THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH
**Edinburgh Law School**

**Edinburgh Study**
of Youth Transitions and Crime

# Causes and Impact of Offending and Criminal Justice Pathways: Follow-up of the Edinburgh Study Cohort at Age 35

Report to the Nuffield Foundation | March 2022

**Causes and Impacts of Offending and Criminal Justice Pathways:**

**Follow-up of the Edinburgh Study Cohort at Age 35**

## Acknowledgements

- **Lesley and Susan**

## Edinburgh Study Research Team

**Directors:** Lesley McAra and Susan McVie

**Administrator and Fieldwork Work Manager:** Sarah Atkins

**Researchers:** Kirsty Arnott, Rob Barratt, Konstantinos Gaitis, Karyn Mabon, Marianne Robertson, Tia Simanov

**Analytical support:** Paul Norris

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# Executive Summary

**The Edinburgh Study of Youth Transitions and Crime is a longitudinal programme of research on pathways into and out of offending for a cohort of around 4,300 young people who started secondary school in Edinburgh in 1998. This report provides a summary of findings from the most recent phase of the Study (phase eight) which followed-up cohort members at age 35.**

Funded by the Nuffield Foundation, this phase aimed to explore the causes and consequences of offending and justice pathways from childhood to early middle age. Fieldwork included: attempting to re-contact all cohort members; collection of criminal convictions data for all cohort members; an online-survey of contacted cohort members; and interviews with a sub-sample of cohort members.

The research was designed to address three key research questions (as set out below), and to consider what the implications of the findings were for people, policy and practice:

- How do people's patterns of criminal conviction vary over time?

- Does contact with criminal justice help people stop offending over the longer term?

- What impact does offending and justice system contact have on education, employability, health and inter-personal relationships over the life course into early middle age?

The key messages arising from this study, and the main findings from the four research questions, are summarised below.

## Key messages

- Most people who offend during adolescence stop by early adulthood; however, desistance (stopping) is a complex process influenced by multiple factors that are not the same for everyone and do not necessarily remain constant over time.

- Key factors that inhibit desistance from offending in adolescence and early adulthood include: an impulsive personality, engaging in drug use, and experiencing frequent crime victimisation.

- Individuals who continue to offend beyond the age of 25 are significantly more vulnerable than those who stop by age 18, with a history of both adverse experiences and serious offending behaviour in childhood.

- Early involvement in serious offending has a significant impact on the likelihood, longevity and severity of youth and adult criminal justice contact; however, many of those who engage in serious offending have no contact with justice organisations.

- Pathways of criminal conviction from childhood to early adulthood vary considerably depending on people's early life circumstances, and are associated with a wide range of behavioural, familial, contextual and experiential factors. However, those who come persistently into contact with the justice system over time tend to be amongst the poorest and most vulnerable people in our cohort.

- Early and intensive formal system contact (especially care experience) is strongly associated with later justice system contact and a range of other negative outcomes.

- People who have contact with the criminal justice system are not necessarily more likely to desist from offending and, indeed, for some people it may act as a catalyst for continued offending into adulthood.

- Formal system contact is typically experienced by individuals as a set of barriers and hazards to be negotiated, but positive change relies on key individuals (such as youth workers or foster carers) who provide strong and consistent support.

- Successful outcomes typically involve achieving modest social norms (such as family, home and employment); however, change is often precarious, especially amongst those who have a poor start in life.

- Holistic approaches, which work across policy portfolios (education, economy, housing, and justice), and which target risk factors across communities rather than risky individuals in childhood and adolescence, are likely to be successful in driving down offending and conviction across the life-course.

## How do patterns of criminal conviction vary over time?

- One in ten cohort members had referrals to juvenile justice on offending grounds and a quarter had at least one criminal conviction by age 35; however, for those who self-reported persistent involvement in serious offending during adolescence this increased to a fifth and two fifths, respectively.

- Nevertheless, a large proportion of those who engaged in persistent serious or violent offending during adolescence were not recorded as having ever been known to either juvenile or adult justice (in Scotland) by early middle age.

- Analysis of criminal convictions data identified four typical pathways based on the 'probability' (or statistical likelihood) of conviction between age 13 and 35:

  A **'No/Low Class'** with almost no probability of conviction at any age.

  A **'Teen/Early Adult Limited Class'** whose probability of conviction rose sharply during adolescence, peaked at age 20, then tailed off by age 30.

  A **'Later Onset Class'** whose overall probability of conviction was low but rose gradually during the 20s and into early middle age.

  A **'Chronic Class'** with the highest probability of being convicted overall, especially during the early twenties and into early middle age.

- Prevalence of self-reported serious offending during adolescence was highest amongst those in the Chronic Class and lowest amongst those in the No/Low Class; however, the age-trend in the prevalence of serious offending (which peaked around age 14/15) was similar across the classes.

- The prevalence of other 'risk factors' (including deprivation, impulsive personality, educational difficulties, mental health problems, victimization adverse childhood experiences, and early justice system contact) was higher amongst those in all three of the conviction classes compared to those in the No/Low Class, although it varied by class.

- Those in the Chronic Class had a greater prevalence of some risk factors (including serious offending, impulsivity, low self-esteem, school exclusion and early justice system contact) compared to those in the Teen/Early Adult Limited Class, but they were similar on a number of other risk factors (such as experience of early deprivation, drug use, police contact, victimisation and impulsivity).

- Those in the Later Onset Class had a greater prevalence of all risk factors than those in the No/Low Class, but a lower prevalence than those in the Chronic Class (on all risk factors) and those in the Teen/Early Adult Limited Class (on most risk factors).

- While the probability of conviction amongst those in the Later Onset Class was lower than the other two conviction classes, many were convicted of offences that were just as serious as those of more frequently convicted offenders.

- Notably, early engagement in serious offending was not significantly associated with being a member of the Later Onset Class.

- Factors that were most strongly associated with the Chronic and Teen/Early Adult Limited Classes included: being male, growing up in a household that was economically disadvantaged and/or did not include two parents, early involvement in serious offending, and early experience of 'formal' measures of social control.

## Does contact with criminal justice help people stop offending over the longer term?

- Over half of survey respondents at age 35 who had reported offending during the teenage years said they stopped by age 18, while just over a quarter stopped by age 25, and a fifth continued offending beyond that age.

- Continuing to offend beyond age 18 was associated with a range of factors, including: being male, early serious offending, a history of drug use (in childhood and adulthood), and adversarial police contact.

- For those who continued to offend into early middle age, this was also associated with high levels of victimisation, a history of adverse childhood experiences,

and adversities in adulthood (such as bereavement, relationship breakdown, and having a serious accident or illness).

- Offending beyond the age of 18 was not associated with growing up in poverty or living in a deprived neighbourhood and, critically, it was not associated with early history of criminal conviction.

- On the basis of these findings, it is difficult to conclude that criminal justice contacts in and of themselves help people stop offending over the longer term.

## What impacts do offending and contacts with justice systems have on outcomes over the life-course into early middle age?

- There is no simple way of demonstrating cause and effect in terms of offending, justice contacts and specific outcomes. Potential outcome measures such as mental health or employment are closely entwined with offending and criminal justice pathways, such that they become mutually constitutive rather than sequential.

- Many individuals who were referred to juvenile justice on care and protection grounds in early childhood described how they became increasingly viewed as offenders by agencies during their teenage years.

- Outcomes for care-experienced individuals were the most negative, with lives consistently blighted by poverty, mental health and drug problems, poor educational experiences, and periods of unemployment.

- When agencies did make a positive difference in people's lives, it was generally felt to be due to an individual worker or carer with whom a strong relationship had been built.

- For those encountering the criminal justice system for

the first time in the mid to late teenage years, contacts with institutions (including the police and the courts) appeared to have only limited, indeed almost fleeting impact on their behaviour: a hazard, that was initially alarming but quickly normalised.

- Interviewees who talked most positively about their lives in early middle age were those who had partners, children, and jobs which they valued. Such outcomes often depended on educational inclusion, cutting ties with friendship groups from the teenage and early adult years, and, in some cases, downplaying earlier involvement in offending - a reconstruction of identity.

- Individuals face a myriad of challenges when circumstances beyond their control shape childhood experiences and relationships, and opportunity structures that are available to them, as they mature.

- Some people's situations are extremely precarious which makes decisions to stop offending difficult to sustain if supportive contexts are not available.

- It is important to stress that there are stories of hope and transformation – but for those who have been brought up in the most vulnerable, deprived and disrupted circumstances, change can be difficult to achieve and even harder to sustain.

## Implications of the findings for people, policy and practice

### People

- Most people who offend are not known to justice organisations, and when they are, they are more likely to be known to adult criminal justice than youth justice.

- Pathways of criminal conviction are intricately but differentially related to the early years in terms of parental upbringing, childhood development, patterns of behaviour and wider social and environmental circumstances, in ways that make it hard to design targeted interventions for at-risk individuals.

- Desistance from offending is a complex process of stability and change – bound up in a legacy of problems from the past, but also determined by a combination of factors in adulthood that can help or hinder people's ability to change their lifestyles.

- Desistance rarely involves consideration of the justice consequences of behaviour: indeed, the justice system is rarely the context in which desistance takes place.

- Decisions to stop offending require individual agency, but it is a precarious state that is heavily influenced by opportunity structures and critical relationships.

### Policy

- Policies focused on prevention and early intervention are likely to be most effective in supporting desistance from offending, especially where they work across portfolios (including health, education, housing, communities, economy, etc.), recognising that justice cannot by itself solve the problem of crime.

- Educational inclusion and addressing underlying learning difficulties are key to supporting pathways to desistance, both in the medium-term (over the teenage years) and longer-term (in early adulthood and early middle age).

- Leaving school early without qualifications is associated with ongoing poverty and low paid employment in the early adult years, factors that inhibit desistance.

- Further education and life-long educational opportunities are of vital importance in supporting people into, and within, the labour market, but financial support for those who are not able to work because of caring responsibilities (sometimes for parents or older relatives) or problems with poor physical or mental health, would help diminish the risks of drifting (back) into substance misuse or offending.

- Policies that mitigate and prevent the damaging effects that growing up in care can have are essential to reducing stigma and trauma.

### Practice

- Risk management and sentencing often focus on prior convictions as aggravating factors or markers of greatest risk; however, ongoing justice system contact can result in 'scarring' effects (e.g., on drug use, vulnerability and victimisation), particularly in the early adult years.

- Diversionary practices offer more positive outcomes, but only when they are well resourced, entail referral to substantive services (e.g., youth work, community activities, educational interventions), and there is evenness of service provision across jurisdictions.

- Intervention needs to be available at the time it is needed – not time limited – and recognise that offending over the life course will have different starting and stopping points.

- Leaving care is a critical transition and one that young people find challenging, so lengthening the period over which support services are offered and providing a more graduated approach to leaving care would support crime reduction.

- Care leavers who become homeless are not always treated with dignity and respect, and their experiences exacerbate the likelihood of offending and heavy drug use, which highlights a need for better services and support.

- The criminal justice and care systems often manifest as a series of abrupt (often unplanned) hurdles to be navigated or tolerated, rather than sources of support or nurturing.

- The quality and impact of these care and justice experiences is very much dependent on the quality of individual staff whom people encounter, which highlights the importance of staff training, of nurturing and retaining staff, and of creating positive and fulfilling working environments.

- Staff also need time to build relationships with people to ensure client contact is not just a tick box exercise that elicits no meaningful conversations.

- There are a significant number of young people and adults whose offending behaviour goes under the radar of agencies, which demonstrates the importance of universal or community focused services that can indirectly tackle and reduce some of the underlying causes of offending.

- The answer is not to punish more, but to create the conditions which support opportunity structures, tackle poverty and, above all, address educational inclusion.

## 1. Introduction

This report provides a summary of the most recent (eighth) phase of the Edinburgh Study of Youth Transitions and Crime.[1] Funding for this phase of fieldwork, which took place between July 2019 and December 2021, was awarded by the Nuffield Foundation. [2] The main focus was to explore in detail the causes and consequences of both offending and criminal justice pathways from childhood to early middle age. The fieldwork involved collecting survey data on self-reported involvement in offending, analysing administrative data on known offending based on criminal convictions, and conducting in-depth interviews to examine (amongst other things) people's experiences of offending and justice system contact.

The report begins with a brief description of the Edinburgh Study and the key findings from previous phases of data collection, before going on to explain the aims and objectives of the current phase. We then provide a summary of the main findings emerging from the different components of the research. The report concludes with a review of the implications of the findings for people, policy and practice.

Overall, the key messages from this phase support earlier findings from the Edinburgh Study about the impact of a range of individual, contextual and institutional factors on people's likelihood to be involved in offending and to have contact with the criminal justice system. However, this new phase of fieldwork has added extra depth to our understanding of the factors that influence offending over different stages of the life course, and the impacts that this has on people's long term outcomes across a range of domains.

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[1] https://www.edinstudy.law.ed.ac.uk/about-the-study/
[2] The Edinburgh Study has been funded by the ESRC (grant numbers R000237157 and R000239150), the Scottish Government and the Nuffield Foundation

## 2. About the Edinburgh Study

The Edinburgh Study of Youth Transitions and Crime is a longitudinal programme of research on pathways into and out of offending for a cohort of 4,300 young people who transferred to Edinburgh secondary schools in the autumn of 1998 (when they were aged around 12, on average).[3]  It brings together evidence and theory at the levels of individual development and social context.

The Study has provided evidence and insights into a wide range of policy issues of importance for a variety of organisations, including the Scottish, UK and other devolved governments, local authorities, and third sector organisations.  It has played a particularly significant role in terms of direct policy change in Scotland.[4]  For example, in 2011 it formed the evidence base for the national roll out of the 'whole system approach' for dealing with young people who offend.[5] This approach is predicated on 'early and effective intervention', 'diversion from prosecution' and 'community alternatives to secure care and custody'.  In addition, it is the only research study cited in the Scottish Parliament's Policy Memorandum, which accompanied the passage of the Age of Criminal Responsibility (Scotland) Act 2019, which raised the age of criminal responsibility from 8 to 12.[6]

### The story so far

Key findings from earlier phases of the Study, on which this phase builds, include:[7]

- The majority of young people self-report getting involved in some form of offending during adolescence; however, for most this involves infrequent, short-lived and non-serious behaviours.
- Persistent involvement in violence in the teenage years is associated with social adversity, including difficult family backgrounds, social deprivation, problems at school, various health issues, risky lifestyles, substance abuse, self-harm and crime victimization.
- It is difficult to predict from an early age who will become a persistent serious offender in the teenage years as a high proportion of those who self-report serious offending by age 15 are completely under the radar of official agencies (social work and juvenile justice) up to that age.
- Early identification of 'at risk' children can result in labelling and stigmatisation, increasing the risk of criminalisation in the teenage and early adult years.
- Critical moments in the teenage years are key to pathways out of crime.   Retaining young people in education and avoiding expulsion from school are associated with lower levels of criminal conviction in the teenage years amongst those with early histories of juvenile justice contact.
- Diversionary strategies facilitate reductions in criminal conviction.  Dealing with young people who come into conflict with the law through informal measures (such as referral to youth services and support) rather than formal measures resulting in a criminal record, is associated with crime reduction.
- Patterns of criminal conviction do not necessarily reflect patterns of self-reported offending. Convictions are more often associated with official forms of agency intervention (such as school exclusion, police contact and youth justice involvement) rather than individual, familial or environmental factors.
- There is a strong inter-relationship between offending, justice contact and poverty in the teenage years and early adulthood. Poverty during childhood and adolescence is directly related to involvement in youth violence, which results in police charges and youth justice supervision, which in turn predicts poverty in adulthood.

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[3] For further information on the aims and methods of the study, see Smith and McVie (2003).
[4] The Study was awarded the ESRC Prize for Outstanding Public Policy Impact in 2019.
[5] https://www.gov.scot/policies/youth-justice/whole-system-approach/
[6] https://www.parliament.scot/-/media/files/legislation/bills/previous-bills/age-of-criminal-responsibility-scotland-bill/introduced/policy-memorandum-age-of-criminal-responsibility-scotland-bill.pdf
[7] Further details on the findings from the study can be found in a variety of papers by McAra and McVie (2005, 2007, 2010, 2012, 2015, and 2018).

## 3. Fieldwork at age 35

This section of the report sets out the aims of this phase of the Edinburgh Study and the methods that were employed to collect the data.

The overarching aim was to understand how events and circumstances in childhood and adolescence impacted on cohort members over their life-course. In particular, it explored people's criminal justice pathways (from childhood to early middle age) and the impact of these pathways on their longer-term life-chances. The research was designed to address three key research questions (as set out below), and to consider the implications of the findings for people, policy and practice:

- How do people's patterns of criminal conviction vary and what helps to explain this variation?
- Does contact with criminal justice help people stop offending over the longer term or not?
- What impacts do offending and contacts with justice systems have on outcomes (including education, employability, health and inter-personal relationships) over the life-course into early middle age?

Using the Edinburgh Study to address these research questions is important and relevant because there is evidence that conviction rates in Scotland have increased for older age groups (from age 30 and above), but there is very little research that can explain this (see Matthews and Minton 2017). The UK and Scottish Governments have highlighted ageing and crime as a key issue to be addressed in recent strategies and have recognised that offender management requires cross-departmental working (linking health and social care, children and families, education and justice).[8]

The fieldwork for this research took place between November 2019 and August 2021, which means that it was affected by the outbreak of the covid-19 pandemic and necessarily had to adapt to the lockdowns and social distancing restrictions over this timeframe. This proved extremely challenging and required the team to re-design aspects of the Study as it developed. Some of these changes are reflected in the design of the four stages of fieldwork, which are described below:

### (i) Cohort Tracking

The last time we contacted the entire cohort was in 2009 (phase seven) when cohort members were in their early 20s. Therefore, a key priority for fieldwork was to re-establish contact with the cohort members at age 35 to inform them about this new phase of research and invite them to participate. Beginning with our existing contact information, we attempted to re-contact 4,280 individuals from the original 4,300, as 20 were known at that time to have died.

The tracking process involved a number of activities, including:

- multiple mail-outs by post and by email using existing contact information;
- following up mail-outs with telephone contact using any existing numbers;
- contacting 'locators' for help in contacting cohort members (locators are individuals whose names and addresses were provided by cohort members in previous phases of the Study, to arrange contact in the event that they could not be contacted directly);
- trawling print media (e.g., newspapers) and social media (in particular Facebook) to identify and make contact with cohort members (this included targeted tracking and using local ex-school and other networks);
- and Respondent Assistant Tracking, using data that were gathered in earlier phases, which identify high school friends of the target who are also in the Study cohort.

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[8] https://www.prisonsinspectoratescotland.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publication_files/SCT03172875161.pdf;
https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/2149/documents/19996/default/

Table 1 sets out the outcome of the tracking exercise using all of these methods. We made contact with a quarter of the cohort and got agreement to participate from the majority of these individuals. A small number (n=39) were either identified as having died since phase seven or notified us of their decision to withdraw from the Study.

No contact was achieved for around three-quarters of the cohort. In some cases, our contact information was incorrect and we had no further information to trace them; however, in most cases we were uncertain whether or not our information was correct. Therefore, in an effort to further increase the success of the tracking (and to determine what proportion of those from whom there was no response, after repeated contact attempts, were potentially 'achievable' through face to face means), we sampled a small pool of cohort members (known as the 'random 100') for more detailed investigation. The results of this exercise indicated that more than half of those who had not responded were still contactable using our existing tracking information.

Unfortunately, midway through the process of tracking people, the pandemic hit and the country was placed into lockdown. While some tracking activity could be pursued using online methods, we were unable to act on the information gathered through the random 100 in order to use face-to-face contact methods to make further contact with cohort members. We acknowledge that this is a limitation of our fieldwork and has an impact on the analysis presented in this report.

Table 1: Tracking outcomes for Edinburgh Study cohort members at age 35

| Outcome of contact | Number of cohort members | % of cohort members |
|---|---|---|
| Contacted and details confirmed | 1029 | 24 |
| Contact details confirmed - withdrawn or deceased | 39 | 1 |
| No direct contact despite repeated attempts | 3212 | 75 |
| Total | 4280 | 100 |

## (ii) Collection of updated official criminal conviction records

At previous phases of the Edinburgh Study, we collected criminal convictions data from the criminal history database maintained by Scottish police forces. In 2014, these forces merged into one single service, Police Scotland.[9] For the current phase of the Study, we requested access to the updated records of cohort members. This involved a protracted period of negotiation with Police Scotland during which we undertook a detailed Data Privacy Impact Assessment and ethical review, to address any legal, ethical and data protection concerns with regards to collecting further convictions data. Permission to access convictions was sought at earlier phases of the Study and, while some individuals had expressly opted out of this element of data collection (n=23), the majority had not. Of the 4,280 cohort members we attempted to re-contact, a total of 4,257 were, therefore, included in the criminal record check.

Amongst those for whom a criminal record check was conducted, it was established that just over a quarter (26%) of cohort members had at least one criminal conviction by the age of 34. Prevalence for conviction was around 2.5 times higher for males (37%) than for females (14%) within the Edinburgh Study cohort. These figures are higher than those estimated from the Scottish Offenders Index (SOI) some years ago (McGuinness et

> **"…just over a quarter (26%) of cohort members had at least one criminal conviction by the age of 34."**

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[9] Further information about the merger of the eight police forces into one can be found in Scott (2013).

al 2013), which indicated that around 33% of the adult male population and less than 8% of the adult female population at age 34 had a known criminal conviction (post 1989). However, the latter study excluded some convictions, including those for motoring and other minor offences, so it was an under-estimate. Our data collection included all crimes and offences and, therefore, provides a more accurate profile of convictions. Moreover, it is within the boundaries of what might be expected based on the prior analysis of the SOI data, especially for women who would be expected to have more convictions for minor offences (see Scottish Government 2022).

## (iii) Survey

It was not our original intention to conduct a survey of cohort members during this phase of fieldwork; however, after the pandemic struck, we felt that this would be a valuable, and achievable, way to collect information from cohort members about how their lives had changed. Therefore, for all those who had been contacted and agreed to continue to participate in the Study, we undertook an online survey.

The survey included questions on a wide range of topics (in most cases following up on information that had been collected during earlier phases of the Study). Topics covered by the questionnaire included: key relationships and household structure; employment status; experience of crime (offending and victimisation); health and health risk behaviours including depression, anxiety, self-harm, use of drugs and alcohol; personality measures (impulsivity, feelings of alienation, self-esteem); adverse experiences during childhood and adulthood (including neglect, unwanted sexual experience, violent victimisation from and between family members, family breakdown and bereavement); and a small number of Covid-19 lockdown related questions. A high proportion (77%) of the 1,029 cohort members we successfully re-contacted, participated in the survey.

Figure 1 shows that the profile of survey respondents differed in several significant ways to the wider cohort members (including those that were not contacted and those who were contacted but did not participate in the survey). Compared to the cohort as a whole, the survey responder group were: more likely to be female; less likely to have grown up in an economically disadvantaged household or in an area of high deprivation; and less likely to have received criminal convictions. This suggests that those cohort members who could be contacted, and who agreed to take part in the survey, were materially more affluent as children and less troublesome in adulthood than other members of the cohort. Importantly, however, there was no significant difference in their likelihood of self-reported offending during mid-adolescence, with over 90% of both the responders and the remainder of the cohort admitting at least one of the offences covered by the Edinburgh Study by age 15.
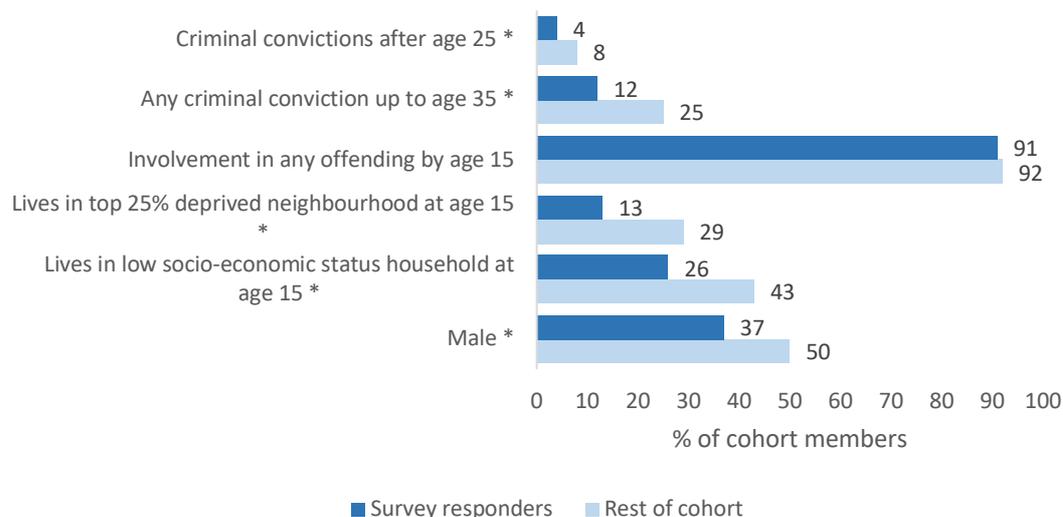


Figure 1: Profile of survey responders at age 35 compared with other cohort member

Note: Survey responders were compared to non-responders using data collected at age 15 and the updated criminal conviction data. A * indicates where differences between groups were statistically significant at p<.05.

## (iv) Interviews

A focus of the fieldwork was to identify and contact a sub-sample of cohort members for interview, to explore in detail how people's lives had changed and what factors had influenced aspects of their criminal careers, including onset, duration and desistance.  The original plan was to identify the sample for our interviewees using the criminal convictions data; however, severe delays in accessing these data meant that we had to redesign the data collection and use alternative methods of selection.

Four key criteria were used to ensure that the profile of interviewees included as many people who had engaged in offending as possible, especially at the serious end of the spectrum.  Individuals who met at least two of the following criteria were prioritised for invitation to interview:

- Self-reported serious offending by age 18.[10]
- Had offence referrals to the children's hearing system by age 18.[11]
- Had a criminal conviction by age 25.
- Participated in phase seven of the Study (the sampling for this phase included those with early and later histories of contact with the juvenile justice system and matched groups).

To narrow down the number of interviewees to a manageable level, we drew primarily from cohort members that had been successfully re-contacted and agreed to participate in this phase of the study (n=174).  However, given the problem of non-representation amongst responders compared to the cohort as a whole, and given the overall focus of this phase of the Study on long term patterns of offending, some high level offenders who had not yet been contacted were prioritised for interview on the basis of their prior histories (n=68).

Despite having good and recent contact details for the majority of these individuals, the process of contacting them and arranging interviews was extremely challenging, at least partly due to the Covid-19 restrictions and consequent constraints on research fieldwork activities put in place by the University.  Where people did agree to participate in an interview, these had to be conducted by video call or telephone (for health protection reasons); however, this proved to be very difficult to arrange for some individuals and multiple attempts had to be made to ensure a successful interview in almost all cases.

From the pool of 242 cases who were approached and invited to take part in interview, we achieved 73 completed interviews between March and October 2021. A further 17 individuals were contacted and agreed to interview but the individual did not answer the call or cancelled at the last minute (this often happened several times), while in a further 17 cases the individual was contacted but it did not prove possible to arrange an interview (for a wide variety of reasons).  In the remaining 135 cases, no direct contact could be made with the individual.

Key themes covered in the interviews included: patterns of offending – onset, duration, and stopping; nature and impact of behaviours; contexts of development over childhood, early adulthood and early middle age including family (parents, partners, children), friends and peers, education and employment; neighbourhood dynamics and characteristics; contacts with the police and other justice institutions; and interventions associated with juvenile and adult justice (including the Scottish children's hearing system, the criminal courts, and social work).

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[10] Our measure of serious offending included: assault; robbery; weapon carrying; fire-raising (arson); housebreaking (burglary); breaking into a motor vehicle to steal from it; riding in a stolen motor vehicle.
[11] The Scottish children's hearing system plays a key role in juvenile justice.  It deals both with children (from birth up to age 16) who are in need of care and protection (for example those who suffer from parental neglect or who have been victim of sexual or other forms of violence in the home) and children who have committed offences (at the time that the Edinburgh Study began, the age of criminal responsibility in Scotland was 8 – in 2019 it was raised to age 12). Children (over the age of criminal responsibility) who commit the most serious offences can be dealt with in the criminal courts.  Compulsory measures of care (supervision either at home or in some form of residential care) generally stop at age 16 but children can be retained in the system until age 18.  In practice, almost all young people between ages 16 and 17 who have committed offences are dealt with in the adult criminal justice system.

The profile of interviewees is set out in Figure 2. Around two thirds were male, half were from economically disadvantaged households, and a third had grown up in a deprived community during adolescence. Importantly, whilst all of the achieved sample had reported involvement in some kind of offending at age 15, there was a mixture of offending pathways, from those who stopped offending before age 18 to those who continued offending into early adulthood or early middle age. Two-fifths (40%) of interviewees had been referred to the juvenile justice system in Scotland at some point, and just over four fifths (81%) had a record of criminal conviction, enabling us to explore the longer term impacts of (juvenile and adult justice) system contacts.
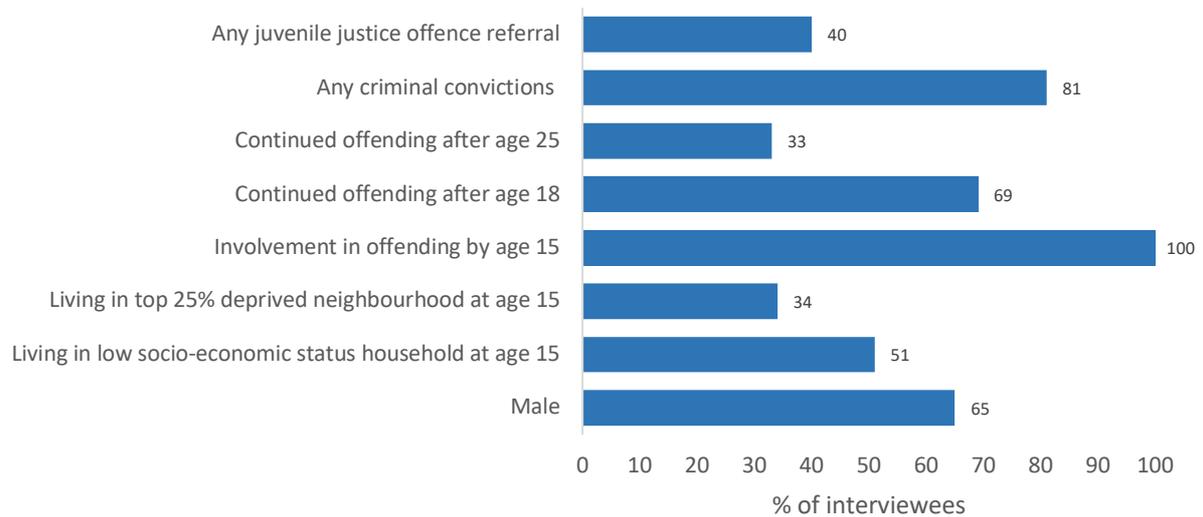


Figure 2: Profile of Edinburgh Study interviewee sub-sample at age 35 (n=73)

## 4. Research findings

This section of the report sets out the key findings from the Study based on each of the three research questions posed for fieldwork.

### (i) How do patterns of criminal conviction vary and what helps to explain this variation?

A quarter (26%) of cohort members for whom a criminal record check was conducted had at least one criminal conviction by the age of 34. Around a fifth (19%) had a children's hearing record for any reason (i.e., a referral on any ground including care and protection and/or offending), while 11% of the cohort (n=501) had been referred on offence grounds, up to the age of 18.

Importantly, our findings at this phase confirm those from earlier phases of the Study that (based on self-reports) a relatively high proportion of even the most serious and persistent offenders during the teenage and early adult years were not known to agencies in either the juvenile or adult justice systems.  As set out in Table 2, even amongst those who reported involvement in serious offending behaviour at every phase of the Study during the teenage years,

> **"...a relatively high proportion of even the most serious and persistent offenders during the teenage and early adult years were not known to agencies in either the juvenile or adult justice systems."**

only around a fifth had ever been referred to the children's hearing system on offence grounds by age 16, and two fifths had ever been convicted in the criminal courts by age 34.  Moreover, almost half of those who were persistently involved in serious offending during adolescence were not known to either juvenile or adult justice in Scotland by early middle age.

Table 2:  Agency contact amongst the Edinburgh Cohort

|  | % who had juvenile justice referral (by age 16) | % who had criminal conviction (by age 34) | % who were unknown to any justice agency (by age 34) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Those reporting serious offending* at every phase of Study in teenage years (n=713) | 21 | 41 | 48 |
| Those reporting highest amount of violence** by age 12 (n=543) | 25 | 46 | 38 |
| Those reporting involvement in violence at age 18 or over*** (n=59) | 12 | 37 | 54 |

*Measure of serious offending: assault; robbery; weapon carrying; fire-raising (arson); housebreaking (burglary); breaking into a motor vehicle to steal from it; riding in a stolen motor vehicle.
**Measure of violence includes assault, weapon carrying and robbery.
***Survey respondents included in this phase only.

A similar pattern can be observed in relation to early violent offenders in Table 2.  Three quarters (75%) of cohort members who were involved in higher than average levels of self-reported violence during childhood (up to age 12) were unknown to juvenile justice by age 16, and over half (54%) were unknown to adult criminal justice by age 35.  Indeed, four fifths were unknown to any justice agency.  Of those who completed the survey (i.e., those for whom we have updated self-reported offending data into early middle age), a majority (54%) of those who reported continued involvement in violence were found to have neither criminal convictions nor earlier referrals to juvenile justice by age 34.

These findings from the Edinburgh Study suggest that high-risk groups of serious and violent offenders (both children and adults) are often completely unknown to justice agencies.  This is consistent with findings from

earlier phases of the Study (McAra and McVie 2007), and confirms the problem for official agencies in trying to identify or intervene at an early stage with children who are likely to become serious or persistent offenders. We will return to the policy implications regarding the 'unknown' groups later in the report.

## Criminal conviction pathways amongst the Edinburgh Study cohort

A key aim of the Edinburgh Study is to understand life-course patterns of criminal conviction, taking account of the fact that people often start and stop at different points in the life-cycle. Using the updated criminal conviction data, we identified four typical 'classes' of offender using group-based trajectory modelling.[12] This technique was used to calculate each person's probability (or statistical likelihood) of belonging to a particular criminal conviction pathway based on their prevalence of conviction at each year between age 13 and 34. Statistical software assigned each individual to the conviction class for which their probability of membership was greatest, based on their pattern of conviction. The four typical conviction pathways based on these probabilities are illustrated in Figure 3.[13]

- **The 'No/Low' Class:** comprised 3,648 members of the cohort with either no or a very low probability of conviction at any age.

- **The 'Chronic' Class':** comprised 64 individuals whose probability of conviction was above 0.1 by age 13, increasing to around 0.6 by age 24, before declining to around 0.2 by age 34. This small, but important, class of individuals had the highest probability of being convicted across all ages covered by the Study, especially during the early twenties and continuing (albeit it on a falling trajectory) into early middle age.

- **The 'Teen/Early Adult Limited' Class:** comprised 294 cohort members whose probability of conviction rose sharply from just above zero at age 14 to peak at just below 0.5 by around age 20. Notably, the probability of conviction for the individuals in this class was almost identical to that of the Chronic Class between the ages of 18 and 20, which suggests that it would have been difficult to tell members of these two classes apart at that age based on conviction data. Unlike the Chronic Class, however, the Teen/Early Adult Limited Class shows a sharply diminishing probability of conviction throughout the 20s, with a strong probability of having no convictions by the time they reached age 30. (Note that this particular pathway forms a close match to the national aggregate pattern of conviction in Scotland when our Study began in 1998).

- **The 'Later Onset' Class:** comprises 251 individuals whose probability of conviction did not start to rise until their late teenage years and exhibited a very gradual rising pattern during their 20s and into early middle age. It is notable that the probability of conviction amongst members of this class did not exceed 0.1 at any point, which suggests that most were infrequent offenders (i.e., with convictions in only one or two years for the most part); however, their probability of conviction remained at around the same level from the mid-20s onwards which indicates a low but stable conviction pathway.

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[12] We use Mplus software to create trajectories using the group-based semi-parametric modelling method developed by Nagin (2005).
[13] It is important to note that these conviction classes are based on statistical probability, and people are assigned to classes based on general similarity in their pattern of conviction over time. It does not necessarily mean that each individual person's conviction profile looked exactly like the pathway, or that these individuals were represented by real and identifiable 'groups' of offenders.
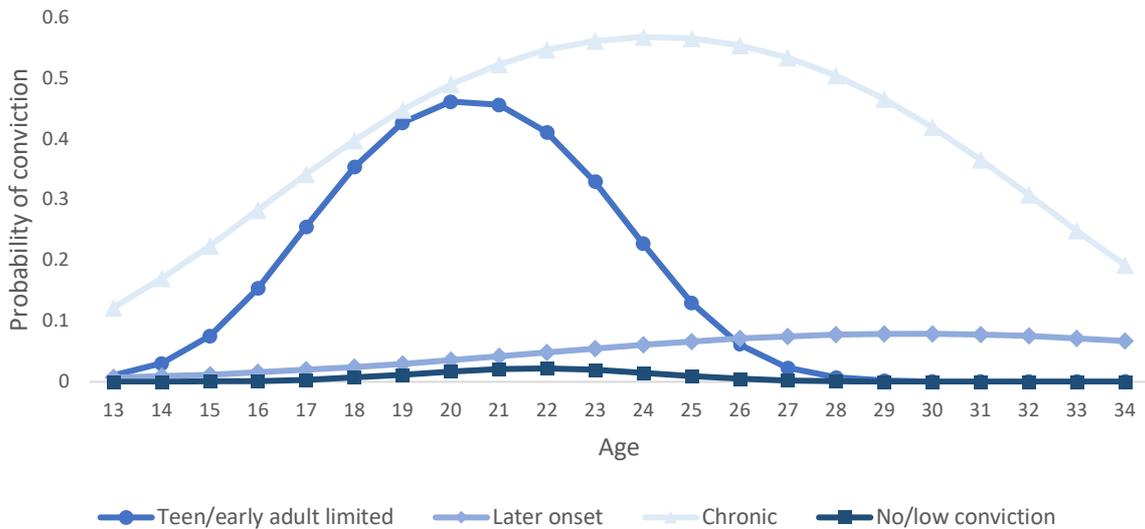
Figure 3: Criminal conviction pathways amongst the Edinburgh cohort (n=4,257)

## Serious offending profile of cohort members within each pathway

Given the higher probability of conviction, it would be reasonable to hypothesise that cohort members who were assigned to the Chronic and Teen/Early Adult Limited Classes would be more likely to self-report involvement in serious offending during the teenage years compared to those in the Later Onset and No/Low Classes. It would also be reasonable to hypothesise that the Later Onset Class would demonstrate an increasing involvement in offending during the later teenage years. We explored these two hypotheses by examining data on self-reported offending between age 13 and 17.

Figure 4 shows the percentage of individuals within each class who self-reported serious offending (i.e., prevalence) during earlier phases of the Edinburgh Study, while Figure 5 shows the average number of serious offences committed (i.e., frequency). For prevalence of offending, Figure 4 shows a very similar trend but a clear degree of separation between each of the four classes. Whereas, Figure 5 also shows a similar overall trend, but much greater frequency of offending amongst the Chronic and Teen/Early Adult Limited Classes and low frequency amongst the Later Onset and No/Low Class. Notably, the peak age of serious offending was around age 14 or 15 for all classes for both prevalence and frequency of offending.

Those who were assigned to the Chronic Class had both the highest prevalence and frequency of self-reported serious offending. Over 80% of people who were assigned to this conviction class at age 34 had reported being involved in serious offending at age 14 and 15, and frequency of offending peaked at age 15 with an average of around 12 serious offences reported within the past year.

Those who were assigned to the Teen/Early Adult Limited Class based on convictions at age 34 had been slightly less likely than those in the Chronic Class to self-report involvement in serious offending during the teenage years, although the prevalence rate was still around 70% at age 14 and 15. Frequency of serious offending between these two classes was very similar at age 13 and 14; however, Figure 5 shows a clear divergence between these two classes at age 15 and 16, with those in the Teen/Early Adult Limited Class showing a markedly lower frequency of serious offending compared to the Chronic Class.

At its peak, 56% of those assigned to the Later Onset conviction class had admitted to involvement in serious offending during the teenage years; however, contrary to expectation, there is no sign of increased prevalence or frequency of offending with age. This confounds the suggestion that it might have been possible to identify these individuals based on an increased propensity to offend during the teenage years. Prevalence of offending was considerably lower for those in the No/Low Class of convictions, although it is notable that around one in three of these individuals had admitted involvement in at least one serious offence during the teenage

years. Moreover, in terms of frequency of offending, those in the Later Onset Class were only marginally higher than those in the No/Low Class.

These findings provide evidence that people who exhibit different patterns of conviction into early adulthood are likely to have differed to some extent in terms of their underlying patterns of offending during the teenage years. However, they also provide further confirmation that patterns of self-reported offending by themselves do not explain differences in patterns of criminal conviction, and that many young people involved in serious offending go under the radar of juvenile and adult criminal justice.

> **"…patterns of self-reported offending by themselves do not explain differences in patterns of criminal conviction."**
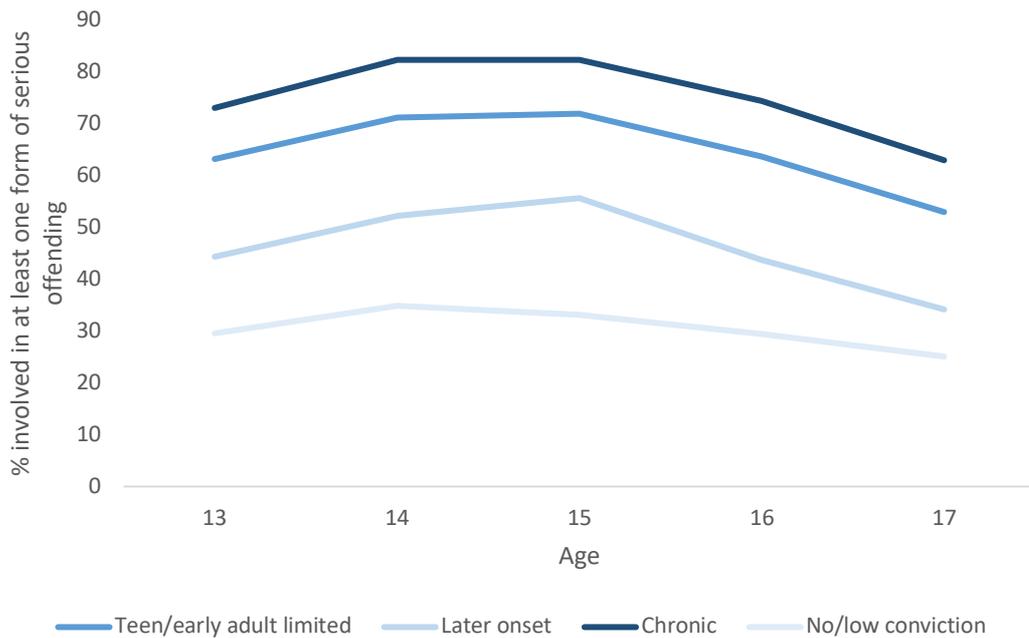


Figure 4: Prevalence of serious offending (self-reported) in the teenage years by conviction group
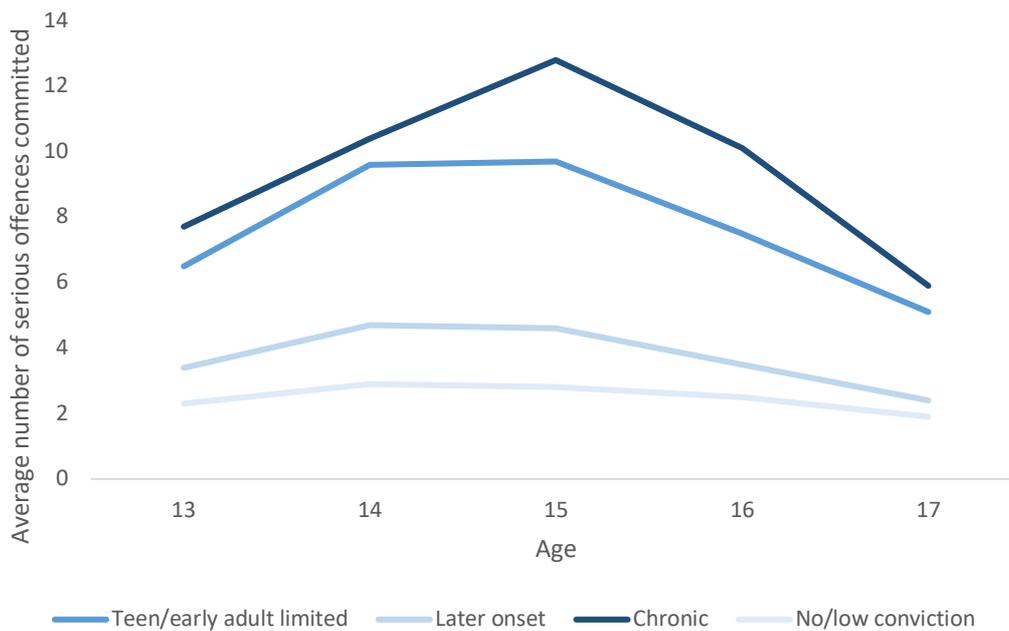


Figure 5: Average number of serious offences (self-reported) in the teenage years by conviction group

### Background characteristics of cohort members within each pathway

Using data collected at earlier phases of the study, more detailed analysis of the individual characteristics, social and economic circumstances, and very early life experiences of the cohort members in each conviction class was carried out. This analysis demonstrates that those who had the highest probability of criminal conviction were significantly more likely to be disadvantaged and/or vulnerable on a range of measures in comparison with those who were assigned to the No/Low Class. Figures 5 to 8 provide a snapshot of the childhood profile of individuals in each of the four conviction classes across a range of variables.

These figures show that less than half of all those who were assigned to the No/Low Class were male, while males made up the majority of people in each of the other three conviction classes. In addition, members of the No/Low Class were significantly less likely than those in any other conviction class to have:

- grown up in a disadvantaged household or a deprived neighbourhood;
- reported involvement in serious offending or drug use by age 12;
- come to the attention of the police or juvenile justice by age 12;
- been excluded from school or identified as having significant difficulties by teachers by age 12/13;
- had adverse experiences during childhood;
- described themselves as having impulsive personality at age 12.

Conversely, people who were assigned to the Chronic Class at age 34 were significantly more likely than those in any other conviction class to have reported involvement in serious offending or been known to the police and the youth justice system, especially on offending grounds, by age 12. They were also by far the most likely to have been excluded from school or identified as having significant problems by teachers in childhood. And they were more likely to score highly on a scale of impulsivity than those in other classes during their early years, and to have the lowest scores on a scale of self-esteem.

> **"…the profile of household socio-economic status and neighbourhood deprivation was fairly similar for those in all three conviction classes."**

Those in the Chronic Class were also least likely to have grown up in a household with two parents. On other measures in childhood (such as early family poverty, neighbourhood deprivation, drug use and crime victimisation) they did not differ significantly from those in the Teen/Early Adult Limited Class, but were more disadvantaged than those in the Later Onset Class.

Those who were assigned to the Later Onset Class were typically more vulnerable, deprived and problematic during childhood than those in the No/Low Class, but less so than those in the other two conviction classes. Interestingly, the profile of household socio-economic status and neighbourhood deprivation was fairly similar for those in all three conviction classes, so those in the Later Onset Class were not especially more or less economically disadvantaged than the others during childhood. However, they were far less likely than those in the other two conviction classes to have reported serious offending, or to have come to the attention of the police, youth justice system or teachers due to their behaviour, by age 12. Nevertheless, compared to the Teen/Early Adult Limited Class, those in the Later Onset Class were no different in terms of family structure, early drug use, early offence referrals to the hearing system, early victimisation, other adverse childhood experiences, or personality measures.

Overall, these findings indicate that the early lives of those who had a pattern of conviction by early adulthood were significantly different to those who did not; and that those who had the most prolific and chronic conviction pathways were the most disadvantaged, vulnerable, troublesome, and victimised children. However, the biggest difference between those in the Chronic Class and those in the Teen/Early Adult Limited Class was that a far higher proportion of the former were 'identified' by agencies as being problematic on the basis of their behaviour at a very early age (i.e., they had a children's hearing record, had known offence referrals, and had been excluded from school). While those in the Later Onset Class shared some early patterns of disadvantage,

troublesome behaviour and vulnerability with the other two conviction classes, they would have been far harder to identify as potentially problematic based on their characteristics in childhood.

Interestingly, while the probability of conviction for the Later Onset Class was far lower than for the other two conviction classes (meaning that they were not known to be prolific offenders), the level of seriousness of the offences for which they were convicted did include a range of behaviours that were also observed amongst the more frequent offenders. This included road traffic offences, assault and other forms of violence with injury, threatening and abusive behaviour, fraud, theft and sexual offences. In other words, the profile of their convictions was not substantially different, even though their frequency of being convicted was lower.

> "…these findings indicate that the early lives of those who had a pattern of conviction by early adulthood were significantly different to those who did not; and that those who had the most prolific and chronic conviction pathways were the most disadvantaged, vulnerable, troublesome, and victimised children."
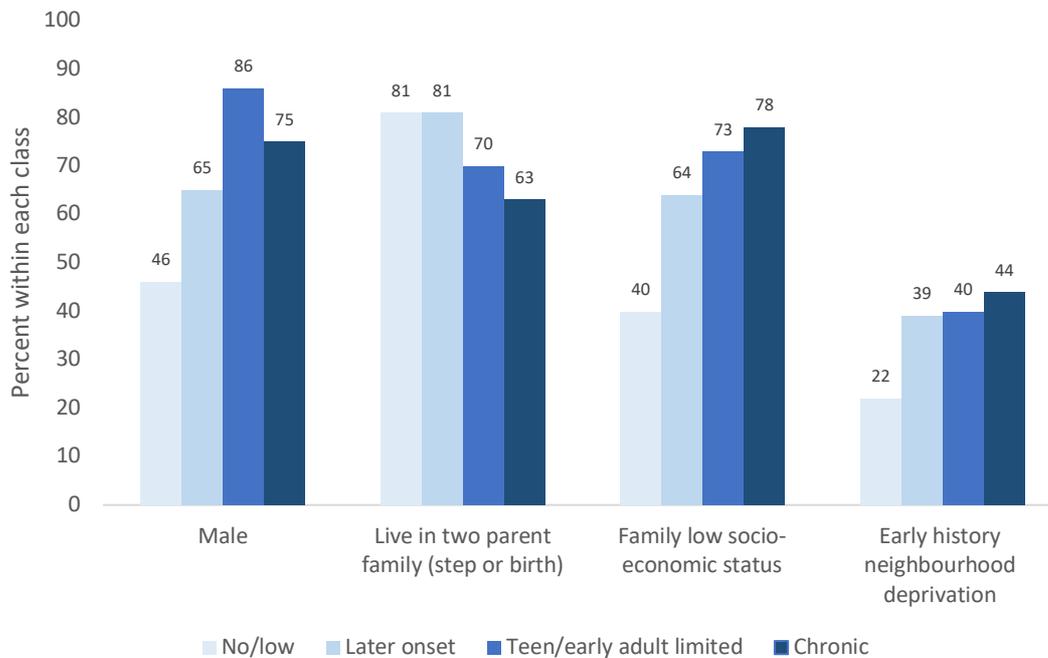


Figure 6: Sex, parental and childhood deprivation profile of cohort members by conviction class
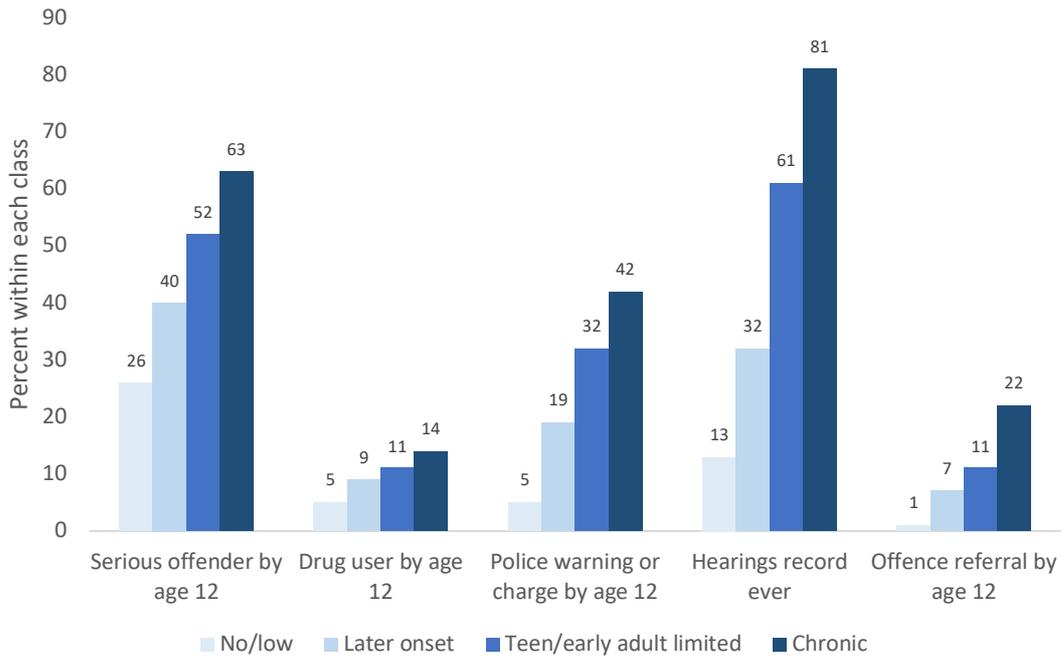
Figure 7: Childhood behavioural and system contact profile of cohort members by conviction class
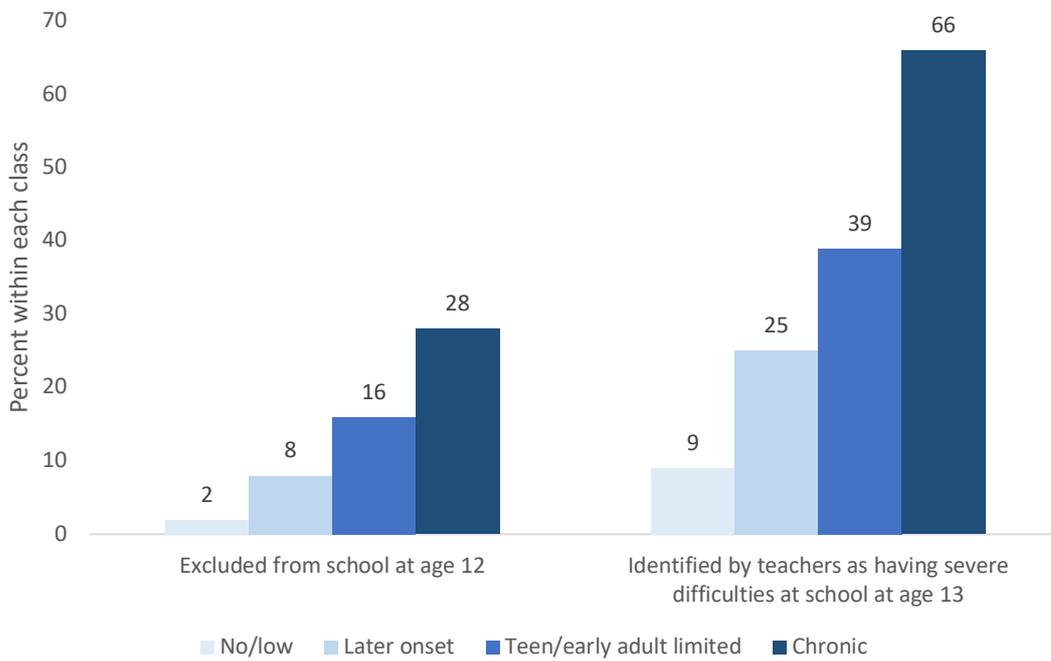


Figure 8: Childhood school profile of cohort members by conviction class
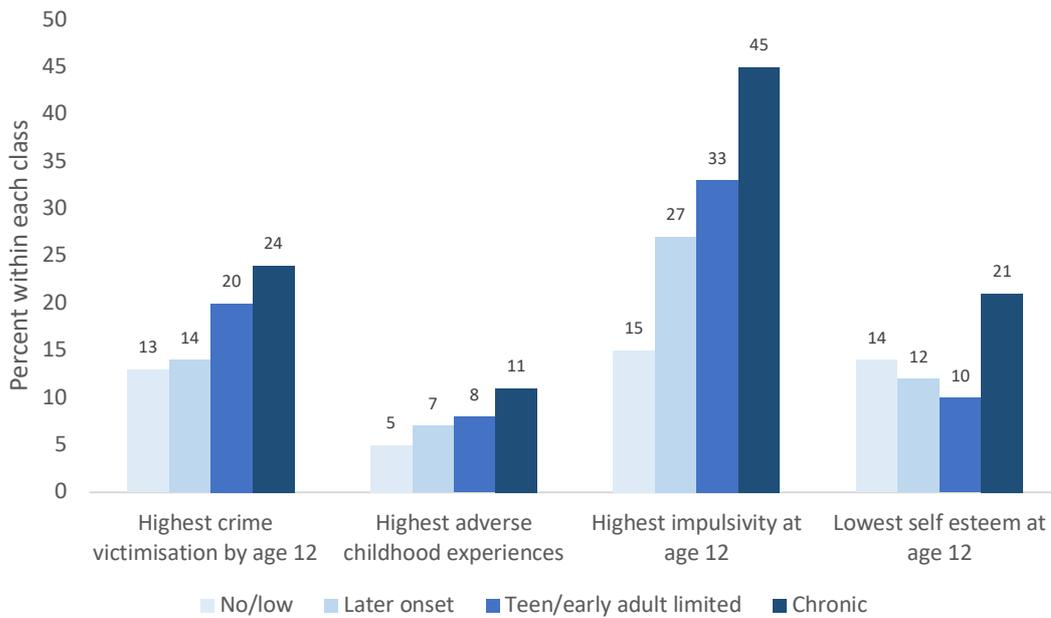
Figure 9: Childhood victimisation, ACEs and personality profile of cohort members by conviction class

## Factors most strongly associated with likelihood of criminal conviction

Drawing on the early childhood factors discussed above, we conducted analysis to determine whether and, if so, which of these factors might be most strongly associated with each conviction pathway. Table 3 shows the results of a multinomial regression model where the reference group for analysis (i.e., the key comparator for each of the other groups) was those in the No/Low Class. Odds Ratios are only reported for the variables that were found to be significant in the model. Due to missing data, the base number in each group is smaller than reported above, especially for the Chronic Class, which means that the results need to be interpreted with caution.

Table 3: Factors associated with conviction pathways (Reference group: No/Low Class)

| Odds Ratios | Later Onset (n=193) | Teen/Early Adult Limited (n=227) | Chronic (n=43) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Being male | 1.8 | 7.1 | 2.1 |
| Live in non-2 parent family (single parent, kinship, foster care or other care arrangement) | NS | 1.5 | 2.3 |
| Low household socio-economic status | 2.4 | 2.6 | 3.4 |
| Involvement in highest levels of serious offending by age 12 | NS | 1.3 | 2.3 |
| Excluded from school at age 12 | 2.5 | 5.3 | 5.0 |
| Police warnings or charges by age 12 | 2.5 | 3.4 | 5.3 |

NS = Not statistically significant.

Even after controlling for a range of other risk factors, being male was significantly associated with membership of all three conviction pathways. This was especially true for the Teen/Early Adult Limited Class, where males had 7.1 times greater odds than females of being assigned to this class rather than the No/Low Class. The odds of being assigned to the Later Onset or Chronic Class, rather than the No/Low Class, was twice as great for males than females. These findings indicate that there is something about being male that was associated with

a higher likelihood of criminal conviction (especially in the late teens/early adulthood) that was not explained by the other factors included in our analysis.

Growing up in any kind of household other than one with two parents (whether birth or step parents) was significantly associated with greater odds of being in one of the two high level conviction classes (Chronic and Teen/Early Adult Limited), rather than the No/Low Class; however, it did not appear to be a significant distinguishing factor for those in the Later Onset Class. While number of parents is not a measure of quality of parenting, it does provide some evidence that household disruption in the early years may be a significant indicator of risk for those who are likely to start being convicted during the teenage years.

Growing up in a neighbourhood of high deprivation was not significantly associated with conviction pathways when controlling for other factors; however, children whose parents were socio-economically disadvantaged were significantly more likely to be assigned to any of the three conviction pathways by age 34.  Compared to those in the No/Low Class, those who grew up in more economically disadvantaged households had around 2.5 greater odds of being assigned to the Teen/Early Adult Limited or the Later Onset Class, and 3.4 greater odds of being assigned to the Chronic Class.  This suggests that growing up in poverty may have a significant impact on the longer-term justice outcomes of children, over and above involvement in serious offending and a number of other risk factors, even years later.

> **"…growing up in poverty may have a significant impact on the longer-term justice outcomes of children, over and above involvement in serious offending and a number of other risk factors, even years later."**

Early involvement in serious offending had a strong association with being in the Teen/Early Adult Limited and, especially, the Chronic Class; however, those who engaged in serious offending by age 12 had no greater odds of being in the Later Onset Class compared to those in the No/Low conviction class.  This provides no evidence that individuals who start being convicted in early adulthood are simply serious offenders who fly below the radar of official agencies and don't get caught.  Instead, it suggests that the factors that explain their patterns of conviction are difficult to identify in their early years.

Importantly, those who were subject to 'formal' measures of social control in childhood, in terms of being excluded from school or receiving policing warnings or charges, had far greater odds of being convicted. Table 3 shows that, even after controlling for other early risk factors, those who were excluded from school by age 12 had around 5 times greater odds (than non-excluded children) of being assigned to the Teen/Early Adult Limited Class or the Chronic Class, rather than the No/Low Class.  Those who had been excluded by age 12 were also more likely to be assigned to the Later Onset Class; however, the odds of being in this class was only half that of the other two conviction classes.  Those who had been formally warned or charged by the police by the age of 12 also had 5.3 times greater odds (than non-warned/charged children) of being assigned to the

> **"…efforts to improve the lives of children, and reduce risky behaviour and contact with formal agencies of social control, could potentially reduce the likelihood of later criminal conviction."**

Chronic Class, rather than the No/Low Class.  While still statistically significant, the odds of being assigned to the Teen/Early Adult Limited Class were slightly lower (3.4), and lower still for the Later Onset Class (2.5).

These findings provide evidence of a strong and significant association between early childhood factors and later criminal conviction.  This means that efforts to improve the lives of children, and reduce risky behaviour and contact with formal agencies of social control, could potentially reduce the likelihood of criminal conviction.  Our results show that serious offending at an early age is strongly associated with early and repeated criminal conviction, and that the risk is exacerbated for children (especially

boys) growing up in less stable and more deprived family circumstances. However, the fact that the problematic behaviour of many of these individuals is known to the police and schools suggests that interventions from these agencies did not prevent them from ending up in the criminal justice system. Therefore, clearly different approaches are required to prevent young people from an escalating pattern of conviction in late adolescence and early adulthood.

## (ii) Does criminal justice contact help people stop offending over the longer term?

Analysis was undertaken to explore age of desistance (i.e., cessation of offending). This analysis uses data collected via our survey, and focuses on those who self-reported involvement in offending prior to age 18 for whom we have data for all of the teenage years (n=672). Figure 10 shows that just over half (53%) of responders who were involved in offending during the teenage years reported that they had stopped by age 18. A further 28% said that they had stopped between the ages of 18 and 25, while a fifth (19%) reported that they continued to be involved in offending after the age of 25. Bearing in mind that this self-selected sample was likely to be on the conservative side in terms of their behaviour, we anticipate that the prevalence of offending across the cohort as a whole was likely to be significantly higher than this.
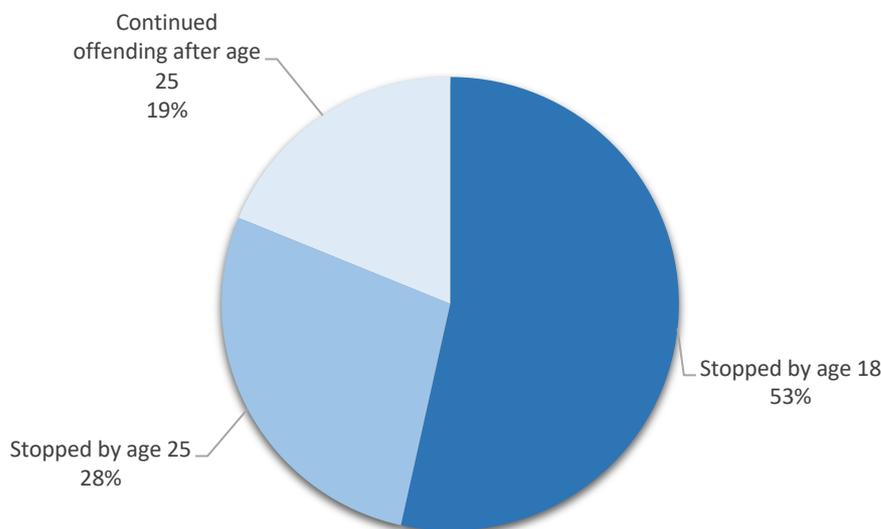


Figure 10: Long term offending patterns of responders who were involved in offending during the teenage years

Figures 11 to 15 explore some of the factors associated with age of desistance, and provide some simple descriptive analysis for the three groups shown in Figure 10. Using information from both childhood and adulthood, our aim was to understand what factors were most strongly associated with desistance amongst those who were involved in offending during their teenage years.

The analysis shows that those who continued to offend into adulthood were significantly more likely to be male than female, with almost two thirds (58%) of those who continued offending after the age of 25 being male in contrast to around a quarter (26%) of those who had stopped by age 18. However, the groups could not be differentiated between each other in terms of poverty (as measured by low family socio-economic status and living in a deprived neighbourhood), nor in terms of family structure.

Those who continued offending beyond age 18 were significantly more likely to have an early history of serious offending than those who desisted by this age. Around two-fifths (39%) of those who self-reported continuing offending after the age of 25 were involved in serious offending by age 12, in comparison with a quarter (25%) of those who stopped between ages 18 and 25, and around a fifth (19%) of those who stopped by age 18. Drug use during adolescence and, especially, in adulthood was also significantly associated with continuing to offend

beyond age 18.  Just under half (45%) of those who were still offending between age 18 and 25 had been using drugs by age 15, and three quarters (75%) of this group reported using drugs in adulthood. The figures were slightly, but not significantly, higher for those who continued to offend beyond age 25, with 50% using drugs by age 15 and 83% continuing to use drugs in the adult years.
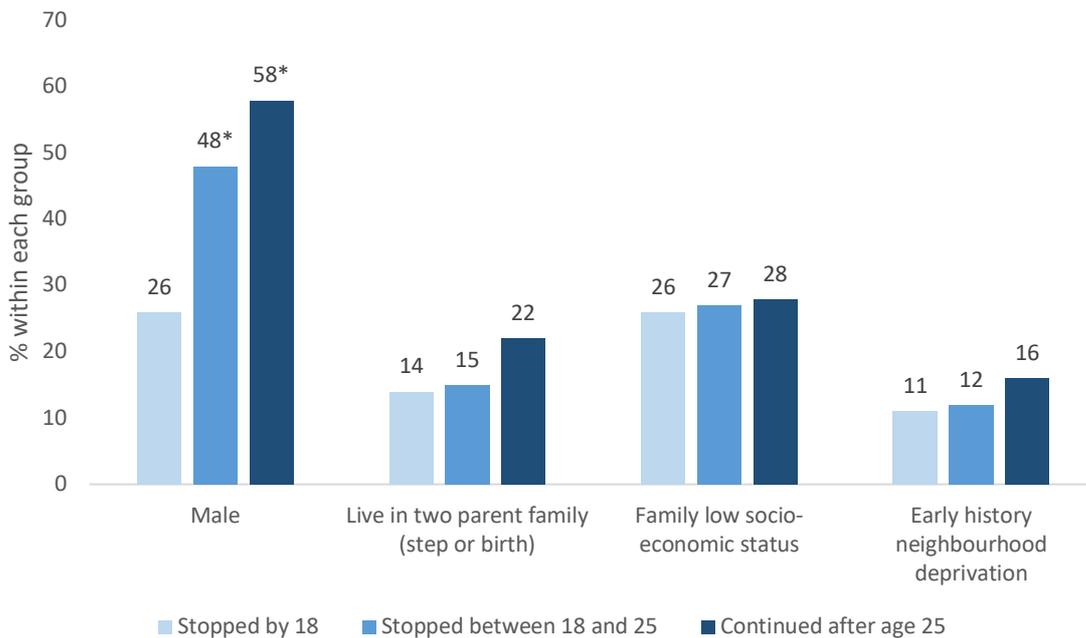


Figure 11: Sex, parental and childhood deprivation profile by age of desistance
Note: * Significant difference (p<.05) between those who stopped by age 18 and this group.
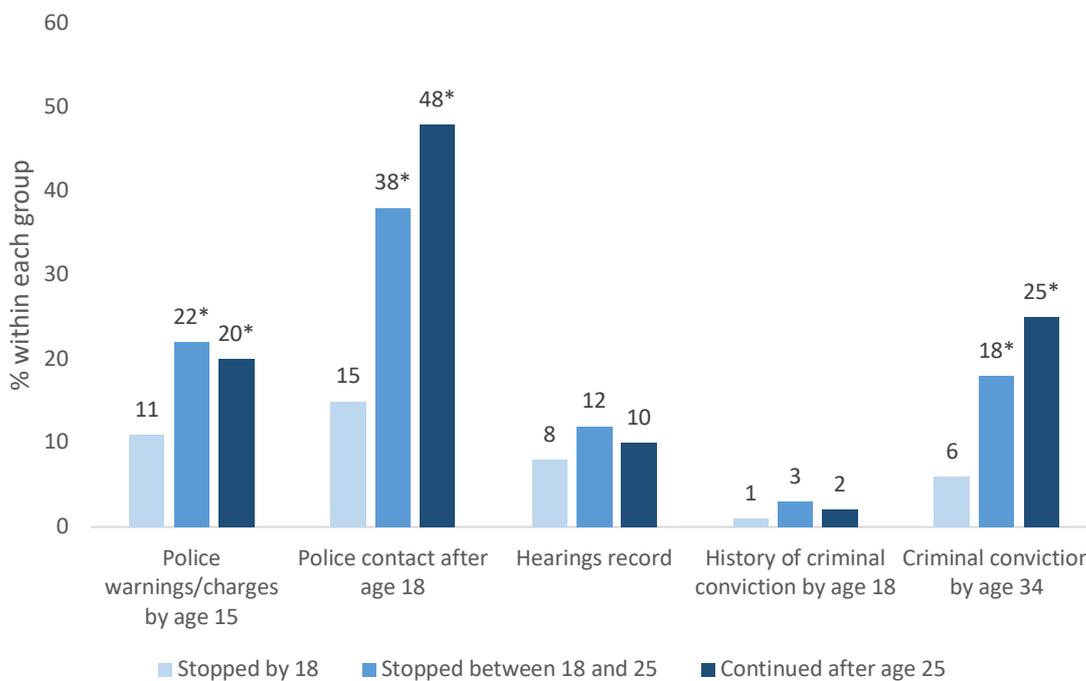


Figure 12: History of justice contacts by age of desistance
Note: * Significant difference (p<.05) between those who stopped by age 18 and this group.
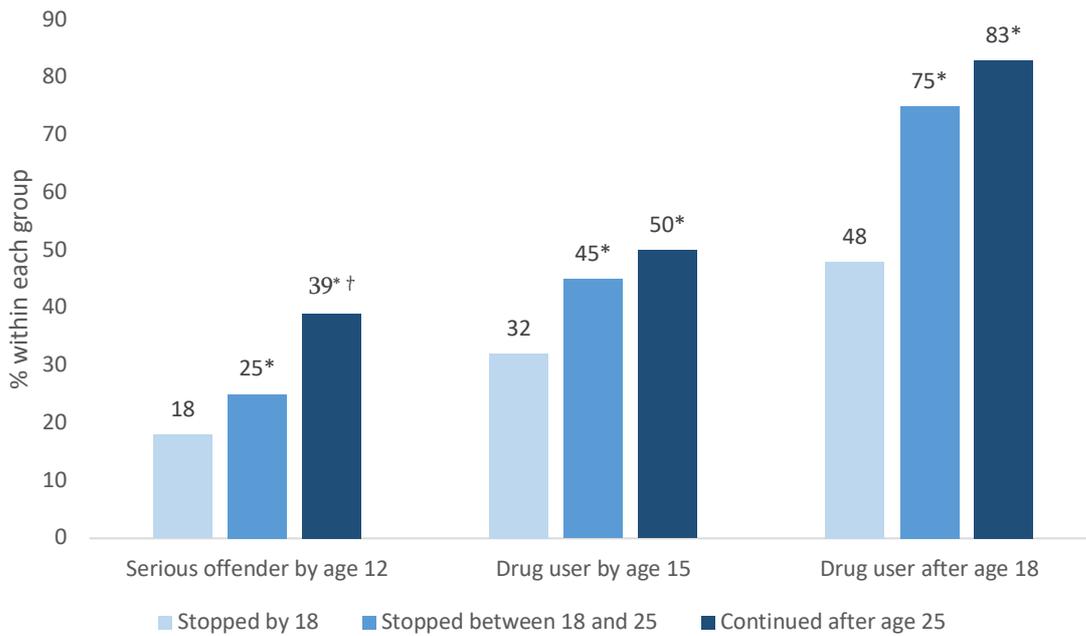
**Figure 13: History of serious offending and drug use by age of desistance**

Notes: * Significant difference (p<.05) between those who stopped by age 18 and this group; † Significant difference (p<.05) between those who stopped between the ages of 18 and 25 and those who continued offending after age 25.
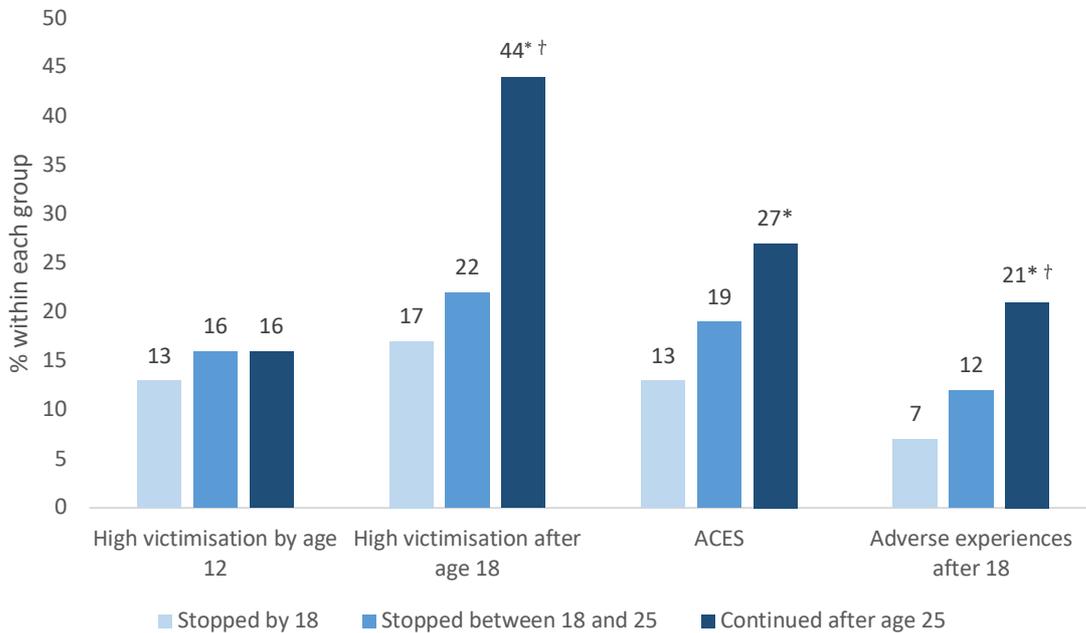


**Figure 14: History of victimisation and adverse experiences in childhood and adulthood by age of desistance**

Notes: *significant difference between those who stopped by age 18 and this group; † Significant difference (p<.05) between those who stopped between the ages of 18 and 25 and those who continued offending after age 25.
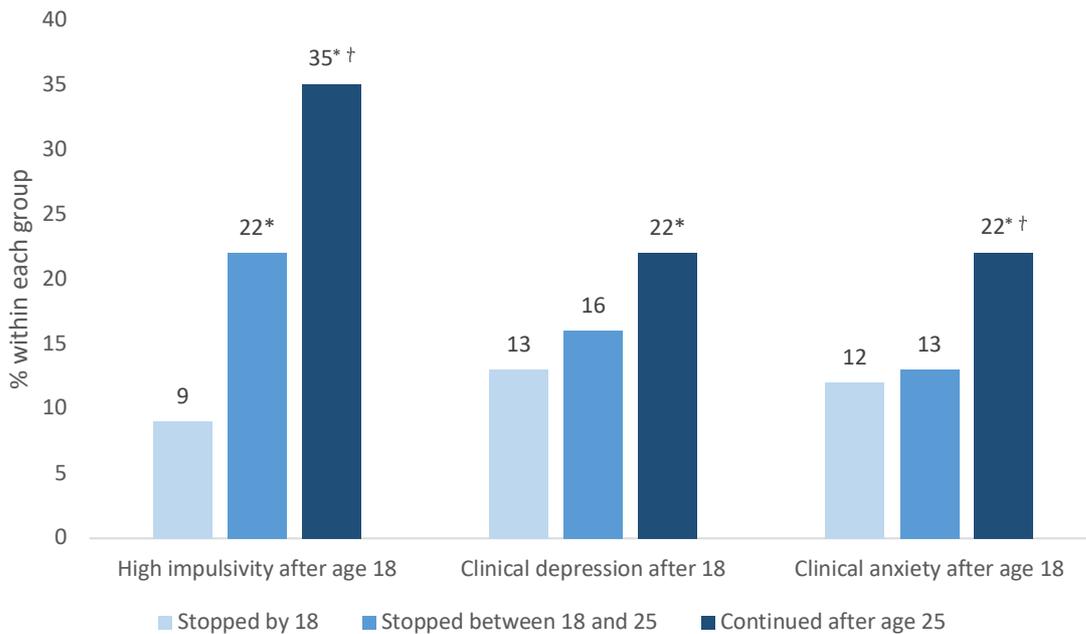
Figure 15: Personality and mental health problems by age of desistance
Notes: *significant difference between those who stopped by age 18 and this group; † Significant difference (p<.05) between those who stopped between the ages of 18 and 25 and those who continued offending after age 25.

The likelihood of having had police contact, both in childhood and in adulthood, was also higher amongst those who continued offending over the age of 18 compared to the earliest desister group.

The descriptive analysis also shows that the vast majority of those who self-reported offending were never convicted. At age 18 there was no difference between the groups in terms of likelihood of a criminal conviction (which was low), although, as might be expected, prevalence of conviction increased over time for those who continued offending into adulthood and early middle age. Nevertheless, only a quarter (25%) of those who self-reported offending after the age of 25 had been convicted in the criminal justice system by age 34.

Interestingly, the three groups were not distinguishable in terms of the proportion of people who were most highly victimised by crime during childhood; however, those who had continued offending beyond age 25 were significantly more likely to have experienced high levels of victimisation in adulthood. In terms of adverse childhood experience (ACEs), survey responders who self-reported continuing offending after the age of 25 had the highest incidence of ACEs. They were also more likely to report the highest incidence of adverse experiences in adulthood (which included events such as relationship breakdown, losing a job, having a serious accident or illness, being interfered with sexually, or having someone close to them die through homicide or suicide).

Looking at measures of personality and mental health, both impulsivity and anxiety in adulthood were associated with age of desistance. Those who were still offending beyond age 18 were

> **"… those who continue offending after the age of 25 are a particularly vulnerable group and the desistance process becomes more complex as people get older because of the possible scarring effect of both early life experiences and new adversities which are emergent in adulthood."**

significantly more likely than those who desisted by this age to have a high impulsivity score, while this was even more likely for those who continued offending beyond age 25. Finally, prevalence of moderate to severe levels of anxiety and of depression in adulthood were significantly higher for those who continued offending beyond age 25 compared to the earliest desisters (by age 18).

Overall, these findings suggest that offending into early adulthood (up to age 25) has a significant association with both problematic behavioural factors (including highly impulsive activity, serious offending and drug use) and institutional contact in the form of policing in both childhood/adolescence and early adulthood.  However, for those who continue offending beyond this age, specific aspects of vulnerability that occur in adulthood (including high levels of victimization, adverse experiences, and clinical levels of anxiety), alongside ACEs and serious offending behaviour in childhood, are strongly associated with continued offending.  These data suggest that those who continue offending after the age of 25 are a particularly vulnerable group and the desistance process becomes more complex as people get older because of the possible scarring effect of both early life experiences and new adversities which are emergent in adulthood.

Multinomial regression was used to examine which of the factors identified as significant in Figures 11 to 15 were most strongly associated with desistance, using those who desisted between the ages of 18 and 25 as the reference group.  This allowed us to examine the relative impact of specific factors when taking account of the others, and helps to differentiate between those who desisted at different time points.  Only those findings that were statistically significant in the final modelling are presented.

Table 4: Multinomial regression of factors associated with desistance

| Reference category: Stopped offending between 18 and 25 (n=142) | Stopped offending by 18 (n=295) Odds ratio | Continued offending after age 25 (n=95) Odds ratio |
|---|---|---|
| Being female | 2.4 | NS |
| No drug use after age 18 | 3.6 | NS |
| Low impulsivity after age 18 | 2.1 | NS |
| No police warning/charges by age 15 | 2.1 | NS |
| No police contact after age 18 | 2.9 | NS |
| High victimisation after age 18 | NS | 2.6 |

Notes: Modelling also controlled for:  early involvement in serious offending; early drug use by age 18; adverse childhood and adult experiences; depression and anxiety. NS: not significant; all odds ratios shown in the table were significant at p<0.05

Table 4 indicates that, when taking account of a range of other factors, females had over twice the odds than males of desisting by age 18 rather than continuing to offend into the early 20s.  Early desistance was also strongly associated with no involvement in illegal drug use and exhibiting a low level of impulsive behaviour beyond age 18. Those who avoided adversarial police contact in the early to mid-teenage years and into adulthood, also had significantly greater odds of stopping offending by age 18 than those with no such police history.  What is striking from this analysis is that early involvement in serious offending does not remain significant in the modelling when controlling for other factors.  This suggests that factors other than age of onset of offending may play a greater role in determining age of desistance.

When comparing those who continued to offend after age 25 with those who desisted between the age of 18 and 25, we found only one variable to be significant within the model.  Table 4 shows that, when holding other factors constant, the main difference between those who desisted in early adulthood and those who continued offending relates to victimisation.  Those who reported the highest levels of victimisation had 2.6 times greater odds of continuing to offending after the age of 25 (rather than stopping between age 18 and 25) than those with no such history.

> "…factors other than age of onset of offending may play a greater role in determining age of desistance."

These findings do not, of course, determine causality and further work is required to examine in more detail some of the age-related factors that may have acted as promotors of, or barriers to, desistance. Nevertheless, it is important to recognise that there are likely to be both distal and proximal factors that influence offending pathways, and the relative importance of these may well change over time. This means that, while reducing risks in childhood and adolescence is important, it is vital to take a life-course approach to preventing offending behaviour.

> **"…contacts with criminal justice either have very limited impact on propensity to offend (in terms of conviction history) or serve to exacerbate offending propensity (in terms of adversarial police contact)."**

Critically the three groups which formed the focus of this analysis could not be differentiated by their likelihood of criminal conviction by age 18, but remaining under the radar of the police was found to be a key part of the desister journey. This suggests that contacts with criminal justice either have very limited impact on propensity to offend (in terms of conviction history) or serve to exacerbate offending propensity (in terms of adversarial police contact). This theme is picked up again in the interview narratives to which the report now turns.

### (iii) What impacts do offending and justice system contacts have on outcomes over the life-course into early middle age?

In this section we explore in more detail the inter-relationships between system contacts, patterns of offending and outcomes with regard to education, employability as well as health and inter-personal relationships, from the teenage years, through early adulthood and into early middle age. The findings reported here are based on data from interviews.

As noted above, all of those interviewed had a history of involvement in some form of offending during the teenage years; two fifths had contact with the juvenile justice system (referred for offending and/or on care and protection grounds) and around three fifths had criminal convictions by age 35.

The interview data reinforce and illuminate further the findings from the analysis of the criminal conviction and survey data reported above. They show how early and intensive system involvement and early involvement in serious offending, especially violence, can have a profound impact on later life journeys. A typical pathway was referral to the children's hearing system on care and protection grounds in early childhood, being made subject to compulsory measures of care (including foster or residential care), and gradually transitioning from being viewed by systems as primarily a victim into an offender. Outcomes for such 'care experienced' individuals were the most negative, with lives consistently blighted by poverty, mental health and drug problems, poor educational experiences and periods of unemployment. When agencies did make a positive difference in people's lives, it was generally because of an individual worker or carer with whom strong relationships had been built.

> **"…early and intensive system involvement and early involvement in serious offending, especially violence, can have a profound impact on later life journeys."**

For those encountering the criminal justice system for the first time in the mid to late teenage years, contacts with institutions (including the police and the courts) appeared to have only limited, indeed almost fleeting, impact on their behaviour: a hazard, that was initially alarming but quickly normalised and one that individuals had to negotiate.

Interviewees who talked most positively about their lives in early middle age were those who had partners, children and jobs which they valued. Such outcomes often depended on educational inclusion, cutting ties with friendship groups from the teenage and early adult years, and, in some cases, downplaying earlier involvement in offending - a reconstruction of identity. Taken together, the interviews show the myriad challenges that

individuals face when circumstances beyond their control shape childhood experiences and relationships, and opportunity structures that are available to them as they mature. What they demonstrate too is the precariousness of some people's situations and how decisions to stop offending can be difficult to sustain if supportive contexts are not available: a case of choice, but within major constraint.

In this section of the report, we have organised the interviewee data under a range of headings which we feel best capture people's experiences. We begin with interviewee perceptions of agency contact (police, first contacts with criminal justice, and care experience). This is followed by an exploration of the contexts which interviewees felt had driven and sustained their offending in the teenage and early adult years and their longer-term impacts. The section concludes with reflections from the cohort on pathways out of offending, including stories of survival and transformation.

## a. Experiences of agency contact

### Contact with the police:

Most of those interviewed reported having had adversarial contact with the police, often from a young age. Partly this was due to their own routine activities in the early to mid-teenage years, especially as a result of hanging out in public places as part of large groups. Highly visible to the police, these groups were often involved in graffiti, minor vandalism and fighting. For many of those interviewed, police contact was viewed as an occupational hazard rather than having any deterrent or positive impact – it was described as a game of 'cat and mouse' by more than one. The following extracts capture the rather insouciant attitudes towards policing of leisure expressed by some:

> "…police contact was viewed as an occupational hazard rather than having any deterrent or positive impact – it was described as a game of 'cat and mouse' by more than one."

> There was a stage when it was the ASBO era[14]. We were actively getting ASBOs… [the police] would just come and be like 'it's too loud at 2.00 am and you're getting written up' and we'd be like 'add it to the pile'. (Interviewee 733)

> I'm walking away, I'm getting led away by the police and everyone's like [starts clapping his hands to demonstrate] ... that was the mentality because it was just like 'ah you know what, you get picked up and they give you a ticket and a fine for breaking windows'. So what? You know you're just like 'whatever' (shrugs shoulders). (Interviewee 896, recounting incident at age 15/16)

A number of interviewees had particularly negative perceptions of the police, and felt that they had been labelled and picked on. For some, their treatment was described as 'brutal' and interviewees were fearful of certain police officers. Rather than impacting behaviour in a positive way, interviewees reflected on how this could exacerbate offending and/or criminalise:

> The police think they're above the law….They just came across quite, um, aggressive ….they would constantly be pulling over my mates and they'd be searching them and just, just, taking liberties to be honest…they're going to basically hang us upside down and shake us until they find something. (Interviewee 899)

For a number of interviewees negative experiences continued well into adulthood, and had a profound effect on longer term outcomes, including employment outcomes:

> Probably made [offending] worse 'cause I actually wouldnae be bothered with them… they are brutal toward people.. the police dragged me out my house…they used to rip me out my bed….and sometimes

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[14] ASBOS - Anti social behaviour orders for the under 16s were introduced in Scotland in 2004, at a time when there was a major focus on persistent offending by young people, in particular fast-tracking persistent offenders into youth justice processes.

> *I wasnae even involved in stuff and I'm getting sacked from work 'cause I've been getting lifted with twice in a week. (Interviewee 678)*

### Contacts with the criminal justice system as offenders:

First contacts with the criminal courts in the mid-teenage years were described by some as 'scary', with particular concerns about the longer-term impact on job prospects of having a record of criminal conviction; as well as fear about being sent to prison:

> *At the time it gave me a fright, because I knew it would jeopardize my future. ..if that had been prosecuted on racial abuse, you know?  (Interviewee 554)*

> *Going through the court system and everything like that and having the prospect of having a charge against my name, .. no one's gonna want to hire someone that's got a paper that says they've done well at school or no, and they've got another bit of paper saying they're a violent person, you know? (Interviewee 899)*

> *That was quite a negative experience because I was very scared thinking – I could go to jail (Interviewee 831, recounting when he was taken to court for assault at age 16).*

Beyond first contacts however, the criminal justice system itself did not really feature in interviewees' narratives about their offending behaviour. Rather, going to court was viewed as a frustrating process of delays, and dropped or downgraded charges: an inconvenient hurdle to be navigated, but having little individual impact.

Fines, for some were an occupational hazard rather than having any deterrent effect. As one interviewee, with numerous convictions as an adult for motor vehicle offences and drug-driving, put it:

> *Well I haven't really seen that I broke the law and the worst they could really do is give me a fine. So, I wasn't really bothered to be honest. (Interviewee 561)*

Probation was dismissed by some as a 'tick box exercise' and community service was described in terms of something to be endured rather than something that would change behaviour, as exemplified in the following extract:

> *To be honest I didn't learn anything from it, I was just surrounded by other people that committed crime…I didn't find it as much as a punishment, it was just something I had to do. (Interviewee 831).*

For some of those involved in the most serious and persistent offending in the interviewee sub-sample, prison was a way of life for many families.  As one interviewee said:

> *I was less anxious as [I] discovered half of my mates were there. (Interviewee 784)*

### Perceptions of care experienced interviewees:

A number of interviewees had more intensive experiences of agency intervention. As noted above, a typical pathway involved early referral to the children's hearing system on care and protection grounds, experience of foster care, and different forms of residential care over the teenage years.  During this pathway, individuals often felt that they transitioned from being viewed as a victim of neglect or abuse into being viewed as an offender.

> **"…individuals often felt that they transitioned from being viewed as a victim of neglect or abuse into being viewed as an offender."**

For these interviewees it was not always systems, programmes or specific interventions that mattered, but key individuals with whom they built up positive, and sometimes negative, relationships.  As one interviewee put it:

*There were some [social workers] that were lovely.  I mean I've bumped into a couple of them since and they are, they're lovely. And then you bump into some of them that even back then you wanted to knock them out…nasty pieces of work. (Interviewee 545).*

A number of interviewees did not get on with their allocated social workers or found that the types of supervision given were meaningless and did not address their specific needs or concerns:

*I hated my social worker.. probably because she was authoritative.  She never understood me, I didn't understand her. ..She threatened a few times.. and said that if I didn't behave they would put me in a children's home on Christmas day. (Interviewee 840)*

*And I only had her a couple of times, but she give me worksheets and asked what colour my hair was. What colour my eyes were. I didnae kinda understand the point of her. She never spoke to me, she never had questions about what had happened, I don't actually remember having an actual conversation with her about anything to do with it. (Interviewee 415, referred to the children's hearing system as victim of abuse and neglect)*

However, some of the care-experienced interviewees highlighted the ways in which their families tried to force them not to disclose anything to social work.  This exemplifies not only some of the challenges which social workers face in communicating and building relationships with those in their care, but crucially how some cases of abuse might go under the radar:

*[My dad would] get us in a taxi and used to tell us what we hae to say, and that was we had to pin all the blame onto mum, he had us like f\*\*\*king saying what he wanted us to say. (Interviewee 210)*

*I don't think my mum wanted to have a social worker, I remember getting in trouble, and her and my dad saying you don't tell people what's going in the house. You don't want outsiders coming in. So we, we were never really supposed to tell people. (Interviewee 415)*

*There wasn't any inquiry as to my household environment, you know ..every time I went out with my social worker, which was like once a week, my father would always give me a script, so you know 'don't say that, don't say that kind of thing'. (Interviewee 247, who described his father as 'handsy' - violent)*

A number of interviewees had been referred to specific community based youth projects.  Mostly this was a very positive experience:

*It was pretty decent. (Interviewee 989)*

*They really persevered – I was lucky in the people that kind of took stuff on.  I think I was just, I had good people around me, I think they had a huge impact on my life, massive. (Interviewee 840)*

However, the longer-term impacts of such intervention were not always evident.  For example, one interviewee (989) felt that the work experience, which had been arranged through a project, had been helpful, but after a couple of years the interviewee had drifted into worklessness, and was unemployed at the time of interview.

Experiences of various forms of residential care were also mixed.  For some the experience of care was entirely negative, with interviewees describing themselves as commodities who were simply considered to be a problem to be dealt with.

*Obviously if you're put in foster care [or] sent to a home you know there's like a massive lump of rejection there…Like I've always felt like either, or, I'm the problem or, or you know everything is going wrong or like and then having a cycle of negative thoughts. (Interviewee 995)*

*[We're] passed along the chain….It's always like with everyone – teachers, social works, it is always the kid's fault they're there, never mind the fact that the adults are the ones that have screwed up in the first place. (Interviewee 545).*

*Foster care was difficult you know… I couldn't go tell because I tried and I'd failed already you know. I knew she (foster mother) had a lot anger towards me with that.' (Interviewee 376)*

For others, care placements – and individual carers - made all the difference between surviving or 'going under'; however, it was recognised that this was not always easy:

*My foster carers, I still keep in touch with them…they played quite a big part in our lives. If it wasnae for them. I don't know how I would've turned out to be honest'. (Interviewee 210)*

*My social worker at the time, she was lovely… She was really, really nice, but she ended up giving up being a social worker just because, for her, she's not been able to help people. I remember me really impacting on her 'cos I kept trying, but the odds were against, and you keep trying and trying. (Interviewee 101)*

Leaving care too was seen as a critical juncture, again with variations in experience. In one case an interviewee, referred in early childhood to the children's hearing system for parental neglect, and who had experience of secure care in the teenage years for violent behaviour, was able to stay on in a residential care setting on a voluntary basis between the ages of 16 and 18:

*Yeah the social worker [there] was quite keen to help out with college studies and stuff. So he helped with finance and other hobbies and things…and also the key workers in the home. I still speak to the staff workers now. (Interviewee 307)*

However, for others age 16 marked an abrupt ending to care, for which they did not feel prepared and which had mostly negative consequences. As interviewee 840 put it:

*You turned 16 and it was very much like 'OK you're an adult now go and do your own thing'. Yeah all the kind of other support kind of just went a bit ..out of the window. (Interviewee 840)*

Interviewee 545 gave a powerful and moving account of the challenges in retaining any sense of identity, belonging or history for care-experienced youngsters transitioning into adulthood:

*Nobody tells you how you're meant to live, how you're meant to pay bills…and all of a sudden you're meant to know how to do all this all on your own and the only people you're surrounded by is people who have either been in the same situation as you and are already on drugs.. or have already had experiences in prison and just kind of continue down that route. And then there's you at 16 just dumped into the middle of it……*

*….90% of the people in the B&B are on some sort of substance because it's a miserable life…then every day you're meant to then go to The Access Point to find out if you stay in that B&B or if you're moving to another one…And then while you're trying to do all that you've got to then cart all your belongings… and then you have to whittle all that down to minimal amounts because you cannae be carrying that every week. So any connections you have had to childhood are then lost because you have to get rid of them because there's no other option. (Interviewee 545)*

Support for this interviewee eventually came from some key individual workers in hostels and services for people experiencing homelessness, emphasising again the importance of empathetic and highly motivated staff:

*'Really good, just more talking to you and understanding you on a level, rather than thinking that they know best, and like talkin' to, like, a normal person. (Interviewee 545)*

## b. Contexts driving and sustaining offending and their longer-term impacts

Given the limited perceived impact of justice systems on reductions in offending, and the proportion of the responders who continued offending into the early adult years and beyond, what other factors did interviewees identify as facilitators of (continued) offending and potential barriers to behavioural change? Here we focus on 5 core contexts from the interview data: peer pressure; gangs and community subcultures; interpersonal and family violence; drugs and alcohol; and education and employment.

### Negotiating peer pressure:

Negotiating the informal orders of peer groups, and attempting to assert a sense of identity within that context, was associated with sustained involvement in offending behaviour for many interviewees. This form of negotiation occurred at most stages through their life course from early years, through secondary education, and into early adulthood.  The following extracts from the interviews illustrate various dynamics of peer pressure:

**To be 'cool'**

*So you almost pigeonhole things to areas…distance myself from people..so for example stealing a car was never on my radar, and anyone that did you would almost distance yourself from.. … But, weirdly, at the same time…there was maybe a peer pressure to operate in that circle. So you almost had to be part of that, to be cool right? But distance yourself from the stuff that was significantly impactful maybe for future life. (Interviewee 984).*

**To fit in**

*Just feeling like I had a point to prove..yea, to fit in and be you know, ..to kinda, like make a name for myself..to have a tough image, it would make me look more important. (Interviewee 831)*

*Mischief can very easily transition into something a bit more malicious when you're sort of egged on, or if you're not really thinking about the consequences as more often is the case. ..for me I was looking for a crowd, school can be a socially difficult place… I was liking it to tribalism sort of stuff. You know you're looking for a tribe a group to belong to. (Interviewee 896)*

**For self-preservation or protection**

*When you're young like I didnae want to be a part of that, but I did, I wasnae strong enough to be like ' oh you shouldnae do that'. I didnae want people to turn on me I guess… I didnae want to be picked on… When I think about it now I used to think I was really strong but I really wasn't. (Interviewee 554).*

*So it's either you stick with them and do what they do or, or don't and basically be a bullying victim. And I wanted to be popular…they ruined my school life…we thought that their family would like terrorise [us].. so you just went along with that.  Yeah it made me feel horrible and still makes me feel horrible now. (Interviewee 676)*

**To experiment**

*I think between 16 and early 20s [drinking and drug taking] was very up and down on a daily basis. Just depending on what money you could get your hands on….there were parts of it that were [pressured by others]. So definitely the harder things like heroin. That was definitely people encouraging you to try it. And then it would be like 'awww just try it this way, or just try it that way, you'll be fine'. (Interviewee 545)*

### Gangs and community sub-cultures:

Interviewees gave graphic illustrations of the ways in which sub-cultures of violence, which were historically specific to certain neighbourhoods, led to persistent and sometimes extremely serious forms of offending.

Linking to themes of identity and reputation highlighted above, one interviewee reflected on their involvement during the mid-teenage years in a gang of around 20 to 30 young people from the local area:

*It was just passed down from the older generation… because where we started coming up and kind of hanging about their spaces, they were the ones that you know they had the reputation, they had the name as you were growing up. You were thinking well, I'm not going to be the one that loses that name. I definitely looked up to them to be how they were and what they done. (Interviewee 640)*

This type of territoriality led to a precarious existence for some, highlighting the ways in which victimisation and offending are closely entwined. Interviewees described how situations could spiral out of control and serious assaults could develop from very minor, as well as from both organised and random altercations. The following extracts are offered as illustration:

*Basically the girls from the area that I moved to didn't like the area I was from. So they kind of, like, tried to bully me a little bit, And yeah I got myself into a couple of fights because of that.. I was like attacked by four or five girls at a time… and then I would basically go and get them back one by one. (Interviewee 352)*

*There were boundaries you know like the areas you didnae cross like …[we] would get each other's number and be like right Friday night we'll meet up and we'll have a big fight…And when I think back then it's a miracle that nobody actually got killed if I'm being totally honest'. (Interviewee 844)*

*If you were feeling boisterous or adventurous you jumped on a bus you ran after them or they ran after you, and it was case of chicken, who blinks first.. there were people that got caught [by the other gang]. There was one guy in particular …I remember he was beaten so badly that he died three times in the ambulance; it could seem very just 'oh yeah whatever' and then actually it can very suddenly have serious consequences to that point that we actually had boys walking about with hatchets at one point. (Interviewee 896).*

Neighbourhood reputation shaped interviewee experience into adulthood. Some highlighted the ways in which informal, criminal orders within communities would sort out neighbourhood problems. Others talked about fear of going out in the neighbourhood, with violent neighbours and fear of reprisals, as shown in the following extracts:

*Where we live now we've got like people selling drugs across the road, and kids that are going around smashing window and gangs hanging outside your door, nothing actually gets done. (Interviewee 415)*

*I really dislike going out. I feel like I'm putting my family in danger if I go out with them. I'm scared that they'll find us….[if] I could literally disappear off the face of the earth I would. You know and go and live on a hill somewhere in a small cabin. (Interviewee 376)*

Interpersonal violence and family dynamics:

A number of interviewees talked about their issues with anger in the early years. Family interpersonal violence was a common thread, and this formed a context for expressive violence by some. On-going problems with mental health (including self-harm, anxiety and depression) were associated with these experiences and behaviours, sometimes over the longer term to early middle age. The following extracts from the interview data capture some of these contexts and reflections from interviewees on their impacts:

> **"Family interpersonal violence was a common thread, and this formed a context for expressive violence by some."**

*My dad came in really drunk… And he came in and attacked my mom that night and he made me sit and watch it all…And my mom had every single bit of her face, she had burst, tissues, burst tissue all over her face. Broken eye sockets it was horrific. (Interviewee 210)*

*And I've seen so much fighting, so much arguments, like my mum throwing TVs and CD players at my dad, my uncle fighting and bringing knives and things like that. (Interviewee 415)*

*Just like the angry teenager I suppose…so they were bullying me basically and then I got hold of one of them by themselves. And then yeah, maybe I went a bit overboard and I might have broken his arm… [My] older brother was, like he got very drunk and got quite aggressive with me through the years of my childhood…..you can end up deflecting these things towards other people. (Interviewee 899).*

*I used to be bullied at school so I would just kind of run away from fights. And I think the first time I ever sort of properly retaliated was in the high school...  I think I gave a young lad some serious facial injuries. I think stuff must have been leading up to that, cause I do remember going into school and saying 'nobody better mess with me today. Somebody'll get hurt'.  And yeah somebody got hurt. …..I'm learning to deal with [anxiety and depression]  a bit better. I used to just pick stuff up and throw stuff or be quite loud. And then in 2019 I got a diagnosis of borderline personality disorder'. (Interviewee 307)*

### Drug and alcohol use:

Most interviewees shared stories about underage drinking – one talked about how she and her friends persuaded a homeless person to buy the alcohol on their behalf when they were underage. Drug use was also very common amongst the interviewee sub-sample, starting early in the teenage years, often with cannabis, but peaking again in the early adult years between around 20 and 22, with poly drug use including cocaine and ecstasy. This was associated with a shift in leisure activities from the streets to the clubs, and drugs as well as drinking formed the backdrop to stories of violent victimisation.

Drug use in adulthood was normalised amongst interviewees - a commodity to lend enjoyment and excitement to nights out.  No one interviewed talked about illegal drugs or their sale as a crime: indeed a small number of interviewees admitted that they had sold drugs in their twenties.   However, for some, drug use veered into addiction.  A number of interviewees talked about injecting drug use within their families and this experience was one of the contexts of their own use of drugs in early adulthood. Importantly, a number of interviewees continued drug use into early middle age but here the function was more a way of de-stressing at home or on holiday. There appeared to be widespread availability at all ages:

> **"Drug use in adulthood was normalised amongst interviewees – a commodity to lend enjoyment and excitement to nights out."**

**Mid teenage use**

*Yeah, I was drinking quite heavily, vodka as a child as well..from about 14 onwards. (Interviewee 899)*

*I know he (family member) was involved with some form of dealing, or something…I could pretty much walk out my house and within a couple of minutes have something. Tablets or whether it was something to smoke or I could pretty much get anything. (Interviewee 247)*

**Continuing into adulthood**

*Cannabis, predominantly, was always my go to…I ended up smoking into the late teens into early 20s. Probably had a massive detrimental effect on, I don't know, a measure of achievement…The amount of money I spent is probably absolutely shocking, I kinda dropped out of university and just went on a bit oa party spree….constant, constant pills, loads of MDMA, a little bit of experimenting with psychedelics. (Interviewee 896)*

**Continuing into early middle age**

*Weed so that was probably my poison…I was roonaboot, aboot 16,17…It's only like 4 months ago, I just stopped smoking. (Interviewee 989)*

*I've experimented with myself and I cannae see how it's illegal, it prevents me from going out, getting drunk and I don't know. Sometimes like it knocks me out…there's times when I've smoked more and I smoked, like today. (Interviewee 517)*

*And once you like it (cocaine) I kinda got addicted to it for a wee bit. ..I ended up having to go spend, all my wages ….And I remember when I was stopping you get the craving, you say ' I could do a wee line'. But the faith in me was more you know? So I had the power to stop…the only thing I do is smoke, if I go to Amsterdam or India, I smoke some hash. (Interviewee 601)*

*Well me and alcohol had a rocky past couple of years. Again [I] lack the 'it' in my brain that tells me 'no enough is enough'. And invariable, it's, if the timing is wrong, I will, I will quite happily drink myself into oblivion. (Interviewee 896)*

Importantly, as noted above, drug taking and heavy drinking was a context for violent victimisation from the early teenage years onwards, linked to increased vulnerability and loss of control, as shown in these extracts:

*I think maybe about [age] 12. .. And we were assaulted in the street by three girls who actually I think were about 16 maybe. I was punched in the face…it was just underage drinking you know. (Interviewee 813)*

*I think the times I have been assaulted I've been really drunk and over the limit and I've just been assaulted. (Interviewee 813)*

*When you take them (steroids) like, you really, it feels amazing.. But then, when you're young you just want to go out and have fun and like, almost show off a bit,..it's just a cocktail for…just basically a mad night out…nothing scares you really….I was taking steroids and there was drinking at that point… this guy came up to us.. and he slapped me in the head and I just went mad ….there was blood down his shirt…you know if you've been drinking and he hits you first, someone hits you in the head, you just see red basically you know. (Interviewee 994).*

## Education and employment:

In keeping with findings from earlier phases of the Study, the interview data showed a strong connection between involvement in offending and school exclusion – both formal and informal. Pathways out of offending were inhibited where education broke down and people drifted through periods of unemployment or low skilled, insecure jobs. Experience of bullying often stopped people from going to school and a common feature of accounts of exclusion related to undiagnosed learning difficulties, in particular dyslexia-type problems. Relationships with teachers were also problematic for some, including feelings of have been labelled as a troublemaker and then acting up to the label:

> **"Pathways out of offending were inhibited where education broke down and people drifted through periods of unemployment or low skilled, insecure jobs."**

*I started skiving school, didn't do much school and then I missed most of my high school years… it was really bullying that stopped me from going to school, kept me away. I used to keep it a secret, cause my mum used to drop me off at school and pick me at school. I'd just leave and always be back at school for her to pick up'. (Interviewee 989)*

*I wasn't the happiest of kids to be honest. School wasn't great for me, like, I was quite dyslexic. So they didn't pick that up at all at school, like sort of they messed that whole up..I started skiving.(Interviewee 899)*

*I'm not, like, the fastest at learning things [because of dyslexic problems], but when I was there they actually put me into a class with people with severe learning disabilities, I mean on the severe scale.. and that made me really depressed. And then I started drinking heavily. (Interviewee 831, recounting experiences when first attending further education college)*

*I just got in trouble at school a lot. There's one teacher and she told me that I was attention seeking …I was like, you know what, I will show you the difference and I would totally play up. I would totally wind her up to the point ..where she couldn't handle the class. And it was because in my hearing … she said I was 'attention seeking'. (Interviewee 415)*

## c. Pathways out of offending: stories of survival and transformation

The journey out of offending for those most heavily involved was sometimes a long one, and the outcomes in some cases came across as precarious rather than wholly sustainable. Whilst many talked about simply choosing to stop, for this to be successful required a supportive context in terms of both relationships and opportunities. As highlighted earlier, pathways out of offending were also shaped by efforts to transform identity – minimisation or downplaying of earlier involvement in crime seemed to be a key component of this process. In

> **"…pathways out of offending were also shaped by efforts to transform identity…"**

this section we highlight 4 key themes identified by interviewees: maturation and cutting older ties; close relationships; educational inclusion and employment; and transformations in self-presentation and self-reflection.

### Maturation and cutting older ties:

Many interviewees considered that they stopped offending when they 'grew up'. But this process was often accompanied by actively cutting themselves off from friends and, in some cases, family members who were associated with their previous offending persona. As people matured, they sometimes expressed fear about the situations that their offending behaviour had placed them in or how drugs and heavy drinking made them feel, and the need to move on. The following extracts touch on these themes.

*Gradually just started coming away from them and maybe hanging around with different people and starting to go out more to like night clubs and then I eventually just completely broke away. I just basically stopped talking to a lot of people, I just would avoid them and then just not talk to them. It was the only way really that I could dae it. …When I was younger it didnae, I didnae really feel dangerous, we were just bored,… we were very street smart we just hung around on the streets… but as I got older and those people were older, it, it felt more dangerous. (Interviewee 840)*

*Seeing the guns, and the drunks and the criminality and the jails and do you know? That scared me. That really scared me. So I was just like, just get away from. And at first it was hard. Like going away it was so boring, it was the beginning and it was a struggle…like not having people to muck about with, because if I go muck about with these people [I used to hang about with] …you wouldn't have wanted to get in trouble like that. .. my family's very bad. It was a nightmare that family. But I'm no longer involved in any of them anymore. I've walked away from all that drama. (Interviewee 601)*

*I've got a really good job…I've got a really nice partner, I've got two kids, you know we've got money, we're getting ready to buy a house. I probably wouldn't be doing that if I had still been in close contact with these people… I slowly turned it into a positive, when I stopped speaking to them. (Interviewee, 676)*

*I was just like too old for that sort of stuff. You don't want to go uptown to buy new clothes and stuff to fight in. (Interviewee 561)*

*It was fun for a wee while and then it stopped being fun…when something bad goes on in your life, you know you use [drugs] as your crutch…I started to get a real hatred for like the people round me, and you know when I woke up the morning after I started to really hate myself because of that, I didnae wanna keep doing this because I didnae wanna feel that way, it's horrible. (Interviewee 554)*

### Employment and its effects:

Being employed was an important aspect of change.  Interviewee 601 in particular found that the struggles in leaving previous friendship groups and finding a new life was made easier because they were employed.  In their words:

*But what kept me going is that I always had a job (Interviewee 601)*

Employment also opened up new perspectives for some.  Interviewee 840 identified the job opportunity which a family relative had given them as a critical juncture in their life:

*And then when I started working in the pub, everyone, like everyone had jobs, and everyone, a lot of people had families, and they were just a really nice bunch of people.  They would all get drunk but there was no…violence or badness or anything like that….totally I just thought 'Oh, there, like, this is how it's supposed to be'. (Interviewee 840)*

### Relationships, partners and children:

Meeting a life partner and having children was identified by a number of interviewees as a key moment in their pathway out of offending.  This worked in different ways – for some, having children kept them away from situations where crime might be more likely; while, for others, it was a change in perception from 'self' to 'other-regarding' behaviour, through embracing the responsibilities that came with caring.

*But you're responsible for people, it's a different dynamic 'cause you're not just affecting yourself. (Interviewee, 896 reflecting on the impact of having a family on behaviour)*

*Yeah, I mean, I've got two young kids and a mortgage. So yeah, there's way too much at stake for me. (Interviewee, 844).*

*I've got quite a positive outlook for the future and hopefully the child and the mother of my child would be a massive part of it.  …I'm just positive -positive all the way through.  I don't see any hurdles.  There's no, there's not trying to impress anyone. There's not trying to like get extra points from parents because you've done well. It's looking good. I would say that's probably a 90% chance of it being good and 10% chance of it being average. (Interviewee 393)*

*My kids is my most positive, cause they keep me, you know, they keep my mind away from being stupid you know. Cause kids keeping you busy. (Interviewee 601)*

*Going home, dirty hands, clean money. (Interviewee 578 reflecting on the positives in their life)*

### Transformation in self-presentation:

One interesting finding was a number of interviewees who denied or minimized their early involvement in offending, in spite of high frequency of self-reported offending over several waves of the Study in the teenage years, triangulated in some cases with evidence from agency records.   In most of these cases, the participant had moved on to employment in which knowledge of their offending background would have had a significant negative impact, such as, in the army, the police, or social work.  Downplaying earlier behaviour was associated then with moving on, and adopting an alternative 'non-offender' lifestyle in adulthood.

In contrast to the minimisers, however, some interviewees reflected on their early life experiences with some shame and regret, but these reflections were an important strategy in terms of allowing them to accept the past and move on.  The following extracts are used to illustrate these points:

**Blame others**

*I was there. I was just there. Like I've never smashed a bus window, I've never stolen anything.  I was just there going along with it everything but kind of 'no no' like just like shaking my head, I'd be laughing along with it …but never really getting involved with it, do you know what I mean? (Interviewee 844)*

*I was once excluded (from school) and it was because of a fight that my friend and another girl got into.  But I'm the one that got excluded for it, because 'apparently' I was the one that was encouraging it. (Interviewee 554)*

**Deny the seriousness**

*It's very minimal. A non-moving graph I would say.. Just your usual, like as I said, speeding offence, and uh maybe theft in the sense of manipulating the system at work and things like that, you know?  And money, sort of laundering and stuff, in small and small amounts. But, you know, that's it. (Interviewee 290)*

*We can just seem to have managed to avoid it somehow.  I don't quite know how…we're, you know, especially when you're younger, which will be loud and boisterous and just, like idiots as you are when you are that age. .. Yeah I'm sure if people saw us, they probably think we're being loud and anti-social, but… I sound so boring at the moment, but [laughs] I mean, I'm really racking my brain over of anything …there's a couple of guys I hang out with may being going into fights, but it was more you know defending themselves rather than going out and assaulting people you know. (Interviewee 152)*

*I've not been in trouble with the police for, for a while,. I was well, I  wouldn't really say it's trouble. I've caused trouble, I've not harmed anybody, So I don't really see it as being in trouble. (Interviewee 517)*

**Regrets**

*I think part of me felt that [offending] was an unconscious kind of mistake…. I think about because it's a lot of regret associated with it. And some shame as well.  But I don't think it's been influential in [my life choices] and maybe I don't think in anyway on a conscious level. (Interviewee 532)*

*And a lot people when they meet you now, they just assume that you've always been normal and they don't know, like how bad it was at one time… It's probably impacted me. I think there's a lot of guilt from me, I always feel guilty about it and regret, but there's not, I don't think there's anything much more I could've done.(Interviewee 840)*

*I had a certain level of fun growing up you know…this sounds terrible to say, it was fun causing trouble, I definitely wasnae a very nice person as a teenager, I don't think that's who I really was deep down.  I think it was all a bit of a façade.  (Interviewee 554)*

### d.  Final reflections on interviewee narratives

Reflecting on the totality of the experiences recounted by interviewees, it is clear that there is no simple way of demonstrating cause and effect in terms of offending, justice contacts and specific outcomes. Potential outcome measures, such as mental health or employment, are closely entwined with offending and criminal justice pathways, such that they become mutually constitutive. The narrative arc of a number of interviews shows how poverty and neglect in

> **"…there is no simple way of demonstrating cause and effect in terms of offending, justice contacts and specific outcomes."**

themselves beget justice contact, and justice contact becomes caught up in stories of enduring poverty for some; offending can lead to school exclusion and disrupted educational pathways which in turn can lead to more offending; subcultures of violence often beget inter-personal violence and disrupt relationships leading in turn to drug abuse and relationship breakdown.

It is important to stress, however, that amongst the interviews there are stories of hope and transformation – some people have moved on with their lives and found fulfilment in relationships and jobs that they value - but for those who have been brought up in the most vulnerable and disrupted circumstances, change is hard won.

## 5. Implications of the findings for people, policy and practice

In this final section of the report, we explore the main implications of the findings from this phase of the Edinburgh Study. Taken together, our findings throw up a number of challenges for policy makers. Most people who offend are not known to justice organisations and, when they are, they are more likely to be known to adult criminal justice than youth justice. Moreover, desistance from offending is a complex process of stability and change – bound up in a legacy of problems from the past, but also determined by a combination of factors in adulthood (both internal, such as choice or agency, and external, such as opportunity and risk) that can help or hinder a person's ability to change their lifestyle.

> **"…desistance from offending is a complex process of stability and change – bound up in a legacy of problems from the past, but also determined by a combination of factors in adulthood."**

As our interview data demonstrate, people rarely considered the consequences of justice system contact on their behaviour: indeed the justice system is rarely the context in which desistance takes place. As we have shown, decisions to stop offending are contingent on individual agency and a determination to change; yet, even so, desistance is a highly precarious state that is heavily reliant on opportunity structures, and critical relationships.

Pathways of criminal conviction differ significantly so no one solution is going to be effective, and these pathways are intricately but differentially related to the early years in terms of parental upbringing, childhood development, patterns of behaviour and wider social and environmental circumstances in very complex ways that make it hard to design targeted interventions.

A key policy message, therefore, is that the early years continue to have a profound effect on later life outcomes. Our findings from this phase continue to offer strong support for policies which focus on prevention and early intervention. They also reinforce the importance of working across policy portfolios (e.g., health, education, housing, communities and economy), recognising that justice by itself cannot solve the problem of offending in the teenage and early adult years.

> **"Our findings from this phase continue to offer strong support for policies which focus on prevention and early intervention."**

Educational inclusion is key to supporting desisting pathways, both in the medium (over the teenage years) and longer term (in early adulthood and early middle age). Many of those in our Study who skipped or skived school or who were formally excluded, had specific learning difficulties which were undiagnosed.

Leaving school early without qualifications was associated with ongoing poverty, insecure employment and low paid jobs in early adulthood and early middle age. Having money was cited by a number of our interviewees as one of the key incentives for stopping involvement in offending, and having a job that was fulfilling was part of the desister context. Further education and life-long educational opportunities are of vital importance in preparing people for work. And appropriate levels of financial support for those who are not able to work because of caring responsibilities (sometimes for parents or older relatives) or problems with health, would help diminish the risks of any drift back to substance misuse or offending.

Importantly, our findings also show that there can be incremental 'scarring' effects of justice system contact (e.g., on drug use, vulnerability and victimisation). Risk management and sentencing often focus on prior convictions as aggravating factors or markers of greatest risk. It should be acknowledged that contact with justice systems can be criminogenic, functioning, thereby, as a cause, rather than an outcome, of longer term problems. However, people did report positive aspects of justice system contact – especially in terms of key individuals who play a significant role in changing and influencing behaviour – that need to be recognised, encouraged and supported.

These findings provide support for diversionary practices, such as those being embraced in Scotland at present through the whole system approach. But diversion must entail referral to substantive services – such as youth work, community activities, and educational interventions - and investment in 'people' rather than just 'systems'. Furthermore, it is vital that these more informal ways of working with young people and those in early adulthood, are well resourced, and there is evenness of service provision across jurisdictions.

> **"…the study findings highlight the importance of a revived policy focus on older children (at age 16 to18), the point at which a number of critical life transitions occur."**

Late onset conviction cannot be predicted or prevented by a focus on early intervention – and yet it involves serious offending, if not prolific, in most cases. Intervention needs to be available at the time it is needed – not time limited – and to recognise that offending over the life course will have different starting and stopping times. In particular, the study findings highlight the importance of a revived policy focus on older children (at age 16 to18), the point at which a number of critical life transitions, and at which the Later Onset conviction trajectory begins.

Leaving care is one such transition and one that young people find challenging. The shift from being fully looked after (e.g., not having to worry about cooking or managing household bills) to independent living is difficult but especially so for young people who are returning to their pre-care contexts and environment. The capacity to extend care services from age 16 to 18 and to offer a more graduated approach to leaving care would be of benefit, and would support crime reduction.

Housing is a key issue, especially for care leavers. These findings reinforce the need for better services and support for those experiencing homelessness, and particularly the ways in which access to emergency and bed and breakfast accommodation is handled. Whilst acknowledging that some older children and young adults do exhibit challenging behaviours, our findings show that those who were homeless post-care were not always treated with dignity and respect. And their experiences exacerbated likelihood of involvement in further offending and heavy drug use.

A critical finding from this phase of the study is that systems by themselves do not heal and fix those who come within their ambit – rather, people do. The criminal justice system is seen as a hurdle to be navigated or tolerated, rather than a source of support or nurturing. Experience of youth justice too, and especially the care system, appears to be a series of abrupt (often unplanned) transitions. The quality and impact of these experiences is very much dependent on the quality of individual staff whom people encounter. This highlights the importance of staff training, of nurturing and retaining staff and of creating positive and fulfilling working environments. Staff also need time to build relationships with people.

> **"…systems by themselves do not heal and fix those who come within their ambit – rather, people do."**

It was striking how many of those with care-experience and/or community based sentences, felt that social work was often a tick box exercise, and how so few felt able to have meaningful conversations with their supervising officers. And yet there were glimmers of hope when key individuals did make a difference to the lives of young people, albeit in a context where these young people recognised the frailties of their own ability to effect change.

The findings from this phase also show the significant number of young people and adults whose offending behaviour flies below the radar of official agencies. It is important to avoid a knee jerk reaction to this and assume that more criminal justice input is needed – whether in the form of more policing or harsher sentences, particularly given the scarring effects of justice contacts and the potential for stigmatisation and criminalisation that justice led interventions can bring. Rather what this demonstrates is the importance of universal or community focused services that tackle the underlying causes of offending – namely those which tackle poverty, promote educational inclusion, and offer support to parents and care-givers.

## Final reflections

In conclusion, justice for those who come into conflict with the law in childhood and early adulthood, is best served by a wider set of institutions and policy frames than criminal justice itself. Those caught up in systems from a young age tend to be repeatedly caught up in a chronic pattern of conviction, no matter that their involvement in persistent serious offending (as measured by their self-reports) diminishes over time. Whilst offending was very common amongst cohort members in the early teenage years, it would appear that many individuals who did not come to the attention of police or other agencies, stopped offending before they reached adulthood. For others, court appearances and criminal justice intervention became only one, amongst many other life hazards to be negotiated.

Some of the key factors associated with offending at different ages and stages that we have identified in our data – from poverty, neglect and abuse, family and neighbourhood environments characterised by violence, to educational disconnect and shifting patterns of employment, substance misuse, and relationship fragility - speak to the importance of ensuring that holistic policy responses are in place across the life course. Recognising the need to place people, rather than systems, at the heart of policy delivery is a critical first step.

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## Edinburgh Law School

**Edinburgh Study**
of Youth Transitions and Crime
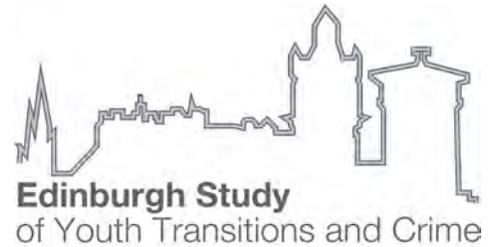
**About the Study**

The Edinburgh Study of Youth Transitions and Crime is a programme of research that has been running for 21 years. The overarching purpose of the study is to examine the causes and consequences of young people's involvement in crime and anti-social behaviour. The core of the programme is a major longitudinal study of a single cohort of around 4,300 young people who started secondary school in the City of Edinburgh in the autumn of 1998. The study also involves a complex set of administrative data linkages which allows it to explore the lives of study members in significant detail.

The study has been conducted across a number of phases. The first six phases tracked cohort members from around age 12 to age 17, when they were eligible to attend secondary school (1998 to 2004). Over this period, the study collected information using questionnaires completed by the cohort members and administrative data from official records, including education, social work and criminal conviction records. The seventh phase of the study involved updating the criminal conviction records and conducting in-depth interviews with a sub-sample of the cohort at age 24 (2011/12). The study is currently in its eighth phase which will involve further updating the criminal conviction records, conducting a short online survey with all cohort members and in-depth interviews with a sub-sample at age 33 (2019/20).

Visit the project webpage at:
https://www.edinstudy.law.ed.ac.uk/