian background’, 4 per

cent were Bangladeshi, 4 per cent were Indian and 4 per cent were ‘White Other’, while 31 per cent gave their ethnicity as ‘Other Ethnic Background’. We designed and co-ran the workshop with Bawso, a community organisation that advocates for and provides specialist services to people of colour who have been victims of abuse, violence and exploitation in Wales.³⁰⁰ We also interviewed colleagues at Migrants Organise and Refugee Action.

Immigration policy is the responsibility of the UK Home Office, and the devolved Welsh government has been critical of national asylum policy.³⁰¹ Cardiff is a

299 We recognise how the categories of migration can be used to divide, differentiate and influence perceptions of the legitimacy of someone’s claim to migration and protection. These categories are socially and politically constructed and do not adequately represent shared, real-world experiences of the UK’s border regime, but nonetheless they can be relevant because there are different legal stipulations depending on how a person is categorised. See Crawley, H. and Skleparis, D. (2017) ‘Refugees, migrants, neither, both: Categorical fetishism and the politics of bounding in Europe’s “migration crisis”’, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 44(1): 48–64.

300 Bawso (no date) ‘About us’, <https://bawso.org.uk/en/about-us>.

301 Mallet-Garcia, M., Bastick, Z. and Spencer, S. (2024) Summary: Responses to Migrants with Precarious Status in Cardiff: Frames, Strategies and Evolving Practices, Oxford: COMPAS, www.compas.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/LoReMi-Summary-Responses-to-Migrants-with-

City of Sanctuary, meaning that it has strong networks of community groups to support people seeking asylum and refugees. Approximately 16 per cent of the Cardiff population were born outside the UK.³⁰² As of 2016, Cardiff housed half of the total number of people seeking asylum in Wales and was the fourth-most-common asylum dispersal destination in the UK. It also settled 95 people (21 families) under the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme between 2014 and 2020.³⁰³

How the hostile environment drives harm and policing

We asked community members to identify why and how migrants and people seeking asylum are policed in the way they are. Our analysis suggests there are four key ways: ‘survival crimes’, housing deprivation, hateful rhetoric and discrimination, and surveillance.

For Refugee Action, the criminalisation of migrants functions in two ways. First, rhetorical criminalisation represents people seeking safety as dangerous and potentially criminal and therefore in need of risk management, pre-emptive policing and control. This is used to justify the living conditions and de facto detainment we describe below. It includes phrases such as ‘smash the gangs’, which associates people seeking asylum with ‘gangs’ – which, as we describe in Chapter 7, is rooted in racism and justifies heavy policing. Second, the policy-level criminalisation makes people ‘criminal’ by law by creating new types of criminal offences and thereby manufacturing ‘deportable people’.

Survival crimes

They know you need money so they exploit you or they overwork you ... we are expected not to complain.
(community member)

Hostile-environment policies, including NRPF, are driving poverty and destitution. Around 1,800 destitute people with NRPF were supported by Welsh local authorities in 2021/22, including 1,000 children.³⁰⁴ This is likely a significant under-estimate of the actual number of destitute migrants.

People seeking asylum can apply for an allowance of £49.18 per week, or £9.95 if they are staying in ‘full board’ accommodation. This is received only if the person is deemed destitute or homeless. The poverty line for an individual in the UK is £177 per week, while National Living Wage is £12.21 per hour for those aged 21 and over. At the same time, people seeking asylum (*and undocumented migrants*) are not allowed to work while their application is being processed; at the end of 2023, 166,000 people were awaiting a decision, with around 70 per cent of them having waited for over six months.³⁰⁵

I can't tell you the number of times that I meet people who come to the reporting centre and are being fined or criminalised potentially because they couldn't afford to get to the reporting centre, and so then they got a fine, but they ... jumped the barrier because they didn't want to be getting classed as absconders and potentially being detained, but all of these things are linked, right?
(Migrants Organise)

Precarious-Status-in-Cardiff-Frames-Strategies-and-Evolving-Practices.pdf.

302 Migration Observatory (2018) Migration Observatory Regional Profile: Wales, Oxford: The Migration Observatory at University of Oxford, <https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Migration-Observatory-Regional-Profile-Wales.pdf>.

303 Cardiff Council (2022) ‘Cardiff Council’s support for asylum seekers and refugees’, Community and Adult Services Scrutiny Committee, 12 December, [https://cardiff.moderngov.co.uk/documents/s65306/Appendix per cent20A.pdf](https://cardiff.moderngov.co.uk/documents/s65306/Appendix%20per%20cent20A.pdf).

304 Leon and Broadhead, Understanding Migrant Destitution in Wales.

305 Tyler-Todd, J., Sturge, G. and McKinney, C.J. (2023) ‘Delays to processing asylum claims in the UK’, Research Briefing CBP 9737, 20 March, London: House of Commons Library, <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-9737/CBP-9737.pdf>.

Labour exploitation and the criminalisation of work were pinpointed as drivers of unsafety and police contact. People seeking asylum and undocumented migrants in our workshops made it clear that the NRPF policy and the ban on work (and subsequent right to work checks) meant that they could not afford to live and provide for their children, giving them a choice between destitution or exploitation.

The result of this state-imposed poverty is that people have no choice but to work informally and dangerously to supplement their allowances, playing into the hands of groups that exploit and abuse migrant labour, knowing that the worker cannot report them to the police due to their immigration status banning them from working. The hostile environment therefore criminalises any income generation – or ‘survival crimes’.

This extends to work that is itself criminalised, such as sex work, and is therefore more accessible to people who cannot evidence their right to work but also have little recourse to ‘justice’ as a function of both their status and work.³⁰⁶

As Refugee Action told us:

The hostile environment as a set of policies forces people into situations where they might be committing offences, and then into situations where they’re going to potentially have contact with the criminal justice system and with the police.

Some people seeking asylum or undocumented migrants become indebted to people smugglers, which creates opportunities for coercion. Coupled with the criminalisation of people’s immigration status, which deters them from reporting harm and accessing refuges or other places of safety, this can drive domestic abuse and sexual violence.³⁰⁷ We discuss this in more detail in Chapter 11.

Some community members mentioned the entitlement to take part in some educational courses, but noted that these did not

³⁰⁶ See for example the work of SWARM: www.swarmcollective.org/about-swarm; Boswell, C. (2024) *Work It Out: Advancing Migrant Workers’ Rights*, London: Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants, <https://jcwi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Work-It-Out-Advancing-Migrant-Workers-Rights-July-2024-2.pdf>.

³⁰⁷ Leon and Broadhead, *Understanding Migrant Destitution in Wales*.

strengthen existing academic qualifications and could not help with immediate quality of life. This meant that some were pushed into low-wage, manual, cash-in-hand work and were forced to work extra hours. Those with refugee status still faced barriers to work and were often told they lacked the necessary experience or qualifications, meaning that they were pushed into similar informal work.

Perversely, these migrant workers are unable to report being exploited because they either are worried about police discrimination or would be subject to immigration checks. But their circumstances can lead to police contact in two other ways. First, so-called immigration raids (including joint operations between immigration officers and the police) on businesses where people seeking asylum or undocumented migrants might be working see people criminalised for just trying to get by, and have been described as racist state intimidation.³⁰⁸ Our partners set out how the Home Office will then assess the earnings of anyone identified in this way and if they are over a certain threshold, they lose their accommodation and any state support. Immigration raids are often justified as necessary to address modern slavery and people trafficking, but in doing so they sideline and fail to address the basic needs of exploited workers.

Second, Migrants Organise commented that immigration checks are a direct barrier to support and therefore contribute to harm and a lack of safety:

You might be afraid to access the doctor or a domestic abuse support line or even the police ... because you’re afraid it might have some connection to your immigration status.

³⁰⁸ Migrants’ Rights Network (2024) ‘Immigration raids: An anatomy of racist intimidation’, 22 August, <https://migrantsrights.org.uk/2024/08/22/immigration-raids-anatomy-racist-intimidation>.

NRPF and NHS services

The lack of social security and ban on work must also be looked at alongside other hostile-environment policies. The NRPF policy extends to NHS services: under NHS charging rules, people with NRPF, who have been refused asylum or are undocumented migrants, pay a surcharge of £1,035 per year to access healthcare.³⁰⁹ This includes charges for NHS maternity care, including all antenatal, labour and delivery, and postnatal services. Although maternity services are deemed ‘immediately necessary’ and cannot be delayed or denied ‘due to charging policies’, charges start at around £7,000, rising to the tens of thousands for complex care, and unpaid debts of over £500 are reported to the Home Office. This puts the health of the mother and baby at risk and, in combination with the above policies, can push them into (further) poverty and destitution.³¹⁰

In Wales, the devolved government’s 2019 Nation of Sanctuary Refugee and Asylum Seeker Plan promises free healthcare and assessments for refugees, people seeking asylum and people whose asylum claim has been denied. Those without regular immigration status have to pay for some services, but debts can be written off if a person is considered destitute.³¹¹ Our workshop made it clear, however, that these charging policies are not well understood.

309 Freeman-Powell, S. (2024) ‘Nurse with two children faces debt as immigration health surcharge nearly doubles’, Sky News, 6 February, <https://news.sky.com/story/nurse-with-two-children-faces-debt-as-immigration-health-surcharge-nearly-doubles-13065429>.

310 Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists (no date) ‘RCOG position statement: Equitable access to maternity care for refugee, asylum-seeking and undocumented migrant women’, www.rcog.org.uk/about-us/campaigning-and-opinions/position-statements/position-statement-equitable-access-to-maternity-care-for-refugee-asylum-seeking-and-undocumented-migrant-women.

311 Mallet-Garcia et al., Responses to Migrants with Precarious Status in Cardiff.

Housing deprivation

As a migrant your needs for your children may not be met but you don’t ask for help for fear of social services getting involved. (community member)

The government is spending millions of pounds on contracts with corporations like Clearsprings or Serco or G4S to provide what our members report to us as misery accommodation, substandard services that neither provide the services that are promised for migrants and refugees, nor are an effective use of government resource. (Migrants Organise)

Upon arrival in the UK, people seeking asylum are often detained on an indefinite basis and subject to inhumane treatment, violating their human rights and having detrimental health impacts.³¹² Those with NRPF are not entitled to social housing. Families with children who have NRPF can sometimes receive accommodation support from children’s social services under Section 17 of the Children’s Act 1989, but they face significant gatekeeping and barriers to accessing this (*including being deterred for fear that it will lead to a visa being cut short*) and the accommodation standards are poor.³¹³ Approximately 50,000 people seeking asylum are currently housed in so-called ‘contingency accommodation’,³¹⁴ of which 95 per cent are people of colour.³¹⁵ Refugee Action argues that this is an example of structural racism and quasi-detention.³¹⁶

312 Runnymede Trust (2024) Racial Segregation and the Asylum System: The Case of RAF Wethersfield, London, https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/61488f992b58e687f1108c7c/6672ae7470a5f2ee8b459fcb_Racial%20Segregation%20and%20the%20Asylum%20System_%20The%20Case%20of%20RAF%20Wethersfield.pdf.

313 Project 17 (2019) Not Seen, Not Heard: Children’s Experiences of the Hostile Environment, London, www.project17.org.uk/systems-change/reports-briefings-consultations/not-seen-not-heard.

314 National Audit Office (2024) Investigation into Asylum Accommodation, London, www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/investigation-into-asylum-accommodation.pdf.

315 Refugee Action (2023) Hostile Accommodation: How the Asylum Housing System Is Cruel by Design, London, www.refugee-action.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Hostile-Accommodation-Refugee-Action-report.pdf.

316 Refugee Action, Asylum in the UK.

This type of accommodation includes hotels, former army barracks such as RAF Wethersfield, the Bibby Stockholm barge and Yarl's Wood immigration detention centre. These accommodations have been described as a violation of human rights, are extremely detrimental to people's health and are run by staff (often outsourced to private companies) who have been subject to sexual abuse allegations. It is also important to note how precarious asylum accommodation is: in 2023/24, being required to leave Home Office asylum accommodation was the fourth-largest driver of homelessness among young people (*affecting 3,360 people – 6 per cent of the total youth homeless population*).³¹⁷

During our workshops, people seeking asylum shared the inhumane, unsafe and unhealthy conditions that defined their asylum accommodation in Cardiff (*managed by Clearspring*). Some thought that the housing managers were corrupt and made deliberate attempts to tarnish public opinion of migrants. One community member explained how people seeking asylum were not provided with basic information such as how local recycling works, leading to piles of rubbish outside asylum accommodation

317 Centrepoint (2025) 'Stats and facts: Gathering data to understand youth homelessness', <https://centrepoint.org.uk/ending-youth-homelessness/what-youth-homelessness/stats-and-facts>.

festering with maggots and vermin. But in this example only one house (the only asylum accommodation) had this mess, and given that housing managers and the local authority chose to ignore it, it was perceived as a 'deliberate attempt to distort the image of asylum seekers as dirty and savages'. This was thought to be the trigger for abusive public behaviour, vandalism, etc., exacerbating lack of safety for the residents of the accommodation and potentially harassment by the police, which we expand on below.

Many spoke about how accommodation conditions caused tension between residents and people seeking asylum. For example, the rubbish, the overcrowding, the noise levels at times, and even becoming sick from the quality of food (or from expired food from food banks – which can also be culturally inappropriate),³¹⁸ were all causing stress and strain. Again, poorly managed housing was blamed for this, and while there was a temptation to call the police, people worried about the consequences and whether it might make their situations worse. Others added that accommodation workers often finish work in the early evening, so the police then become the go-to service for any issues after hours.

318 Power, M. (2022) *Hunger, Whiteness and Religion in Neoliberal Britain: An Inequality of Power*, Bristol: Policy Press.

We were also made aware of how inadequate housing situations became a barrier to using other services. GPs requiring a fixed address is a barrier to accessing healthcare for migrants without a fixed residence or who frequently move. This becomes an additional penalisation for women fleeing domestic violence.³¹⁹

Against this backdrop, it is inevitable that people seeking asylum worry about the unacceptable conditions in which their children are having to live: 'You feel depressed and that affects how you treat your child'. Yet they also felt unable to seek help due to the threat of social services taking their children away, or of immigration control or the police accusing them of neglect.

Community members made clear how living conditions and confinement can drive criminalised behaviour, particularly among younger people seeking asylum. As Refugee Action told us, 'they have very limited freedom of movement ... it's de-facto detention'. People seeking asylum are not allowed to leave their accommodation without permission, they have difficulty accessing WiFi, and they are unable to buy a TV licence or apply for a driving licence. In such a state of limbo, deliberate state-induced precarity forces individuals into survival strategies that can be deemed unlawful and make police contact inevitable:

319 Mallet-Garcia et al., *Responses to Migrants with Precarious Status in Cardiff*.

You're not busy doing anything but your mind is always busy [while waiting for an asylum decision]. (community member)

This was also reflected in our interview with 4Front in the context of discussing 'serious youth violence':

The immigration system comes into this, where people whose parents have no recourse to public funds makes it even harder for them to survive, make a living, access healthcare, all these kinds of things. So it's a situation of organised abandonment.

Similarly, Refugee Action recalled a conversation with a woman seeking asylum, who said of her son ‘If you’re going to ban people from full-time education and ban them from work ... what do you expect? He’s going to come into contact with unlawful behaviour and the police.’

Refugee Action also provided a powerful example of the impact of this on someone from Iraq seeking asylum in the UK:

He was telling me about the impact of the ban on unemployment for people seeking asylum. He started volunteering because he felt like the work ban, the lack of ability to do anything with his time, was causing him really serious mental health damage ... before he started volunteering, he would just go and sit on a bench in the city centre for hours at a time, just watching people go by. Because there’s nothing to do in the asylum hotel, there’s no money to do anything else,

and you’re not allowed to work to earn any money, so literally, you’re held in stasis and unable to participate in almost any aspect of everyday, ordinary social life in the UK. But then [he] was viewed by police as a potential threat and people wanted to understand why he was sitting on the bench, just staring for hours at the time, so he was made suspect effectively by the situation and then he’s treated in an extremely racially specific way, as a suspicious person in a public place.

Hateful rhetoric and discrimination

Politicians promoting hate should be illegal.
(community member)

The language and the treatment of people in the system is not as people, it’s as numbers or as threats. *(Migrants Organise)*

The community members who took part in our workshop in Cardiff drew a clear connection between hateful political and media rhetoric and their lack of safety. This was clear also in our interview with Migrants Organise, who told us how the hostile environment itself invited hate and violence from the wider public, culminating in the racist riots of summer 2024. This points directly to what has been called ‘reactionary democracy’,³²⁰ where migration has become a manufactured ‘crisis’ and used as a wedge issue to stoke division.

³²⁰ Runnymede Trust, *Creating a Crisis*.

The debate about racialised ideas of who is welcome, who belongs and who is 'deserving' further emboldens the far right, the impacts of which reach all communities of colour. For Migrants Organise, this is a purposeful racialisation of borders, national security and terrorism protocols, highlighting the linked struggles for all racialised people:

Last year there were riots in the UK that were a moment when a lot of things came to the front of national consciousness around racism in the media, racism by the state and the intersections of narratives around racism, migration, terrorism and crime ... So as these riots were happening, and now six or seven months after the riots, we see again this continuation of state racism through policies like Prevent, through border bills, through education laws, through chilling effects on the right to protest and speak out and take action, increasingly restrictive visa conditions and even just barriers to daily life and access to public institutions for people who aren't citizens of Britain. And these things are heavily contextualised by this racialised dynamic of who gets to belong and who doesn't. (Migrants Organise)

It's quite dangerous to paint people as criminals, threats, terrorists, as I think the riots bubbled out and showed last summer, right? ... Decades of state racism and exclusion, alongside media narratives that escalate this idea that people are a threat leads to violence, and as we're seeing, an escalation in far right mobilisation and activity. It's extremely dangerous. (Migrants Organise)

Community members drew a connection between racist rhetoric and public behaviour. They spoke in depth about the racist framing of 'Muslim grooming gangs' (often referred to as 'Pakistani grooming gangs' specifically) which pathologises and demonises Muslim communities, decentres survivors, and fails to address the harm of child abuse. Academics have disputed the suggestion that the abuse was overlooked because of the perpetrators' background, arguing that 'the contempt police officers often hold for minority groups was trumped in these instances by their contempt for these vulnerable young girls'.³²¹

It has since emerged that five women exploited by grooming gangs in Rotherham as children have said they were also abused by police officers at the time. One has said she was raped when she was 12 years old by

a police officer in a marked police car who told her he would hand her back to the gang if she did not comply. Others have spoken about how corrupt police officers worked alongside the grooming gangs. Despite 43 complaints being upheld against individual officers, with eight facing misconduct and six facing gross misconduct charges, no officers have faced criminal charges or lost their jobs in this scandal.³²² This shines a stark light on the lack of police accountability and demonstrates the failure of the police to offer any kind of protection to the survivors.

321 Tufail, W. (2015) 'Rotherham, Rochdale, and the racialised threat of the "Muslim grooming gang"', *International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy* 4(3): 30–43.

322 Thomas, E. and Green, R. (2025) 'Women abused as children by Rotherham gangs say police also sexually assaulted them', *BBC News*, 29 July, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cn9y0lvpyqvo>.

People seeking asylum and sexual violence

We have seen the recent proliferation of far-right racism that pathologises men seeking asylum as a sexual threat to white British women and girls. Groups such as the Pink Ladies are weaponising gender-based violence to promote anti-migrant rhetoric, framing Muslim communities as inherently incompatible with British values. These narratives, which are based on misrepresented and inflated data,³²³ depend on white supremacist anxieties about ‘racial purity’, portraying men of colour as threats to the cultural integrity of the nation. Such rhetoric is rooted in misogyny and exploits survivors’ experiences to justify xenophobia, linking nationalism, whiteness, and patriarchal control in a way that serves an exclusionary political agenda. As we will explore in chapter 11, this narrative ignores the serious and legitimate problem of gender-based violence, where it is most prevalent, and how to address it.

The idea that the people projecting these narratives are concerned about the safety of women and girls can be dismissed given the appalling attack on a British-born Sikh woman in Oldbury, West Midlands, in September 2025. The survivor was raped in public, in broad daylight, while her white male attackers told her ‘you don’t belong in this country, get out’. It demonstrates the danger of racist, anti-immigrant rhetoric to all people of colour and particularly the safety of women of colour.

Community members who took part in the workshop told us how the recent focus on these so-called grooming gangs directly led to Asian children being subject to violence at school. They also drew a connection between political rhetoric and discriminatory treatment by public agencies. They repeatedly told us how government agencies that were supposed to support people seeking asylum treated them very badly – leaving them on hold for hours and then cutting them off, not taking agreed steps following conversations, and generally lacking empathy.

Refugee Action told us that people they work with face:

very aggressive racial discrimination in their interactions with the Home Office ... officials scream at them, belittle them, talk down to them, condescend them ... they’re subject to repeated scepticism about the validity of their claims.

As one community member emphasised:

**The police protect the interests of UK nationals ... they’re there to protect the state not the people.
(community member)**

323 Dunford, D. (2025) ‘Fact-checking Farage: Are foreigners more likely than Britons to commit sexual offences?’, Sky News, 8 August, <https://news.sky.com/story/fact-checking-farage-are-foreigners-more-likely-than-britons-to-commit-sexual-offences-13407029>

This was also highlighted when community members were asked to recall interactions with the police. Attendees shared stories of having been victims of violence, theft or vandalism but receiving a response that led them to have negative views of the police. For some, reporting crime to the police as a person seeking asylum 'only leads to immigration questions' such as having to provide identification. The view was widespread that the 'police don't care about migrants' and 'any incidents reported by asylum seekers are not taken seriously'. As Refugee Action explained:

The UK is not a safe environment in which you might report harassment, abuse, racial violence that you experience, which, as we saw in the riots last summer, is widespread and incredibly dangerous, because you worry about having any contact with the police ... [asylum seekers] are concerned that

that information will somehow ... get back to the Home Office and prejudice their Home Office application, that they'll be seen as a troublemaker, effectively, that that will prevent them from ever attaining refugee status.

This view is clearly reflected by the experience of a survivor of domestic violence. She called the police when her abusive husband threatened to take their child away and send her back to her country of origin. Yet the police asked her to leave the flat as it was rented by the husband, leaving her homeless on the street with her child, putting them both at risk of further abuse.

One of our attendees told us that a police officer threatened to 'send [her] to Rwanda', in what is a clear weaponisation of political rhetoric and government policy. When she said that she was from Colombia and came to the UK for protection, the police officer repeated that they would 'send [her] back to [her] original country'. Community members also shared anecdotal interactions with the police who had threatened to split up their families and report them to social services. It was clear that abusive policing practices were enabled by hateful government rhetoric.

Surveillance

While community members had overwhelmingly negative views of the police based on their interactions with officers, they also expressed concern about non-human elements of policing, such as facial recognition, which provoked feelings of criminalisation and constantly being surveilled. Similar concerns were raised by Migrants Organise:

when we look at the way that certain tools of enforcement, again, are trialled on racialised communities and migrant communities, sometimes in different ways, and then extended to other parts of the population, you can really see the way that policing and immigration enforcement work almost in a very synergistic way.

Feelings of surveillance among migrant communities are validated by government data-sharing policy. In 2018, Liberty and Southall Black Sisters raised a ‘super-complaint’ against the police concerning how they share the data of victims and witnesses of crime (including rape, modern slavery and human trafficking) with the Home Office for immigration enforcement purposes. This has now been reformed so that data is shared for a limited time only.³²⁴

324 Liberty (no date) ‘Liberty and Southall Black Sisters’ super-complaint on data-sharing between the police and Home Office regarding victims and witnesses to crime’, www.libertyhumanrights.org.uk/issue/liberty-and-southall-black-sisters-super-complaint-on-data-sharing-between-the-police-and-home-office-regarding-victims-and-witnesses-to-crime.

Many attendees felt that their immigration status was being constantly policed even if it wasn’t by the police. One woman whose visa was due to expire said that she was afraid of encountering the police, while another felt surveilled by social services. Attendees explained how employers are reluctant to hire migrants due to the need to conduct extensive immigration document checks. Finally, while immigration checks on prospective tenants are not mandatory in Wales, people’s prior experiences in England pointed to the use of the ‘Right to Rent’ policy to police immigration status. There was a particular challenge and barrier to accessing healthcare, where community members were dissuaded from using the NHS for fear of detection and language barriers, as well as the charges mentioned above.

As Migrants Organise told us:

Immigration checks are increasingly intertwined into access to all these public services so, as a result, people are often afraid to access or turned away from the public support they need and are entitled to ... Different public officials are being asked to basically act as border guards. We talk a lot about border externalisation ... where certain countries sometimes put border controls outside the physical border of their own country into other places to supposedly prevent migration. But I think the flip side of this coin, and what we see a lot in Britain day to day here for the members we work with, is the border internalisation, where every time again, if you want to register for the GP surgery or for all support, you either feel that your immigration status is going to be threatened ... there’s a sort of securitisation of what it means to be a migrant in Britain.

There’s always someone checking on you. There’s always the sense that you’re doing something wrong because you’re here.

Finally, one community member told us that they had avoided registering their children in school for fear of information being shared with the Home Office, even though schools do not require immigration information to be provided. Evidence shows that this is a widespread fear among migrant parents.³²⁵

Solutions

People who maybe don’t have a place to sleep that night and then have to sleep in the park are then potentially exposed to other forms of harm ... if you give people enough to just live at baseline I think that would reduce a lot of the harm that we see people getting exposed to and so-called criminalised activities that people maybe wouldn’t be as likely to be around if they didn’t have to do that just to survive. (*Migrants Organise*)

Revoking the hostile environment

Revoking the hostile environment for migrants would remove the systemic barriers they face. It would ensure safe and legal pathways for migration, granting people seeking asylum the right to work, education, healthcare and secure housing. By challenging exclusionary policies and practices, such as limited access to public funds or indefinite detention, we centre dignity and equality. This would also provide migrants with long-term residency opportunities, pathways to citizenship and protections against deportation.

Community members unanimously thought that ending the hostile environment would reduce the challenges they faced and prevent police contact. In particular, reversing the current denial of the right to work was raised as an effective way to improve outcomes. Not only would this reduce levels

325 Mallet-Garcia et al., Responses to Migrants with Precarious Status in Cardiff.

of poverty and destitution, but it would also provide people seeking asylum with some daily structure and autonomy, and enable people to engage with and become part of the local community. People also spoke about the illogical nature of the current policy given the economic outlook and labour shortages in the UK.

It was also suggested that while asylum claims are being processed (which itself should be a much quicker process) people should be able to study and volunteer. This should include an employment skills booster programme so that when people are granted refugee status, they are more likely to find employment. This would require wider acceptance of international academic and work qualifications. It would also help to rectify the disparity that community members who took part in the workshop referred to between people seeking asylum from Global South countries and people from Ukraine, who were invited to work.

Related to this is the inability to access housing beyond asylum accommodation. Along with repealing the ban on work, people spoke about the need to access alternative forms of accommodation which could be afforded with sufficient income. Community members suggested the removal of prohibitive requirements such as deposits and guarantors. This should be done without separating family members, which community members also raised as a significant challenge.

Investment in community resources

Austerity is a huge driver of a lot of the division that we see around migration. So making sure that public services like the NHS, legal aid, for example, immigration advice, more broadly, domestic violence shelters and helplines, libraries, all of these public services are, I

think, more robust public services and community spaces for people to actually be ingrained in a community and not just sort of on the sidelines. (*Migrants Organise*)

Undoing the harm caused by the hostile environment – and the connected histories of racism, racial capitalism and colonisation – requires investment in community resources to support people’s wellbeing and socioeconomic outcomes. These resources should support the whole community but should include specialist services for migrant communities and people seeking asylum, to stop ‘othering’ and build cross-struggle solidarity.

This would provide access to safe spaces, skills training and support networks. It might include language classes, free immigration and benefits advice, legal aid clinics, cultural centres, and mental health services. Research highlights that providing accessible, welcoming spaces improves wellbeing and contributions to local communities. For example, community centres offering legal support, healthcare and recreational activities foster empowerment and mitigate the negative effects of isolation and social exclusion. Local authorities in Wales offer a ‘parallel welfare safety net’ for those excluded from social services due to their immigration status, but it is not supported by central government and is reportedly ‘dysfunctional’.³²⁶

Community members in Cardiff thought

there was an urgent need for investment in community support services for people seeking asylum. This would help to join up services and make them more holistic. While Cardiff is a City of Sanctuary and in theory should have strong networks and support mechanisms for people seeking asylum and refugees, this relies on a precarious charity and voluntary sector. Many community members mentioned local charities which provide support, activities and essential services to people seeking asylum and refugees, but commented that they need to be expanded both geographically and in terms of capacity. Community members made clear the need for centralised information and advocacy.

³²⁶ Leon and Broadhead, Understanding Migrant Destitution in Wales.

We were told that the landscape of support services for people seeking asylum was becoming increasingly difficult to navigate due to the complexities of legislation:

There are lots of different limitations on what organisations can and can't do and say in order to maintain and continue to be able to support people.. At the same time, we're seeing, again, a crackdown on speaking out, protest, increasing criminalisation of things associated with migration or supporting migrants or resisting harmful legislation. *(Migrants Organise)*

A specific issue was raised regarding the lack of legal aid and how the process is not currently working for people seeking asylum – something that has been identified in previous research as a major absence.³²⁷ Community members reported a backlog of legal aid provision, meaning that at times, the cost can fall to the individual. This is despite a reported lack of quality advice that recognises the needs of people seeking asylum.

³²⁷ Mallet-Garcia et al., Responses to Migrants with Precarious Status in Cardiff.

Trauma-informed care

People arrive [in the UK] with different traumas [which are] compounded by new traumas when arriving [due to the restrictions they face]. *(community member)*

Trauma-informed care for migrants considers their lived experiences, such as forced displacement, violence and the perilous journey to a new country. Many arrive with significant mental health challenges, including post-traumatic stress disorder (*PTSD*), anxiety and depression, compounded by the trauma of adapting to new environments and social exclusion. With 70 per cent of people seeking asylum to the UK coming from countries that experienced colonial rule or that have been destabilised by British foreign policy, contributing to the trauma these people were subjected to, the UK has a responsibility to ensure people have the trauma-informed care they need.³²⁸

Trauma-informed care emphasises understanding the long-term impact of these experiences and avoiding practices that may re-traumatise individuals, such as detention or aggressive policing. The focus is on fostering safety, resilience and community connections, helping migrants rebuild their lives while addressing the profound effects of trauma.

Our community members made clear that their mental health on arriving to the UK was a significant challenge given the hardship and difficult circumstances they were seeking refuge from, and this was exacerbated by the conditions they are forced to navigate once in the UK – low income, inhumane housing, poor quality food and, at times, exploitative labour.

The provision of appropriate therapeutic services was seen as a priority for community members. A number of community members reported not knowing how to access health services. Refugees reported better access to mental health

³²⁸ Refugee Action, Asylum in the UK.

support than people with other migrant statuses, and while people seeking asylum are entitled to secondary NHS care including mental health support, waiting lists are long and private therapy is unaffordable. Existing services were also deemed unfit or culturally inappropriate for the challenges that need to be addressed, and language was also raised as a barrier to getting appropriate – or any – support. While migrant charities may provide some therapy, community members taking part in the workshop made it clear that the levels of trauma among people seeking asylum and refugees are beyond the support offered.

One community member suggested having counsellors assigned to migrant accommodation who have expertise in dealing with trauma-related mental health challenges. This would provide continuity and immediate support. Women made clear the importance of having women counsellors due to the specific challenges that may have led women to flee their origin country. Community members also suggested group therapy sessions to share related experiences and help build community support and networks.

Gender-based violence



Introduction

Gender-based violence is defined as any act of violence that is directed against a person because of their gender or that affects individuals of a particular gender disproportionately.

It can be perpetrated by individuals – including, for example, domestic abuse and sexual assault. But it can also be both perpetrated and enabled by institutions and the state.³²⁹ for example, border enforcement and everyday bordering can be weaponised by abusers and can prevent survivors from accessing support.³³⁰ Government policies, such as No Recourse to Public Funds (*NPRF*), that wilfully push people into poverty, homelessness and desperation and that simultaneously criminalise sex work create the conditions for gender-based violence and workplace exploitation.³³¹

329 Council of Europe (no date) 'What is gender-based violence?', www.coe.int/en/web/gender-matters/what-is-gender-based-violence#:~:text=Defining%20gender-based%20violence%20against%20women&text=Gender-based%20violence%20refers%20to,orientation%20and/or%20gender%20identity.

330 Dos Ventos Lopes Heimer, R. (2022) 'Bodies as territories of exception: The coloniality and gendered necropolitics of state and intimate border violence against migrant women in England', *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 46(7): 1378–1406.

331 Scottish Women's Rights Centre (no date) "'No Recourse to Public Funds" and migrant women living with abuse', www.scottishwomensrightscentre.org.uk/resources/No-Recourse-to-Public-Funds---English.pdf; Decrim Now (no date) 'Violence against women: Decriminalisation is a women's rights issue', <https://decrimnow.org.uk/violence-against-women/#:~:text=Criminalisation%20exacerbates%20harm%20against%20sex,to%20police%20or%20immigration%20enforcement>.

One in four women in England and Wales have been raped or sexually assaulted since the age of 16, yet in 2024 there were only 71,227 rapes recorded by the police.³³² Five in six women who are raped do not report it.³³³ According to the latest figures, there are no statistical differences between ethnic groups in terms of surviving domestic abuse.³³⁴ However, data from the year ending March 2020 shows that adults of ‘Mixed’ and Black ethnicities are more likely to experience sexual assault.³³⁵ These figures are unlikely to reflect the full extent of cases: the Crime Survey fails to capture the experiences of marginalised groups, certain types of gender-based violence (such as psychological or economic abuse), and violence in contexts such as prisons, immigration detention centres and Home Office accommodation. In other words, ‘available data on [violence against women and girls] ... is therefore often an unreliable measure of the disproportionate harm faced by certain communities’.³³⁶

332 Stripe, N. (2021) ‘Sexual offences in England and Wales: Year ending March 2020’, Office for National Statistics (ONS), 18 March, www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/bulletins/sexualoffencesinenglandandwalesoverview/march2020.

333 Clark, E., Dean, K., Nicholson-Pallett, P., Samuel, M., Seshadri, S. and Ward, N. (2025) The Annual Audit 2025, Bristol: Women’s Aid, www.womensaid.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Annual-Audit-2025.pdf.

334 ONS Centre for Crime and Justice (2024) ‘Domestic abuse victim characteristics, England and Wales: year ending March 2024. Ethnicity’, 27 November, www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/articles/domesticabusevictimcharacteristicsenglandandwales/yearendingmarch2024#ethnicity.

335 Stripe, N. (2021) ‘Sexual offences victim characteristics, England and Wales: Year ending March 2020. Ethnicity’, 18 March, www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/articles/sexualoffencesvictimcharacteristicsenglandandwales/march2020#ethnicity.

336 End Violence Against Women (EVAW) Coalition (2025) A Mission to Halve Violence against Women and Girls (VAWG): A VAWG Sector Briefing on Metrics and Their Limitations’, London, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5f7d9f4addc689717e6ea200/t/683dcf2e83fd532f9bb0adb2/1748881198804/Halving+What+-Measuring+VAWG.pdf>.

Despite women and girls of colour facing multiple barriers to reporting,³³⁷ specialist services available for these women and girls have declined rapidly in recent years.³³⁸ Women’s Aid reports that from 2023 to 2024, 60.1 per cent of referrals to refuge services were rejected.³³⁹ Nine out of ten local authorities have no specific provision for women and girls of colour who have experienced such violence.³⁴⁰ ‘By and for services’ for women and girls of colour are crucial to providing culturally appropriate support, recognising the specific, intersecting barriers they face, and offering holistic support with specialised language and therapeutic expertise.³⁴¹

Efforts to tackle gender-based violence have predominantly focused on policing and criminal justice. But the College of Policing’s own research has found that ‘criminal justice sanctions for intimate partner violence have no consistent effect on subsequent offending’ and ‘prison sentences were associated with higher rates of recidivism 36 per cent of the time and had no effect in the remainder’.³⁴² Just 2.7 per cent

337 Gill, A.K. and Anitha, S. (2024) A Matter of Trust: Improving Police Responses to Violence against Women and Girls in Racially Minoritised Communities, Bristol: Economic and Social Research Council, www.bristol.ac.uk/media-library/sites/sps/news/2024/Amatteroftrust_Gill&Anitha_November2024.pdf; EVAW Coalition, A Mission to Halve VAWG.

338 Home Affairs Committee (2025) ‘Oral evidence: Tackling violence against women and girls: Funding’, HC 741, 6 May, London: House of Commons, <https://committees.parliament.uk/oralevidence/15843/pdf>; Imkaan (2025) ‘Written evidence submitted by Imkaan’, Home Affairs Committee, <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/140135/pdf>; Home Affairs Committee (2025) ‘Tackling violence against women and girls: funding’, HC 741, Third Report of Session 2024–25, London: House of Commons, <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/48755/documents/255530/default>.

339 Clark et al., The Annual Audit 2025.

340 Imkaan, Forward and Women’s Health & Equality Consortium (2013) The Road to Sustainability, London: Women’s Health & Equality Consortium, https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5f7d9f4addc689717e6ea200/t/61e6a5ebfa6e825a9f81e652/1642505708824/2013+_+Imkaan+_+Road+to+Sustainability+%255BSummary%255D.pdf.

341 EVAW Coalition (2020) ‘Submission to the Women and Equalities Select Committee Enquiry “Unequal Impact: Coronavirus and BAME People”’, July, www.endviolenceagainstwomen.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/EVAW-Submission-WESC-BME-Inequalities-Covid-Inquiry-July-2020-FINAL.pdf.

342 College of Policing (2015) ‘Criminal Sanctions to prevent domestic violence’, 17 September, www.college.police.uk/research/crime-reduction-toolkit/criminal-sanctions-prevent-domestic-violence.

of recorded cases of rape ended in a charge in 2024.³⁴³ Charge rates have recently increased, but they remain a drop in the ocean of endemic gender-based violence.

The extent of gender-based violence is so severe that solving the problem is entirely unachievable under a continuation of the current approach. Evidence suggests that initiatives aimed at preventing it from occurring in the first place are much more effective, especially if they tackle the root causes of the harm.³⁴⁴

Our workshop

We held the workshop for this theme at St Luke's Community Centre in Islington, North London, where we spoke with 19 local community members about their experiences of gender-based violence and interactions with the police and legal system. Almost 80 per cent had personally experienced gender-based violence, while

just over 25 per cent had previously had any interaction with the police. All community members who participated in the workshop were women; 58 per cent were from a Black, Black British or Black Caribbean background, 26 per cent were Asian or Asian British, 11 per cent were from 'Mixed' or 'Multiple' ethnic backgrounds, and 5 per cent described their ethnicity as 'Any Other White Background'.

We co-hosted this workshop with Imkaan, a representative body for Black and minoritised women-led organisations that provide vital, dedicated specialist services – including advice, advocacy, safe housing and mental health support – to women subjected to domestic abuse and sexual violence. Imkaan's network of more than 40 members has specific expertise on issues such as violence in transnational contexts, immigration-based abuse, forced marriage and so-called honour-based abuse and is able to respond holistically to women's needs and experiences, including racism and inequality.

343 Rape Crisis England & Wales (no date) 'Rape, sexual assault and child sexual abuse statistics', <https://rapecrisis.org.uk/get-informed/statistics-sexual-violence>.

344 Usdin, S., Scheepers, E., Goldstein, S. and Japhet, G. (2005) 'Achieving social change on gender-based violence: A report on the impact evaluation of Soul City's fourth series', *Social Science & Medicine* 61(11): 2434–2445, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2005.04.035>; Crooks, C.V., Jaffe, P., Dunlop, C., Kerry, A. and Exner-Cortens, D. (2018) 'Preventing gender-based violence among adolescents and young adults: Lessons From 25 years of program development and evaluation', *Violence Against Women* 25(1): 16 December, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801218815778>; Finnie, R.K.C., Okasako-Schmucker, D.L., Buchanan, L., Carty, D., Wethington, H., Mercer, S.L., Basile, K.C., DeGue, S., Niolon, P.H., Bishop, J., Titus, T., Noursi, S., Dickerson, S.A., Whitaker, D., Swider, S. and Remington, P. (2022) 'Intimate partner and sexual violence prevention among youth: A community guide systematic review', *American Journal of Preventative Medicine* 62(1): E45–55, [www.ajpmonline.org/article/S0749-3797\(21\)00418-9/abstract](http://www.ajpmonline.org/article/S0749-3797(21)00418-9/abstract).

Drivers of gender-based violence

Rigid gender norms ... societal attitudes [and] structural inequalities intersect with other forms of discrimination such as racism, xenophobia and classism to create a context where women and girls of colour are more likely to experience violence, and also less likely to be able to access support and protection. (Imkaan staff member)

Community members found the drivers of gender-based violence to be complex. Gender-based violence occurs within a patriarchal society that purposefully creates and exacerbates structural misogyny and misogynoir.³⁴⁵ It is intersectional, meaning that it manifests differently depending on race, religion, sexuality, class, ability, immigration status, gender identity and other factors.³⁴⁶

345 This term refers to the intersection of racism and sexism experienced by Black women.

346 Crenshaw, K., (1991) 'Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color', *Stanford Law Review* 43(6): 1241–1299, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039>.

Structural oppression relating to migration policies limits the ability of migrant survivors of violence against women and girls to access support, and can become a tool of abuse itself. (Imkaan staff member)

It is also important to consider the role of hostile immigration policies in creating a context in which gender-based violence can occur, as this cannot be divorced from the over-representation of women of colour among survivors of gender-based violence. Insecure immigration status creates situations of potential exploitation, where people facing domestic abuse or workplace exploitation have very limited options for escaping their situatio

Migrant women and gender-based violence

Migrant women and girls often do not report gender-based violence due to fears surrounding their immigration status.³⁴⁷ Under the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999, when survivors of gender-based violence report incidents to the police, their personal data can be shared with the Home Office for immigration enforcement, including deportation.³⁴⁸ In addition, the UK has made reservations to Article 59 of the Istanbul Convention, which in certain cases requires states to provide survivors of gender-based violence with autonomous residence where their residence status depends upon their spouse or partner. This reservation means that gender-based violence survivors in the UK do not have full protection if they feel unable to leave an abusive relationship due to concerns about the impact on their residence status.³⁴⁹ There is evidence that such concerns may be used as a tool for coercive control by perpetrators of domestic abuse: 92 per cent of migrant women and girls of colour surveyed by Imkaan reported that their perpetrator had used their immigration status against them and that it acted as a barrier to asking for help.³⁵⁰ In addition, migrant women subject to NRPF can be denied refuge accommodation if the refuge is funded by the government.³⁵¹

347 SafeLives (no date) Guidance for Multi-Agency Forums: Cases Involving Victims Who Are Black, Asian and Racially Minoritised, Bristol, <https://safelives.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/National-Scrutiny-Panel-Guidance-Black-Asian-Racially-Minoritised-clients.pdf>.

348 Home Office (2021) Home Office and Police Data Sharing Arrangements on Migrant Victims and Witnesses of Crime with Insecure Immigration Status, London, www.libertyhumanrights.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/HO_Review_Police_and_HO_data_sharing_migrant_victims-LTC2022030914543737.pdf.

349 Reis, S. (2020) Migrant Women and the Economy, London: UK Women's Budget Group, <https://wbg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/WBG-28-Migrant-Women-Report-v3-Digital.pdf>.

350 Imkaan (2020) The Impact of the Dual Pandemics: Violence against Women and Girls and COVID-19 on Black and Minority Women and Girls, London, https://829ef90d-0745-49b2-b404-cbea85f15fda.filesusr.com/ugd/2f475d_6d6dea40b8bd42c8a917ba58ceec5793.pdf; Centre for Women's Justice and Imkaan (2023) Life or Death? Preventing Domestic Homicides and Suicides of Black and Minoritised Women, London, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5aa98420f2e6b1ba0c874e42/t/655639d55be306e7dfa5c5/1700149727418/Life+or+Death+Report+-+November+2023.pdf>.

351 Scottish Women's Rights Centre (no date) "No Recourse to Public Funds" and migrant women living with abuse', www.scottishwomensrightscentre.org.uk/covid-migrant.

Poverty and destitution – both separately and in relation to migrant status – are key factors in potential exploitation and gender-based violence.³⁵² They create an urgent need for income and therefore opportunities for exploitation. This can increase the likelihood of police contact, which can itself be harmful, particularly for women and for anyone with insecure migration status.

Poverty is gendered: government policy disproportionately pushes women into poverty. An analysis by Women's Budget Group of social security cuts since 2010 shows that Black women have lost on average £2,498 and Asian women £2,212 each year, compared with £990 for white men.³⁵³ To prevent gender-based violence, we must address poverty as a site of harm and ensure that all women have access to basic needs such as non-exploitative work or income and housing.

Gender-based violence is not simply about individual men abusing women. It is a form of structural violence enabled by a patriarchal, economically unequal society which creates power imbalances and therefore coercive relationships. This points to the solutions to gender-based violence lying not in policing and more prosecutions, but rather in reducing the sites of potential harm, by ensuring that people have fair and equal access to housing, employment and healthcare.

352 Neitzert, E. (2020) 'Violence against women and girls and women's economic inequality', paper for the Commission on a Gender-Equal Economy, March, www.wbg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Violence-and-womens-economic-equality-1.pdf; Varlık, S., Akpınar, S., Akpınar, Ö. and Görünü, R.M. (2025) 'The unbreakable chain: The cycle of social inequality – violence, poverty and education', *Humanities & Social Sciences Communications* 12(1): article 871, www.nature.com/articles/s41599-025-05302-z; Close the Gap (2023) 'Women pay the price of gender inequality and poverty', Blog, 5 December, www.closesthegap.org.uk/news/blog/women-pay-the-price-of-gender-inequality-and-poverty; The Improvement Service (2019) Elected Member Briefing Note: The Gendered Nature of Poverty, Edinburgh, www.improvementservice.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0020/8345/em-briefing-gendered-nature-of-poverty.pdf.

353 Women's Budget Group (2024) Who Bears the Brunt? Intersectional Analysis of Social Security Cuts since 2010, London, www.wbg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Who-bears-the-brunt_WBG-June-2024-1.pdf.

How do the police interact with survivors of gender-based violence?

Community members participating in the workshop reported fearing, and thus avoiding, going to the police to report gender-based violence. There were a number of reasons for this, including a police culture of victim blaming, low prosecution and conviction rates, the historical relationship between the police and communities of colour, and a lack of trust in the police. In addition, the police were described by community members as ‘intimidating’. This, they said, leads to survivors of gender-based violence being increasingly isolated and silenced.

Police do not follow through with incidents, they just seem to report or write it down but there’s no action – no compensation, no justice.
(community member)

Where cases were reported to the police, there was strong consensus among community members, based on personal experience, that the police treated survivors of colour differently and in a discriminatory way. There was a view that the police view women of colour as ‘less than’ and ‘not a priority’. Community members believed this to be in part due to institutional racism and misogyny in police forces, leading to police officers not taking cases seriously or dismissing survivors’ claims. This was reported to be especially the case if the abuse

was psychological or emotional in nature. Indeed, following the BBC’s recent Panorama undercover investigation into the Met Police, hundreds of survivors have reported their experiences of police misogyny and racism, including a Black woman telling the BBC that reporting her rape while pregnant ‘was like being raped again’.³⁵⁴

There was also a strong feeling that police were unresponsive or slower to respond to gender-based violence against women of colour. These findings are reflected by figures published by Sistah Space, showing that 76 per cent of Black women do not report abuse, and 97 per cent do not feel that reporting abuse would lead to fair and supportive treatment.³⁵⁵

As a result, there was a widespread lack of trust in the police, with community members reporting that they would call the police only so that incidents were recorded and would not trust them ‘to do anything with’ the record

354 Kotecha, S. and Mowafi, M. (2025) ‘300 people tell BBC of police misogyny and racism’, BBC News, 22 October, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/ceq0jx7ljn9o>

355 Sistah Space (2025) ‘Experiences of domestic abuse support among African and Caribbean heritage Black women’, Sistah Space, <https://www.sistahspace.org/research>

I automatically think that if it were a white person calling the police, they would be treated differently.
(community member)

Incidents were reported of survivors of gender-based violence themselves being criminalised by the police, or not being offered appropriate services. Alongside this, migrant women were said to face a unique threat when dealing with the police, who reportedly ‘instil fear into people’ by, for example, threatening to take their children away. It was reported in 2018 that more than half of UK police forces were handing over victims of crime to the Home Office for immigration enforcement.³⁵⁶ Between April 2020 and March 2023, every police force across England and Wales referred victims of domestic abuse to Immigration Enforcement, leaving survivors nowhere to safely report gender-based violence without fear of immigration action.³⁵⁷³⁵⁸

Community members taking part in the workshop said that the police were presented as a ‘one-stop shop’ for dealing with all aspects of incidents of gender-based violence, when instead a non-punitive multi-agency response was needed. Participants felt strongly that police intervention was the last resort for women of colour facing gender-based violence.

I would have to be in crisis to call [the police] but I wouldn’t trust the outcome.
(community member)

356 Nye, C., Bloomer, N. and Jeraj, S. (2018) ‘Victims of serious crime face arrest over immigration status’, BBC News, 14 May, www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-44074572.

357 EAW Coalition (2023) ‘Calls for a firewall as new data finds all police forces share migrant victims’ data with Immigration Enforcement’, 9 November, www.endviolenceagainstwomen.org.uk/calls-for-a-firewall-as-new-data-finds-all-police-forces-share-migrant-victims-data-with-immigration-enforcement.

358 Montiel-McCann, C. and Julios-Costa, M. (2025) A Hostile Environment: Language, Race, Surveillance and the Media (phase two), London: Runnymede Trust, [https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/61488f992b58e687f1108c7c/688b6baccbeb036f9e0f022_A%20hostile%20environment_Phase%20Two_v6%20\(1\).pdf](https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/61488f992b58e687f1108c7c/688b6baccbeb036f9e0f022_A%20hostile%20environment_Phase%20Two_v6%20(1).pdf)

These experiences cannot be separated from police violence itself. Research by Refuge found that from 1 May 2022 to 1 May 2023, there were 1,124 cases of VAWG-related misconduct or gross misconduct committed by police officers and staff across the 26 police forces in England and Wales. This clearly shows that the police cannot guarantee safety for women.³⁵⁹

359 Bowdrey, A. (no date) 'Remove the rot: Refuge investigation uncovers magnitude of police force's failure to tackle violent misogyny by police officers and staff', Refuge, <https://refuge.org.uk/news/rremove-the-rot-refuge-investigation-uncovers-magnitude-of-police-forces-failure-to-tackle-violent-misogyny-by-police-officers-and-staff>.

The experience of Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller women

There is little evidence on the extent of gender-based violence in travelling communities, and rates of reporting to the police are low. However, research by Lime Culture suggests that 60–80 per cent of Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller women and girls have experienced gendered violence.¹

One of the most significant challenges in this context is the inaccessibility and inadequacy of support services, which are both difficult to reach and perceived as hostile and lacking in understanding.

'Services don't really understand communities ... [professionals are frequently either] totally against Travellers or just don't understand how to help them.' (The Traveller Movement)

66 per cent of domestic abuse support practitioners do not know how to engage with Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller survivors.² As a result, there is a deep mistrust among women in the community, many of whom are reluctant to seek help out of fear of being misunderstood, discriminated against or

further marginalised.

Some women from these communities who have left abusive relationships have encountered institutional barriers. Some refuges reportedly have discriminatory policies which only permit one Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller woman to stay at a time, due to stereotypical fears of 'family feuds'. This denies these women safety and reinforces the feeling that support services are neither safe nor welcoming spaces.

The consequences of this can be devastating for victims. We were told about how, tragically, a survivor of domestic abuse who had been assigned a social worker decided to take her own life after being told that if she died her children would be placed in the care of her mother rather than social services.

Addressing gender-based violence in Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller communities therefore requires more than just service provision. Communities need more culturally informed, empathetic and respectful engagement from service providers.

1 LimeCulture (2022) Working with Victims and Survivors from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Communities, Hale, Cheshire, <https://limeculture.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Working-with-victims-and-survivors-from-Gypsy-Roma-and-Traveller-Communities.pdf>.

2 The Traveller Movement (2024) '66 per cent of domestic abuse practitioners don't know how to engage with Gypsy, Roma and Traveller survivors', 10 March, <https://travellermovement.org.uk/news/66-of-domestic-abuse-practitioners-dont-know-how-to-engage-with-gypsy-roma-and-traveller-survivors>.

Solutions

The priority must be building long-term economic justice and ensuring the material needs of people belonging to marginalised genders are met, in order to create a baseline from which more targeted interventions are possible. Below are a series of community-based solutions that, in addition to these structural changes, can be considered as part of a holistic approach to tackling gender-based violence.

An ecosystems approach

I would rather try and prevent a situation [of police contact regarding GBV] with Black people happening – try and de-escalate [the situation]. (*community member*)

An ecosystems approach to tackling gender-based violence involves viewing harm and violence not as isolated, individual incidents but as something that can be prevented by addressing root causes holistically. This approach brings together non-policing public and social services to implement early interventions. The aim is to prevent women and girls from finding themselves in violent situations in the first place, rather than only responding with punishment after harm occurs.

Community members felt that well-funded, early interventions that work with women and girls to raise their self-esteem and become more familiar with their rights would be an effective way to achieve this. They felt that it was also important to engage men and young boys in anti-misogyny education. The value of bystander programmes was highlighted too. Overall, participants felt that it was the responsibility of everyone in society to prevent gender-based violence.

In addition, community members felt that strengthening women's economic independence by decreasing barriers to employment, among other factors, would also be effective in reducing gender-based violence.

Addressing harm and achieving justice and accountability

A variety of community-based interventions could address harm and achieve justice and accountability for survivors of gender-based violence, including prevention-focused education, mutual aid, restorative justice, and funding for community-based crisis intervention and gender-based violence support services.

Community members highlighted the need for a trauma-informed approach to supporting survivors of gender-based violence. Trauma-informed practice recognises the multifaceted impacts of trauma and the complex paths to healing and recovery. It works to integrate this awareness into every aspect of gender-based violence services, shaping the interaction between service providers and survivors to create a more supportive and effective healing environment. While it was not discussed as part of the workshop, transformative justice was seen by our interviewees as a key solution.

Perpetrator intervention work which aims to challenge the beliefs, attitudes and behaviour of people who have harmed others was also discussed. Community members said that they might feel uncomfortable with the idea of instigators of gender-based violence receiving support but they simultaneously recognised that it was important. There was a rich discussion on the use of restorative justice practices that could help perpetrators to understand how their actions had impacted others and to take responsibility in a way that emphasises healing and growth, while also giving those affected by harm a space to be heard.³⁶⁰ On the other hand, there were concerns about how using restorative practices in the context of gender-based violence might perpetuate the power imbalances associated with this type of harm and potentially re-traumatise the survivor. However, academic research highlights the benefits of using restorative justice in

³⁶⁰ Newbury, A. (no date) 'Restorative justice and young people's offending: Project details', University of Brighton, <https://research.brighton.ac.uk/en/projects/restorative-justice-and-young-peoples-offending>; Catch 22 (2023) 'Understanding violence in young people: Explanations, approaches and resources', 6 September, www.catch-22.org.uk/resources/understanding-violence-in-young-people.

sexual violence cases. These include restoration, desistance, rehabilitation and community safety, as well as empowering survivors and giving them agency and justice in a way that the traditional criminal legal system fails to do.³⁶¹ While this provides support in principle for these approaches, studies also note the importance of specialist training for facilitators, education and public awareness of restorative justice.³⁶² Community members in our workshop also emphasised this need.

Funding for specialist support services

Community members emphasised the importance of well-funded specialist services led by and for Black and minoritised women, D/deaf and disabled women, LGBTQ+ survivors, and people belonging to marginalised other groups. These services are trusted lifelines, rooted in an understanding of intersecting forms of oppression, cultural and linguistic accessibility, and trauma-informed, community-based practice.

It is important to critically reflect on how some of these services are positioned in relation to the criminal legal system. This positioning risks reproducing the same barriers to access and trust that community members raised in our workshop. Some services also exclude trans survivors or take punitive stances toward sex work, undermining their accessibility to all.³⁶³ Specialist services led by and for marginalised survivors can themselves face systemic racism and discrimination, as well as barriers created by

361 Gavin, P., Kite, C., Porter, C., McCartan, K. and Cawley, P. (2024) 'Restorative justice in cases of sexual violence: Current and future directions in the UK', *Issues in Criminal, Social, and Restorative Justice* 26(4): 393–410, www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10282580.2024.2330375?src=recsys#abstract; Restorative Justice Council (no date) 'Restorative justice and sexual harm', <https://restorativejustice.org.uk/restorative-justice-and-sexual-harm#:~:text=Restorative%20justice%20can%20help%20survivors,it%20reduces%20reoffending%20by%2014%25>.

362 Gavin et al., 'Restorative justice in cases of sexual violence'.

363 Magić, J. and Kelley, P. (2018) 'Barriers to accessing services for LGBT+ victims and survivors', *SafeLives*, 9 April, <https://safelives.org.uk/news-views/barriers-to-accessing-services-for-lgbt-victims-and-survivors>.

underfunding and restrictive central and local government commissioning practices. This limits their capacity to provide accessible, culturally specific and trauma-informed support for those most in need.

Gender-based violence support will be most effective when resources are directed towards services that support all survivors, particularly those at the sharpest edge of structural inequality, including racialised, trans and undocumented survivors, sex workers, disabled and neurodivergent people, and others whose needs have long been neglected or deliberately marginalised.

Public awareness-raising and attitudinal change

Interventions that aim to transform gender norms and inequalities, particularly at an early age, have proven effective in reducing the harms of gender-based violence. Research shows that a low level of support for gender equality is the strongest predictor of attitudinal support for gender-based violence.³⁶⁴

Attitudinal change can be achieved in a number of ways. Educational and awareness-raising campaigns that target men and boys and help community members to 'unlearn' harmful norms can be a successful way of preventing gender-based violence. Community members felt that schools were the best place to intervene, and that it was important to involve parents, as what is taught in schools could be different to what young people hear at home. It was also felt that men and boys needed to be challenged on their behaviour and beliefs to break what was perceived to be a cycle of men abusing women.

Community members expressed support for a series of consistent, holistic awareness-raising campaigns at national,

364 ANROWS (Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety) (2018) *Australians' Attitudes to Violence against Women and Gender Equality: Findings from the 2017 National Community Attitudes towards Violence against Women Survey (NCAS)*, Sydney, <https://d2rn9gno7zhxqg.cloudfront.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/05062144/anr001-NCAS-report-WEB-1019.pdf>.

local and interpersonal levels, seeing them as important tools for promoting cultural change and raising consciousness.

However, it is important to note that the evidence base is limited regarding the effectiveness of awareness-raising campaigns alone.³⁶⁵ These initiatives often attract support and funding because they are more palatable, easier to implement and more visible than interventions that address root causes of violence such as poverty, housing precarity or immigration insecurity. The priority should be structural solutions such as ensuring people's material needs are met, including access to safe housing, income security and support services. Attitudinal work should be complementary to, but never a substitute for, the systemic interventions needed to genuinely prevent and reduce gender-based violence.

365 Fellmeth, G.L.T. (2013) 'Educational and skills-based interventions for preventing relationship and dating violence in adolescents and young adults: a systematic review', *Campbell Systematic Reviews* 9(1): i-124, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.4073/csr.2013.14>.

Mental health



Introduction

We can't treat mental health as an isolated issue when the very conditions people are living in are making them unwell. (Coalition for Racial Equality and Rights, CRER)

The UK government has declared that mental health is a priority on a par with physical health. Despite this, resources remain insufficient to address the growing need in the context of widening inequalities.³⁶⁶

There are approximately 1.7 million people currently on waiting lists for mental health support in England.³⁶⁷ The wait can be up to eight times longer than for those with physical health conditions – it can stretch to two years, during which time symptoms worsen.³⁶⁸

³⁶⁶ Streeting, W. (2025) 'Mental health: Expected spend for 2025–26, Statement UIN HCWS562, UK Parliament, <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-statements/detail/2025-03-27/hcws562>.

³⁶⁷ NHS Confederation (2025) 'NHS waits not significant driver of health-related inactivity', 2 May, www.nhsconfed.org/news/nhs-confederation-responds-analysis-suggesting-nhs-waits-not-significant-driver-health-related.

³⁶⁸ Rethink Mental Illness (2025) 'New analysis of NHS data on mental health waiting times', 21 February, www.rethink.org/news-and-stories/media-centre/2025/02/new-analysis-of-nhs-data-on-mental-health-waiting-times.

This chapter focuses on mental health in Glasgow, a city which consistently ranks among the lowest in Europe for life expectancy³⁶⁹ and among the highest for drug-related deaths,³⁷⁰ suicide³⁷¹ and hospitalisations for mental health crises.³⁷² Alongside these individual issues, poor mental health is also a political crisis that is created and exacerbated by systems of social, economic and structural inequality, neglect, and control. We explore how issues discussed throughout this report – including insecure housing, hostile migration policies and other structural inequalities – do not just impact mental health outcomes but create the conditions in which distress, trauma and crisis become inevitable for many.

We begin by examining the causes of poor mental health in Glasgow. We then consider how policing and criminalisation intensify harm for those experiencing mental ill health, especially for working-class people of colour, who are among those hit hardest both by the drivers of mental ill health and the punitive systems that respond to it. Finally, we highlight the work that communities are already doing to build alternatives and ask what it would take to fund, sustain and scale up these efforts in a way that prioritises care over control.

369 The Times (2025) 'Scots have lowest life expectancy in Western Europe', 1 April, www.thetimes.com/uk/scotland/article/scots-have-lowest-life-expectancy-in-western-europe-says-health-chief-pcfwxgnn6.

370 National Records of Scotland (2025) 'Drug-related deaths in Scotland, 2024', <https://www.nrscotland.gov.uk/publications/drug-related-deaths-in-scotland-2024/>

371 BBC News, 'Slight rise in Scottish suicide rates'.

372 Glasgow City Health and Social Care Partnership (GCHSCP) (no date) 'GCHSCP demographics and needs profile', www.glasgow.gov.uk/article/6372/Health-and-Wellbeing.

Our workshop

For this theme we hosted a workshop in partnership with the Coalition for Racial Equality and Rights (CRER), a Scottish anti-racism charity which campaigns to tackle racial inequality and discrimination through research and strategic policy lobbying, and See Me, Scotland's national programme to end mental health stigma and discrimination.

We were joined by community workers, youth workers, mental health professionals and activists whose work spans mental health and racial justice in Scotland. Community members represented local organisations including Girl Dreamer, a community of young women of colour working towards transforming society; Sharpen Her: The African Women's Network, an organisation which supports African women to achieve their goals in education, employment and entrepreneurship; Romano Lav, a community-based organisation which works with local Roma communities; ILFA (Information and Learning for All) Project, which collaborates with communities in Scotland to build a more inclusive future; Learning Link Scotland, a third-sector organisation supporting adult learning initiatives; South East Integration Network (SEIN), a membership organisation for voluntary groups and community organisations; and the Mental Health Foundation, a charity dedicated to preventing poor mental health. We were also joined by Nina Abeysuriya, a mental health practitioner specialising in young people's mental health, with expertise in decolonising therapy and anti-racist mental health care, and we received written contributions from Exhale. Group CIC, a non-profit organisation which works to create safe spaces for QTPOC+ (queer, trans and intersex people of colour).

We explored the causes of poor mental health in Glasgow, how the police interact with people experiencing mental health difficulties, and what is needed to prevent mental health distress, particularly among communities of colour.

Drivers of poor mental health in Glasgow

People are experiencing a constant layering of pressures – poverty, racism, insecure housing, immigration status. Mental health is not a medical issue in isolation. It’s a social, political, and economic one. (SEIN representative)

Social determinants

Community members consistently emphasised that people do not become mentally unwell in a vacuum – they are made unwell by the harmful systems and structures in which they exist. In particular, they identified intergenerational deprivation, poverty, homelessness and poor-quality living conditions as core drivers for poor mental health outcomes in Glasgow, a city with a history of extreme inequalities in health and wellbeing, even compared with cities with similar levels of deprivation. Community members referred to this as the ‘Glasgow Effect’ (although this term has been contested as an overly simplistic one which leaves some of the adverse outcomes for local communities unexplained). A representative from CRER explained the ‘Glasgow Effect’ as a:

public health phenomenon where, in the context of stark social deprivation, you get a vicious cycle of poor outcomes that become compounded by social, culture and environmental factors – like people’s reliance on unhealthy habits and coping mechanisms. This contributes to an even greater public health crisis, where outcomes are significantly worse than what is observed in equally deprived cities.

Indeed, 23 per cent of people in Glasgow have common mental health problems (such as anxiety and depression), compared with 17 per cent of Scotland overall; life expectancy is 2.5 and 4 years lower, and healthy life expectancy 4 and 7 years lower, for women and men respectively, than in the rest of Scotland; drug-related deaths are twice as common; and suicide rates are also higher.³⁷³ These differences cannot be explained by poverty alone. Public health experts point to a range of socioeconomic and political factors, including Glasgow’s history of colonialism and deindustrialisation, and socioeconomic policy decisions at local and UK government levels.³⁷⁴

There is limited research on how this phenomenon impacts communities of colour living in the city. However, community members noted that working-class communities of colour and migrant communities, who are disproportionately impacted by socioeconomic inequalities, are often marginalised in discussions and interventions. Statistics show that 43 per cent of children of colour were living in relative poverty in Scotland between 2020 and 2023, compared with 20 per cent of White British children. While this rate is generally declining for white children, it had risen by 14 percentage points since 2013–16 for Black and Brown children.³⁷⁵

Community members added that as well as these mental health-damaging social and material inequalities that damage mental health, communities of colour and migrant communities are impacted by racialised factors – namely hostile immigration policies and institutional racism, which further increase precarity, alienation and social exclusion – despite the city’s self-image as ‘progressive’ and ‘welcoming’.

A 2025 survey by the University of Glasgow suggests that experiences of racial discrimination continue to rise in

373 GCHSCP (2021) Glasgow City Health and Social Care Partnership: Demographics Profile June 2021, Glasgow, https://glasgowcity.hscp.scot/sites/default/files/publications/Demographics_Report_0.pdf.

374 Walsh, D., McCartney, G., Collins, C., Taulbut, M. and Batty, G.D. (2017) ‘History, politics and vulnerability: Explaining excess mortality in Scotland and Glasgow’, *Public Health* 151: 1–12.

375 Understanding Glasgow (2024) ‘Ethnic minority households’, www.understandingglasgow.com/childrens-indicators/poverty/child-poverty-priority-groups/ethnic-minority-households.

Scotland across healthcare, policing, housing, employment, education and other key aspects of public life.³⁷⁶ Community members echoed these findings, speaking about experiences of racism ranging from discrimination and dismissal when seeking support to violent physical attacks in the street, with particular emphasis on the racist riots in summer 2024. All of these experiences further contributed to mental health challenges.

The Runnymede Trust's Against Serious Violence Reduction Orders report explored the mental health impact of policing, including clear evidence of a relationship between the use of high-discretion police stop powers and a series of harmful social consequences. This includes detrimental health and mental health outcomes, including anxiety, self-harm and increased suicide attempts among individuals whom the police have stopped and searched, making clear that a policing response to the mental health crises often makes matters worse.³⁷⁷

Attendees made it clear that mental health crises were particularly prevalent and concerning among people with experience of migration to the UK, as well as children and young people.

376 University of Glasgow (2025) 'UofG-led survey shows that racial discrimination continues to rise in Scotland', 10 March, www.gla.ac.uk/news/newsheadlines/2024/uofgledsurveyshowsthatracialdiscriminationcontinuesoriseinscotland.html.

377 Runnymede Trust, Against Serious Violence Reduction Orders.

The hostile environment

Across the UK, refugees and people seeking asylum are five times more likely to experience poor mental health than the general population, with heightened risk of depression, PTSD and anxiety.³⁷⁸ Community members agreed that experiences of racism, the trauma of migration and 'cultural displacement' all contribute to poorer mental health for migrants of colour who have recently arrived in Glasgow. A representative from Sharpen Her: The African Women's Network described how:

The different immigration statuses people have, and their interactions with the system, impacts their mental health. There are institutional challenges that permeate every aspect of people's lives.

A representative from the ILFA Project echoed this, highlighting the anxiety and instability faced by families who are awaiting Home Office decisions:

Migration ... it's a long process filled with waiting and anxiety. What I've seen in families is that people struggle because they don't always know what's going to happen tomorrow.

378 Mental Health Foundation (2025) The Mental Health of Asylum Seekers and Refugees in the UK, London, www.mentalhealth.org.uk/explore-mental-health/publications/mental-health-asylum-seekers-and-refugees-uk; Tribe, R. (2002) 'Mental health of refugees and asylum seekers', *Advances in Psychiatric Treatment* 8: 240–247; Fazel, M., Wheeler, J. and Danesh, J. (2005), 'Prevalence of serious mental disorder in 7,000 refugees resettled in Western countries: A systematic review', *The Lancet* 365: 1309–1314; Tempany, M. (2009) 'What research tells us about the mental health and psychosocial wellbeing of Sudanese refugees: A literature review', *Transcultural Psychiatry* 46: 300–315.

A representative from the Mental Health Foundation noted that refugees and people seeking asylum were traumatised not only by the conditions that pushed them to migrate but also by their living conditions in the UK. This is particularly severe for undocumented people and people in the process of seeking asylum, who, as we explored in Chapter 10, are stripped of autonomy on arriving to the UK – not allowed to work, often housed in inadequate and unsafe accommodation, and surveilled during every interaction with the British state and society, including third-sector organisations and support services:

Because of hostile policies, people don't have knowledge on how to work with people seeking asylum and refugees. They don't understand that people have triggers and trauma. People enter services expecting support – but instead, they are re-traumatised by the experience. (Mental Health Foundation representative)

Children and young people

Community members described how factors such as school-based discrimination, language barriers and intergenerational poverty are contributing to deteriorating mental health among young people of colour. Speaking about the mental health crisis among Roma children and young people and their families, a representative from Romano Lav explained:

Our children have a big problem with stress, anxiety, and depression ... And when the children are suffering, the parents get depressed too. But there's so much stigma. They don't want to go to the doctor because some might people say they're crazy and say they need to be sent to an institution ... Unfortunately there can be a lot of misunderstanding and shame in the community about mental health. We would like this to change and feel that mutual understanding between Roma and non-Roma people will really help this.

Nina Abeysuriya described how issues around identity and belonging are central to young people's distress:

Belonging and identity is something that's come up with every young person I've worked with. It's the dislocation of being British-born and a person of colour. Or coming from another country and experiencing the hostile environment. And then there's the lack of therapists who understand that. Young people are left to carry the burden on their own.

The Mental Health Foundation representative noted the intergenerational impact of racialised mental health when children internalise the marginalisation experienced by their parents:

Children look at their parents – how they live, how they’ve been treated unfairly, how they’re living in poverty and can’t work. They compare themselves to their peers and feel excluded. That sense of exclusion is a mental health issue in itself.

Community members agreed that mental health services for children and young people in Glasgow are underfunded and overstretched, waiting lists are long, and there is a lack of services which meet the specific needs of young people of colour. The same is true at a national level – demand for child and adolescent mental health services in Scotland exceeds capacity, with some young people waiting over a year for a first appointment. For those with complex trauma or language needs, access is even more limited.³⁷⁹

Harm caused by mental health services

Our services aren’t neutral. They’re built within the same systems that harm us. (Nina Abeysuriya)

The period of austerity since 2010 has seen dramatic cuts to Scotland’s public services, especially in health and social care, where rising demand has left local mental health services stretched beyond capacity. Community members described how the most marginalised groups are hit hardest, with equalities and specialised services the first to be scrapped in times of economic uncertainty. A lack of accessible, culturally appropriate and preventative mental health support for communities of colour in Glasgow leaves those most impacted with the least support.

379 Scottish Government (2020) ‘Child and adolescent mental health services: National service specification’, 2 February, www.gov.scot/publications/child-adolescent-mental-health-services-camhs-nhs-scotland-national-service-specification.

Community members described widespread cultural incompetence, long waiting lists and retraumatising encounters with the NHS, local authorities, schools, charities and social service – institutions that are supposed to promote safety and wellbeing actively reproducing the systems of inequality and neglect that create mental distress in the first place. Many community members shared stories of healthcare professionals, counsellors and teachers dismissing or failing to understand the lived experiences of people of colour when they seek support, creating a dynamic where people either engage with support services only to be further harmed or avoid seeking help altogether.

Across the UK, people of colour face significant disparities in mental health care access, experience and outcomes. People of colour are less likely to be referred to talking therapies such as cognitive behavioural therapy, counselling or trauma-informed care, and more likely to be offered medication or subjected to coercive interventions, including involuntary hospitalisation, restraint and police involvement, during mental health crises.³⁸⁰

Community members added that on the rare occasion when services do engage with issues relating to racism, migration

trauma or community-specific forms of harm, it is often at a superficial level – through diversity training or tokenistic representation rather than meaningful engagement and structural change.

The over-reliance on medication and coercion reflects a broader pattern of pathologising distress in marginalised groups while failing to address socio-political and economic determinants such as racism, poverty, housing insecurity and immigration status. An equitable mental health system must go beyond inclusion: it requires a fundamental shift in how mental health is conceptualised, delivered and accessed, with investment in culturally safe, community-led and anti-racist models of care that prioritise consent, autonomy and holistic wellbeing.

380 NHS Race and Health Observatory (2023) ‘NHS “talking therapies” review identifies barriers in accessing care’, 1 November, <https://nhsrho.org/news/nhs-talking-therapies-review-identifies-barriers-in-accessing-care>; Hua, P., Fenton, S.-J., Freestone, M., Bhui, K. and Shakoor, S. (2025) ‘Ethnic disparities as potential indicators of institutional racism in acute adult mental health care’, *SSM – Mental Health* 8: 100478; Lawrence, V. McCombie, C. Nikolakopoulos, G. and Morgan, C. (2021) ‘Ethnicity and power in the mental health system: Experiences of White British and Black Caribbean people with psychosis’, *The British Journal of Psychiatry* 218(3): 150–157.

Problematic drug use

Many community members argued that problematic drug use in Glasgow is driven by the conditions in which people live. A representative from Girl Dreamer emphasised:

Problematic drug use is linked to the lack of social capital we have ... Drugs in themselves aren't inherently bad. The root cause is escapism from our realities.

This was echoed by the SEIN representative, who described the breakdown of intergenerational support, isolation and institutional neglect as key drivers of addiction and mental ill health. CRER's representative commented:

We need to ask why drug use becomes a form of coping. It's about people managing pain, poverty, trauma – especially when no other support is available.

Our interview with Release explored the fact that problem drug use is seemingly more prominent among white communities, but that this may be based on poor-quality data that may blur a more nuanced picture. Release told us:

we have clients from the Bangladeshi community in East London who cannot disclose their drug use to their family ... and there will be a whole group who aren't walking through our door for legal advice ... there is also a heightened risk as a person of colour walking through the doors of a drug treatment centre, that's not just putting you at risk from your social connections but also from policing ... there's something about being more cautious and private about their drug use ... but criminalisation means we haven't got a good picture of this.

Release also told us that people who are dependent on drugs can't get access to mental health services with people effectively being blocked from accessing care until they deal with their drug use, despite the fact that 'people are using drugs to deal with the mental health crisis!'

Indeed, poor mental health and problematic drug use are inextricably linked. Nearly three-quarters (72 per cent) of adults entering drug treatment in Scotland report a mental health treatment need. Yet more than one in five (22 per cent) of these individuals receive no support for that need, revealing the depth of the gap in services.³⁸¹ However, as we heard from Release, drug use can be a rational response to trauma:

some people are using drugs to deal with emotional pain, it's a way of self-medicating ... but not everybody who uses drugs has a mental health issue, and not everybody who has a mental health issue is using drugs ... people are complex.

Glasgow continues to bear the brunt of this crisis. Of 1,172 people who died due to drug misuse in Scotland in 2023, 21 per cent were in Glasgow despite the fact that only 11.5 per cent of Scotland's population lived in the city.³⁸² The age-standardised rate of drug-related deaths in Glasgow between 2019 and 2023 was 44.6 per 100,000, compared with 23.6 per 100,000 in Scotland overall. People living in the most deprived areas of Scotland are more than 15 times more likely to die from drug-related causes than those in the least deprived – a clear indicator of how socioeconomic status shapes risk and access to care.

³⁸¹ Office for Health Improvement and Disparities (2024) 'Adult substance misuse treatment statistics 2023 to 2024: Report', 28 November, www.gov.uk/government/statistics/substance-misuse-treatment-for-adults-statistics-2023-to-2024/adult-substance-misuse-treatment-statistics-2023-to-2024-report.

³⁸² National Records of Scotland (2024) 'Drug-related deaths in Scotland in 2023', 20 August, www.nrscotland.gov.uk/publications/drug-related-deaths-in-scotland-in-2023/#.

Community members acknowledged that Scotland has made progress in developing public health approaches to addiction, such as safe consumption rooms and needle exchanges. However, they emphasised that such services often fail to reach racialised communities. Although white people are over-represented in treatment services, this should not be taken to mean that communities of colour are unaffected by drug use. Rather, stigma around addiction, language barriers and lack of culturally appropriate services create profound access barriers.³⁸³

CRER noted:

We hear that certain communities aren't engaging. But that's a misread – services aren't accessible, they're not built with these communities in mind. And when people do reach out, they're often retraumatised or misunderstood.

Therefore, this is not simply a question of investing in and scaling up existing services. It is about resourcing different models of care – ones that don't replicate the harms of state systems.

383 The Scottish Public Health Observatory (2023) 'Ethnic minorities: Specialised databases', 25 June, www.scotpho.org.uk/population-groups/ethnic-minorities/data/specialised-databases.

Harm caused by policing

Policing is built to maintain the status quo. The idea that they're here to make you feel safe doesn't reflect how most people of colour experience the police. (Girl Dreamer representative)

As in England and Wales, the police in Scotland act as first responders to a range of social issues. Figures show that 73 per cent of incidents attended by Police Scotland are non-crime-related, particularly mental-health-related incidents.³⁸⁴

Community members described a system that waits for people to reach breaking point, then responds with surveillance, coercion, pathologisation and punishment. This includes stop and search, detention under the Mental Health Act, and prioritising police intervention in situations where someone is experiencing acute emotional or psychological distress.

The consequence of this is the over-policing of communities of colour and disproportionate use of force. According to INQUEST casework and monitoring, the number of deaths in custody³⁸⁵ where mental health-related issues are a feature is nearly two times greater for people of colour than for other groups.³⁸⁶ A painful example of this is the death of Sheku Bayoh, a Black man who died following restraint by five police officers while experiencing a mental health crisis in 2015 in Kirkcaldy, Scotland. Bayoh's death has become a rallying point for anti-racist campaigning in Scotland, revealing the ways in which Black men in crisis are more often met with policing rather than care.³⁸⁷

384 BBC News (2022) 'Three-quarters of Police Scotland incidents not crimes, report says', 30 June, www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-62001092.

385 We use the term 'death in custody' here with recognition that public inquiries are ongoing.

386 Inquest, 'BAME deaths in police custody'.

387 Sheku Bayoh Inquiry (no date) 'An independent public inquiry set up to examine the events surrounding the death of Sheku Bayoh, the subsequent investigation and whether race was a factor', www.shekubayohinquiry.

Black people, especially Black women, are disproportionately detained under Section 136 of the Mental Health Act. In 2021, nearly 58 per cent of Black people detained for mental health reasons in Scotland lived in the most deprived 20 per cent of postcodes – compared with 36 per cent of White Scottish individuals. Black and mixed-heritage people are more likely to be deemed a threat to ‘self and others’ rather than simply to themselves – a finding that illustrates the pathologisation of Black people’s distress as a threat to be contained rather than requiring care.

There has been a recognition among police forces and policymakers that the police are not best placed to deal with mental health emergencies, and a move away from this approach. His Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary in Scotland acknowledges that ‘Police carrying out welfare checks for other agencies could be detrimental for people experiencing poor mental health and may lead to escalation and the criminalisation of people who are unwell’.³⁸⁸ Meanwhile, police forces across England and Wales are rolling out the ‘Right Care, Right Person’ approach, in which police no longer respond to mental health calls unless there is seen to be a threat to life.

Though the removal of police in these situations is welcome, this has not come with the investment in public services that is needed instead.³⁸⁹ Plans to transfer

388 HM Inspectorate of Constabulary in Scotland (2023) Thematic Review of Policing Mental Health in Scotland, Edinburgh, www.hmics.scot/media/0ltfrgsz/hmics20231018pub.pdf.

389 Liberty (2023) ‘Liberty and thirty organisations and individuals call for a rethink of the UK’s approach to responding to mental health crises’, 31 October, www.libertyhumanrights.org.uk/issue/liberty-and-thirty-organisations-and-individuals-call-for-a-rethink-of-the-uks-approach-to-responding-to-mental-health-crises.

responsibilities for restraining and detaining individuals in crisis from police officers to NHS staff have sparked widespread concern among medical professionals, who warn that this is both dangerous and misguided. This highlights broader systemic failures: the medicalisation of mental health crises without adequate resources, the criminalisation of mental illness, and the reluctance to address structural issues in both healthcare and policing.³⁹⁰

Community members at our workshop reflected on the lack of other options. A representative from SEIN described a moment where a man with a history of trauma arrived at the SEIN office experiencing suicidal ideation, speaking limited English. When she called a local refugee charity for help, she was told: ‘There’s not much we can do – you’re going to have to call the police’. She reflected, ‘He’d fallen through every crack in the support we try to create ... it’s a symptom of the society we live in’.

Community members were sceptical about efforts to train or diversify the police. Several pointed out that anti-racism and mental health training is often voluntary, shallow and tokenistic. One community member explained that while they had facilitated hundreds of engagement sessions with police, ‘it’s seen as a tick-box exercise. They come, they listen, but they’re not really interested in changing anything.’ Ultimately, community members argued that policing cannot be ‘reformed’ to serve people in a mental health crisis because its primary purpose is not care but control. As Nina Abeysuriya pointed out, ‘Despite that, if one of us has a psychotic episode on the way home from this round-table, we’d call the police. That’s the scary thing.’

390 Campbell, D. (2025) ‘Plans for NHS staff to restrain those in mental health crisis “dangerous”, medics say’, Guardian, 26 May, www.theguardian.com/society/2025/may/26/plans-for-nhs-staff-to-restrain-those-in-mental-health-crisis-dangerous-medics-say.

Solutions

We don't just need new services – we need a new system. (SEIN representative)

Community members emphasised the need to move away from current mental health responses that are shaped by punishment and neglect, towards a system grounded in care, justice and community. They noted that in many cases, the solutions already exist. The challenge is funding them, scaling them and centring those who have historically been excluded from decision-making.

Tackling root causes

The system isn't broken. It works – to protect some people and exclude others. That's why our services feel inadequate: they were never built with us in mind. (Nina Abeysuriya)

Community members agreed that we must recognise and treat state violence, poverty and racism as determinants of mental ill health. They consistently emphasised that the most effective way to deal with mental ill health is prevention rather than cure. This means addressing the structural conditions that create mental distress rather than relying on medical and therapeutic interventions. Highlighting the limits of interventions which target individuals rather than systems, Nina Abeysuriya shared:

All the projects I work on now are based on early intervention. But we're asking a child of colour to self-regulate in an environment of systemic racism. That's not care – that's outsourcing responsibility.

Responding to the question 'What kind of community infrastructure would help people before they ever reached crisis point?', community members offered clear answers rooted in community, accessible non-coercive models of care. Examples of culturally relevant, trauma-informed support based on an understanding of the social and material context in which mental health exists included the peer-led mental health hubs provided by Taraki, which works with Punjabi

communities to provide evidence-led approaches to promoting mental health;³⁹¹ Healing Justice Ldn, which hosts a range of alternative community-led public health programmes through a disability justice and anti-oppression lens, from somatic healing to martial arts; and Coming Home, a project by Maslaha, a free, confidential counselling service provided by Muslim therapists for Muslims and their families impacted by police, prisons and criminalisation.³⁹²

Community members noted the importance of more informal systems of community-based support, such as outdoor wellbeing networks like Boots and Beards³⁹³ and Black Girls Hike,³⁹⁴ as well as counselling and education – for example, African Women's Network training local community members to act as mental health responders, using workshops and group healing spaces that normalise discussion of mental health without clinical labels, stigma or risk of criminalisation. Other alternatives included mutual aid networks, which a number of community members helped to facilitate during lockdown or in response to the racist violence of summer 2024, providing food, safety, solidarity and emotional support. People also spoke about the importance of culturally rooted practices, ancestral wisdom and Indigenous healing strategies, which have been sidelined and dismissed in favour of medicalised approaches.

However, even where interventions such as drug rehabilitation or safe consumption rooms exist, they often fail to reach people of colour, who are more likely to face criminalisation than care. Tackling root causes means ensuring harm reduction services are accessible, safe and community-led, designed by and for those most affected. This includes centring racial justice, rejecting coercive models and addressing the systemic barriers that shape how support is made available, and who for.

As Nina Abeysuriya observed, 'There are amazing things that exist that are desperately underfunded – and people are being exploited just trying to keep them going'. But while some groups are doing powerful work, they cannot fill the void created by decades of institutional neglect.

391 Taraki Wellbeing (2025) Programme Evaluation: Mixy and Chill, https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/636d61c98b907f0843f55773/67cac69bb1cc5fcc09f3d02_Programme%20Evaluation%20-%20Mixy%20and%20Chill.pdf.

392 Maslaha (no date) 'Coming Home', www.maslaha.org/project/coming-home.

393 Boots and Beards website, www.bootsandbeards.co.uk.

394 Black Girls Hike website, www.bghuk.com.

Funding

Community members agreed that those who hold the wealth should fund the work. As one community member simply put it, ‘Tax the rich’. Another community member expanded on this to say ‘billionaires, corporations, the state – they’re making record profits while we’re begging for basic care’.

Many people are turning to voluntary sector organisations outside of the formal NHS system. However, community members cautioned that such support risks replicating the harms of the state – especially when those organisations are themselves underfunded, white-led, not trauma-informed and reliant on short-term government grants. SEIN’s representative described how funding cycles push organisations into depoliticised service delivery, warning that ‘When funding comes through the state, it often comes with strings attached. Services end up reproducing the same carceral logics. We need money, but we also need autonomy.’

The result of current funding models is a fragmented landscape where support is inconsistent, under-resourced and often disconnected from those most in need. People representing community groups stressed that not only must funding be increased but power and resources must be redistributed – away from coercive systems and towards the people doing the work on the ground. For community members, this could be achieved through new mechanisms: participatory budgeting, independent grants led by communities and a shift away from short-term project funding towards long-term investment in support systems. This would help us to move away from systems where support is conditional and surveilled and does nothing to challenge the structural causes of mental ill health.

CRER offered a view of what a more just funding ecosystem might look like, recognising that public money is important but must come with meaningful anti-racist accountability:

We need a shift in how funding decisions are made – not just anti-racist principles, but a willingness to take a holistic approach to what targeted services offer. It’s not about targets, about the quality of care people receive.

CRER also suggested that more consistent funding streams – potentially routed through intermediary bodies with racial justice expertise – could help to avoid the pitfalls of ad hoc project grants which leave many groups stuck in survival mode.

Policy and legislative change

Community members also pointed to key changes needed at the legislative level. These included:

- repeal or reform of the Misuse of Drugs Act, to stop criminalising people and instead treat substance use as a public health issue
- overhauling the Mental Health Act, especially powers such as Section 136 which enable police to detain people experiencing mental distress – a power disproportionately used against Black communities
- explicit recognition of racism and poverty as public health emergencies, allowing institutions such as Public Health Scotland to frame interventions accordingly and fund community-led solutions in line with need

Community members stressed that on its own, legal and policy reform is insufficient and can only tinker round the edges of the issues at hand. Without movements to hold institutions to account and shift power into the hands of communities, reform risks reproducing existing inequalities and injustices.

Building collective power

Community members proposed an alternative to the current system that is structured around individualised, medicalised responses to mental distress – collective care rooted in solidarity and resistance to the unjust and unequal status quo.

SEIN spoke of the importance of emotional energy: ‘There’s a lot of pain in our communities. These round-tables can feel like a release. But we need to channel that into something – a network, a movement. Otherwise, it just sits in people.’

The SEIN representative went on to highlight the need for networks and movements, not just services: ‘We need to channel the energy we feel in these rooms into action. That’s how we protect each other – not by waiting for the state to save us.’ They argued that harm reduction is not simply about mitigating damage within the system but about building a world where people’s social, material and cultural needs are met. This includes reclaiming public space, creating Black- and POC-led healing collectives, and demanding reparative justice at every level.

Reimagining harm prevention



This report has set out how police and punitive responses to harm are ineffective in reducing or preventing it and instead actively exacerbate social inequalities.

Policing is both a symptom of perceived threats to social order – arising from social inequalities and structural racism – and a tool used to maintain that order, often by upholding the hierarchies and injustices that created those conditions in the first place. A focus on criminalisation and incarceration further entrench cycles of harm and poverty. As we have discussed, this happens within a historical context of colonial policing practices which have targeted and controlled marginalised communities and continue to do so.

We need anti-racist solutions that break this cycle.

Policymakers seemingly understand the need to prevent harm before it occurs.

But the rhetorical and legislative shift to prevention, for example through the Prevent Duty and the Serious Violence Duty, rather than identifying and addressing root causes of harm, merely outsources and expands forms of policing to other public agencies. Through these mechanisms, teachers become counter-terror police, doctors become border enforcement officers and social workers become intelligence agents. This does not prevent harm but actively creates it: this form of prevention widens the scope of what is deemed criminal and justifies the further expansion of racialised surveillance and policing.

Drivers of criminalised harm

Below we consolidate the drivers of policing and harm that our community members identified in our workshops:

- ‘Serious youth violence’: poverty, lack of opportunity, loss of community, experiences of trauma
- Punitive approaches to children in schools: police in schools, school exclusions, Prevent Duty
- The criminalisation of homelessness: housing supply, gentrification, mental health
- Border regime/hostile environment: housing deprivation, language barriers, labour exploitation, hateful rhetoric and discrimination, over-surveillance
- Gender-based violence: misogyny and hostile state policies, state-enforced poverty, deprivation of basic material needs
- The criminalisation of mental health: structural determinants, immigration system, lack of children’s support, drug laws
- We have demonstrated the ways in which police are not the appropriate agency to respond to these forms of harm, which are largely borne of survival, and how policing instead exacerbates their drivers.

Non-reformist reforms

The intention of this report is not to provide policy recommendations that tinker round the edges of harmful systems. However, we cannot overlook the immediate need for communities to be safe from harm. We therefore suggest the following non-reformist reforms are enacted with urgency. Non-reformist reforms are policy, practice or legislative changes that reduce the power and reach of harmful systems – such as policing – while building capacity for alternative approaches. These reforms aim not to legitimise or expand existing systems but to create conditions for their transformation or dismantling.

- recognise the intersection of racism and poverty as public health emergencies, and take the necessary steps to ensure everyone has a minimum level of income
- abolish the Serious Violence Duty and instead mirror the Cure Violence Global approaches
- remove all School Based Police Officers, and invest in teachers and pastoral services in schools
- enact an immediate moratorium on school exclusions
- abolish the Prevent Duty and wider mandatory reporting policies
- end the No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) policy and wider hostile-environment policies to remove barriers to the welfare safety net and end the exclusion of people with NRPF from domestic violence refuges
- immediately sign up to Article 59 of the Istanbul Convention, providing equal support and protection for all migrant women who are survivors of domestic abuse regardless of their resident status
- overhaul the Mental Health Act, especially powers such as Section 136 which enable police to detain people experiencing mental distress, and invest significantly in free, quality mental (and physical) healthcare for all
- repeal or reform of the Misuse of Drugs Act to stop the criminalisation of people in crisis and instead treat problematic drug use as a public health issue
- reverse the decision to create 14,000

prison places by 2031 and instead spend the £2.3 billion on rehabilitating people currently in prison and harm prevention initiatives

- reverse the decision to recruit a further 13,000 police officers and instead invest the funds in non-police, community-based harm prevention initiatives
- establish the new National Oversight Mechanism called for by INQUEST – an independent public body responsible for monitoring recommendations arising from inquests, inquiries, official reviews and investigations into state-related deaths
- redistribute wealth through tax reforms, pay reparations for colonialism and climate injustice, and redistribute that money to community safety initiatives, public services and social security

While these policy and legislative changes would be a step forward, in isolation they are insufficient to tackle the scale of the problem. Keeping us safe also requires substantial legislative change to shift from criminalising behaviour to public-health-led approaches.

Decriminalisation

In line with evidence and recommendations from public health experts, legal scholars, drug and health experts, and community advocates, we call for an immediate and wide-ranging overhaul of punitive laws that criminalise poverty, marginalisation and survival.³⁹⁵

Drug laws remain a key driver of structural racism and a vehicle for disproportionate policing. Drug policy reform should start with the legalisation of cannabis for recreational use with immediate effect.³⁹⁶

However, cannabis legalisation is only a starting point, and we recognise that the harm of higher classifications of drugs is worsened by their criminalisation. We therefore call for the decriminalisation of all illicit substances for personal use. We must, in the immediate term, make drug use less harmful by investing in public health interventions including safe consumption rooms, overdose prevention centres, heroin-assisted treatment, opioid substitution treatment and widespread availability of Naloxone. These reforms should then be extended to regulate all illicit substances for personal use.

³⁹⁵ Bioethicists and Allied Professionals Against the War on Drugs (2021) 'Racial justice requires drug policy overhaul', *American Journal of Bioethics* 21(4): 4–19, <https://ora.ox.ac.uk/objects/uuid:33a824bb-6b1a-4df9-988f-6082aadcca8a/files/r4m90dv73h>.

³⁹⁶ Release (2024) *Regulating Right, Repairing Wrongs: Exploring Equity and Social Justice Initiatives within UK Cannabis Reform*, London, www.release.org.uk/sites/default/files/pdf/publications/Regulating-Right-Repairing-Wrongs-UK-Cannabis-Reform_Release.pdf.

The broader system of criminalisation targets forms of survival and resistance shaped by inequality, racism, misogyny, xenophobia and poverty. We therefore call for the decriminalisation of a wider range of laws that punish marginalised people for meeting basic needs or existing outside of sanctioned norms. This includes:

- sex work, particularly as undocumented women and trans people are over-represented in the industry and criminalisation fuels gender-based violence, exploitation and lack of access to justice
- ‘illegal working’ and immigration offences, which expose migrants – especially those without documentation – to dangerous, exploitative labour conditions and systemic violence
- Right to Rent laws which deputise landlords as immigration enforcement agents and deepen housing insecurity for migrants and racially minoritised communities; instead we must provide housing for all
- ‘survival crimes’ linked to poverty and exclusion, such as shoplifting, fare evasion, homelessness-related offences (e.g. rough sleeping), non-payment of council tax and fines for TV licence evasion – penalties which push people deeper into cycles of debt, surveillance and criminalisation

Ultimately, these reforms must move toward a regulated, health-led approach to all aspects of survival, rooted in racial, economic and gender justice. Decriminalisation is not simply about removing laws, it is about dismantling the systems that punish marginalised people for the unjust conditions they are forced to endure. In addition, keeping us safe requires full investment in non-policing, community-based harm reduction solutions.

Community-based solutions

The political decisions of successive governments have prioritised profit over people and have enacted wide-ranging cuts to public services and legislative changes.

This has widened economic inequality and created a hugely unstable and uncertain context, in which incidents of harm and violence are met with a heavy police and punitive response that is ineffective and creates further harm.

Taken as a whole, policing does not reduce harm in communities – it creates and sustains it. Policing was never designed to effectively address issues such as ‘serious youth violence’, school misbehaviour, homelessness, the harms of the border regime, gender-based violence and mental health crises. In stark contrast, many studies have demonstrated that a range of independently evaluated, non-policing, community-led interventions can dramatically reduce harm and violence in a variety of contexts.³⁹⁷ To break the cycle, we must reorient to models of harm prevention and address the root causes of social inequality.

³⁹⁷ Sharkey, P., Torrats-Espinosa, G. and Takyar, D. (2017) ‘Community and the crime decline: The causal effect of local nonprofits on violent crime’, *American Sociological Review* 82(6): 1214–1240; Slutkin, G., Ransford, C.L. and Decker, R.B. (2015) ‘Cure violence: Treating violent behavior as a contagious disease’, in Maltz, M.D. and Rice, S.K. (eds) *Envisioning Criminology: Researchers on Research as a Process of Discovery*, Cham: Springer International; Roman, C.G., Klein, H.J. and Wolff, K.T. (2018) ‘Quasi-experimental designs for community-level public health violence reduction interventions: A case study in the challenges of selecting the counterfactual’, *Journal of Experimental Criminology* 14: 155–185; Center for Global Healthy Cities (2021) *Advance Peace Stockton: 2018–20 Evaluation Report*, Berkeley, CA, http://healthycities.berkeley.edu/uploads/1/2/6/1/12619988/advance_peace_stockton_eval_report_2021_final.pdf; Skogan, W.G., Hartnett, S.M., Bump, N. and Dubois, J. (2008) *Evaluation of CeaseFire-Chicago*, <https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/227181.pdf>; Sakala, L., Harvell, S. and Thomson, C. (2018) *Public Investment in Community-Driven Safety Initiatives*, Washington, DC: Urban Institute; Nugent, W.R., Williams, M. and Umbreit, M.S. (2003) ‘Participation in victim–offender mediation and the prevalence and severity of subsequent delinquent behavior: A meta-analysis’, *Utah Law Review* 11(1); Bell, M.C., Beckett, K. and Stuart, F. (2020), ‘Investing in alternatives: Three logics of criminal system replacement’, *UC Irvine Law Review* 11(5): 1291–1326.

In Chapter 6, we set out a range of alternative models which have proven effective at addressing social harms: transformative justice, reparative justice, public health approaches, restorative justice, trauma-informed practice, healing justice, and harm prevention and community safety beyond policing. Each of these offers a promising contrast to the ineffective and harmful traditional policing and punishment models.

Funding

Police funding was cut from approximately £19.1 billion per year in 2010/11 to approximately £16.6 billion in 2014/15, in real terms. However, overall police funding for 2025/26 sits at £19.9 billion, representing real-terms increases of 4.1 per cent since 2010/11 and 19.9 per cent since 2014/15.³⁹⁸ The government's latest spending review committed to increasing police core spending power by 2.3 per cent in real terms every year to 2028/29.³⁹⁹ This is paid for by central government and the police precept which forms part of households' council tax, which is expected to rise.⁴⁰⁰ The Northern Police Monitoring Project has raised concerns about this given substantial cuts to local authority budgets since 2010/11 which are yet to recover⁴⁰¹ and the lack of public support for increasing the police precept.⁴⁰² Given the conclusions of this report, we call for the reallocation of the increased police budget to non-policing alternatives to address harm at its root causes.

398 Home Office (2025) 'Police funding for England and Wales: 2015 to 2026', 13 August, <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/police-funding-for-england-and-wales-2015-to-2026/police-funding-for-england-and-wales-2015-to-2026>.

399 HM Treasury (2025) 'Spending review June 2025', www.gov.uk/government/publications/spending-review-2025-document/spending-review-2025-html.

400 BBC News (2024) 'Council tax to rise to fund up to £330m for police', 17 December, www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c62w79ggk9vo.

401 Institute for Government (2025) 'Performance Tracker 2025: Local Government', <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publication/performance-tracker-2025/local-services/overview>

402 Northern Police Monitoring Project (2025) 'Resisting increases in police funding: Money that could be better spent on communities', Manchester, www.npolicemonitor.co.uk/uncategorized/precept.

Our community research workshops and interviews raised concerns about how community safety work should be funded. People spoke about the difficulty of obtaining funding for charities or community organisations.⁴⁰³ Where there was little other choice, often community safety work was funded by state departments and was in turn co-opted to reproduce the harms that the state was already creating.

We therefore require the democratisation of public funding allocation to the community level. Whether funding is granted by charitable trusts, national government or local authorities, it should be:

- long term (over ten years)
- unrestricted (to be spent on what the community wants to spend it on, without outside intervention)
- ring-fenced (a percentage should be mandatorily spent on non-policing, community safety initiatives – this should be in line with the model of commitment given to the triple lock on pensions)

403 Mwale, T. and Williams, P. (2023) *Harm to Healing: Resisting Racial Injustice in the Criminal Legal System of England and Wales*, London: 4Front Project, <https://img1.wsimg.com/blobby/go/22f0bfe3-9a97-45c1-b4b1-ca5ffc212747/downloads/Harm%20to%20Healing%20Report%20-%20Temi%20Mwale%20%2B%20Patrick%20.pdf?ver=1701453260149>.

Conclusion

This chapter has provided the space to reimagine our systems to promote sustained and effective racial justice.

This has required holistic thinking about how to prevent harm, abuse and police contact. We cannot achieve real safety, accountability and harm prevention by implementing one of these initiatives without the others. For example, widespread community restorative justice programmes would be unsustainable without the broader transformative and reparative justice required to stem the flow of harm caused by structural inequalities. It requires a widespread redesign of our public safety systems and the social and economic factors that create unsafety. If we achieve this, we will see:

- care and safety for all survivors of abuse, as well as spaces for healing
- self-accountability when people cause harm, and the opportunities to right wrongs
- collective, community accountability for failures to support individuals, with the power and agency to put this into practice
- transformed broader social and material conditions that enable harm
- reparations for current and historical global and systemic violence, including the redistribution of wealth and power

From crisis to collective liberation: A vision of the future



This report has shown numerous alternative ways beyond policing that our society could respond to harm.

Throughout the chapters, we have highlighted not only the intersecting forms of violence disproportionately experienced by working-class communities of colour, but also the imagination, resistance and everyday practices of care that already exist in these communities.

What emerges clearly is that the state is not a neutral actor. It plays an active role in producing harm, shaping systems that deny people the ability to meet even their most basic human needs. From racist policing and welfare sanctions to hostile immigration policies and exclusionary housing and education systems, the state surveils, disciplines and punishes those most in need of support. In response, we must urgently develop strategies that address people's needs in the present, while working toward structural change.

Our vision is of a transformed world where communities are liberated from all forms of oppression. We aim for a society in which we expend our energy on more than just surviving cycles of harm and violence – one where all people can live, heal and thrive. This vision is shaped by long legacies of anti-racist organising in the UK and beyond, and is carried forward by those who continue to fight for safety, dignity and joy in the present.

How we get there

First, we must ensure that everyone's fundamental needs are met.

This means guaranteeing safe, secure and affordable housing; nutritious food; access to quality healthcare; free and inclusive education; economic security; freedom from state violence; access to justice; and the freedom to move, express oneself and participate in public life.

We must also work to build new systems that reduce harm and create meaningful safety – holistic infrastructure that goes beyond meeting our most basic needs and managing crises to actively prevent harm and crisis from occurring in the first place, address their root causes, and create the conditions for collective safety and healing.

Finally, we must commit to the work of imagining and building a truly transformed society – one that prioritises justice, people and the planet. This means envisioning and creating systems that meet not only our material needs but also our cultural and social needs, and that enable everyone to thrive and prosper in the fullest sense. In this transformed world, robust infrastructures of care ensure that people are no longer forced to rely on punitive state systems and that no one falls through the cracks.

This work relies on building broad-based solidarity across sectors, movements and experiences of oppression. It demands sustained investment in the knowledge, power, leadership and creativity of those who have historically been marginalised, pathologised and policed. Activists and grassroots organisers, artists and storytellers, healers and caregivers, educators, researchers, advocates and legal practitioners, policymakers, funders – each plays a vital role in dismantling harmful systems and creating new ones rooted in care, justice and collective liberation. Guided by a shared purpose and vision, we can begin to build a world where everyone not only survives, but thrives.

Appendix: Methods

In this research we used a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative methods to ensure that our findings were robust and credible.

Polling

We commissioned Survation to poll 5,405 adults in the UK between 2 and 22 January 2024. The data was weighted to the profile of all adults in the UK aged 18+, with boosts applied to target those who identified their ethnic group as Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, 'Other Asian', Black Caribbean, Black African, or 'Other Ethnic Group'. This is a common technique in quantitative research or polling where ethnicity is a focus, to reach a sample size large enough for statistical accuracy.

The survey asked a range of questions exploring attitudes to policing and to social interventions and community-based alternatives to criminalised behaviour. It explored what action the public would like to see in response to a number of real-life scenarios, such as incidents of poor behaviour in schools, addiction and homelessness, and mental health crises. The survey presented options for both policing responses and social interventions, at different levels of severity. Responses were shared with a wide range of stakeholders in a round-table discussion which allowed us to contextualise and better understand our analysis.

Community workshops

Following the survey, we conducted seven in-person workshops with community members.⁴⁰⁴ A pilot workshop in Birmingham was used to shape the themes of the subsequent six workshops. These were conducted between November 2024 and April 2025, one each in Bristol, Manchester, Glasgow and Cardiff and two in London. In these six workshops, we spoke to 136 community members with lived experience of

⁴⁰⁴ We use the term 'community member(s)' rather than 'participant(s)' to highlight each person's connection to the community and their active role in shaping the research.

policing and harms related to the theme of the respective workshop. A majority were people of colour, but this was not a restricting criteria. The themes were ‘serious youth violence’, education, housing and homelessness, policing the border, gender-based violence, and mental health.

The Runnymede Trust is committed to working in a less extractive way in our research practices, and we partnered with community organisations to support workshop design, recruitment and facilitation. These organisations were already embedded in the communities we were engaging with. This enabled us to conduct the research in close collaboration with community members in order to make sure that the work was sensitive to their needs, priorities and lived realities. Our engagement work with these organisations is ongoing, and we are committed to ensuring that the communities we work with feel empowered and valued.

The organisations we partnered with were:

- London (‘serious youth violence’ workshop): 4Front and Poetic Unity
- Manchester (education workshop): No Police in Schools campaign
- Bristol (housing and homelessness workshop): Mwanzo Project and Black South West Network
- Cardiff (policing the border workshop): Bawso
- London (gender-based violence workshop): Imkaan
- Glasgow (mental health workshop): Coalition for Racial Equality and Rights and SeeMe⁴⁰⁵

⁴⁰⁵ At the suggestion of our partners in Glasgow because of concerns about consultation fatigue, this workshop did not include community members. Instead it consisted of racial justice and mental health organisations in the city.

The workshops employed a world cafe method, designed to encourage group dialogue with community members taking part in tables of four to six. The research team opted to record the discussions using written notes rather than audio recording and transcribing the sessions, in order to foster a safe environment where community members felt comfortable speaking freely. Researchers were guided on how to best do this to ensure accuracy. Safeguarding was a priority, and we provided information sheets and asked every community member to sign a consent form, along with a signposting leaflet with contact details for local support services for people of colour.

Each workshop was structured around three discussion points. After each, space was provided for facilitators to feed back to community members and for a short group discussion.

First, groups discussed how the police interacted with those who were experiencing or had experienced the thematic issue of the workshop. The second discussion point was what the drivers might be for criminalised behaviour relating to the thematic issue, and what might be implemented locally to reduce or minimise these drivers. To focus this discussion, community members were asked to fill out a short survey at the start of the workshop asking which factors were driving such behaviour locally. The responses given most frequently were then given to small groups to discuss. The final discussion point revolved around an existing harm prevention initiative. These were chosen based on an evidence review by the research team, looking at both national and international examples. A facilitator for each table provided an overview of the initiative and how it had been implemented. Community members then discussed whether it would work locally and what the challenges might be.

Interviews

We also conducted semi-structured interviews with partner organisations to gain a deeper and more granular understanding of how each theme was experienced locally. As part of this phase of the research, we also discussed the challenges facing each organisation in order to provide an account of

- (1) the types of support available to communities who are vulnerable to police harm and
- (2) the precarity and continued threat that organisations providing this support are facing.

These interviews were recorded and quotes are attributed throughout the report. The organisations we interviewed were:

- 4Front
- Black South West Network
- Coalition for Racial Equality and Rights
- Imkaan
- Kids of Colour
- Migrants Organise
- Poetic Unity
- Refugee Action
- Release
- Mwanzo Project
- The Traveller Movement

We greatly appreciate the support and collaboration of our partner organisations and all community members who contributed to this research.

Acknowledgements

This report is the result of time, energy, knowledge and care shared by many people across the UK who are engaged in the everyday work of building safer, stronger, more connected communities.

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To our partners

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To our colleagues

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This report represents the views of the Runnymede Trust and not necessarily the positions of our partner organisations or individual contributors.

Thank you to the venues

who hosted our sessions – Ayeeyo’s Kitchen, the Black Cultural Archives, the Malcolm X Centre, St Luke’s Community Centre, West Bromwich Community Centre, the Windrush Millennium Centre and Merchants House. You ensured that our guests felt warm and welcome. These spaces remain vital to community wellbeing. We are also grateful to the caterers who nourished us and everyone who took part in our workshops – often with home-style meals and always with care. Breaking bread did more than sustain us: it created vital moments of joy, connection and togetherness amid challenging and sometimes painful conversations.

Thank you

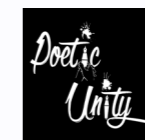
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