



Children and Policing in England and Wales: Adopting a Child First Approach

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About the research

This project, funded by the Nuffield Foundation, brings together three linked studies of children's encounters with the police: frontline policing, police custody and custody records. It is the most comprehensive examination to date of children's experiences of policing in England and Wales.

The evidence base

Across the three studies, the team conducted individual and focus group interviews with more than 400 participants, observed 64 frontline and custody shifts, reviewed 80 body-worn video recordings of stop and search, analysed 51 recorded police interviews and examined 199 detention logs, alongside analysis of more than 70,000 custody records.

400+

interviews

64

frontline and custody shifts observed

70,000+

custody records analysed

Frontline policing

Key findings

- Children (10-17 year olds) were predominantly policed by relatively inexperienced frontline officers with limited, if any, child-specific training.
- A substantial proportion of call-outs involving children concerned welfare or safeguarding needs rather than suspected offending.
- Officers sometimes felt compelled to arrest and detain children where a welfare response would have been more appropriate because partner-agency support was unavailable.
- Less intrusive alternatives, including voluntary attendance, were not always considered before arrest and detention.
- Youth justice support was not routinely available when officers were deciding whether to divert a child, and diversionary intervention was sometimes delayed.

Key recommendations

- Nationally mandated child-specific training for all police officers and staff who come into contact with children in their duties.
- Timely support from children's social care and youth justice services when a child first comes to police attention.
- Clear guidance for officers and a presumption in favour of less intrusive alternatives, including voluntary attendance where safe and appropriate.
- Supervisory oversight of decisions to arrest and detain a child.
- A fast-track diversion pathway for low-level offending, with a national target timescale for referral.

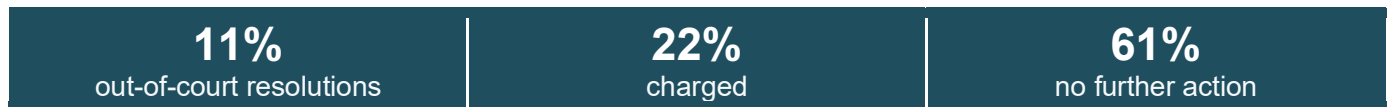


Police custody

Key findings

- No further action was taken in relation to 61% of children detained in the five forces included in the custody-record analysis.
- Children were detained for an average of almost 12 hours – a rise of almost a third in less than 15 years.
- In the Child First Custody Pilot in London, child-specific training and more robust decision-making reduced the detention of children by 30%.
- In Surrey, reducing the maximum initial detention period from 24 to 12 hours cut average detention time from about 11 hours to just over 7 ½ hours.
- In London, automatic lawyer attendance resulted in 96% of children receiving legal advice; child-specialist lawyers engaged with, and advocated for, children more effectively.
- Custody teams often lacked timely information from children's social care, youth justice and other agencies about children already known to those services.

Case outcomes following arrest and detention



The remaining 6% received other case outcomes.

Key recommendations

- Strengthen the presumption against detention under section 37 of the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 for children, so that detention is used only as a last resort.
- Amend PACE Code C to introduce an extendable maximum initial detention period of 12 hours for children.
- Require automatic notification and attendance of a lawyer for every child detained in police custody.
- Introduce mandatory child-specialist training for lawyers representing children in custody, supported by an adjusted legal aid fee.
- Review the appropriate adult safeguard so that those supporting children have relevant expertise, timely information and sufficient independence and standing to protect the child's rights.
- Parents and carers should continue to be involved, where they and the child wish, with the right to advocate for their child and access to independent assistance.

A Child First approach when a child comes to police attention

Children should be treated as children first. Arrest and detention should be used only where strictly necessary, with earlier access to welfare support, diversion and specialist safeguards.

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