



Challenging Justice Inequalities with Children in Conflict with the Law

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1. Introduction

This report outlines the main findings from a research project, *Challenging Justice Inequalities with Children in Conflict with the Law*, funded by the Nuffield Foundation between 2024 and 2026. The project focused on children¹ aged under 18 who encounter justice systems as a result of suspected, alleged, or confirmed involvement in offending behaviour in Scotland. The Scottish youth justice system spans, but is not limited to: police contact; early intervention and diversionary supports; the Children's Hearings System; the criminal court; and other justice institutions, such as secure care (see Appendix A).

The project's impetus stemmed from the increasing body of evidence regarding the significant and cumulative disadvantage experienced by children in conflict with the law (Malvaso et al., 2022; van den Brink & Lanskey, 2025; Vaswani, 2014; Vaswani, 2015). This adversity and disadvantage not only results in increased likelihood of contact with the justice system (Graf et al., 2021; McAra & McVie, 2005), but also affects how equitably children can participate in justice and how decisions are made about them (Donnelly, 2023; van den Brink, 2022). Therefore, perhaps, it is unsurprising that there is significant disproportionality within youth justice systems. Across the UK, and worldwide, minoritised groups are over-represented and over-criminalised, including children from racialised communities (Brodie et al., 2025; Lymperopoulou, 2024), children with care experience (Day, 2021); children living in poverty (McAra & McVie, 2015), who are neurodivergent (King & Murphy, 2014) or who have communication needs (Chow et al., 2022). There is limited research about offending amongst LGBTQ+ children, or that which brings an intersectional lens to children's justice experiences.

We wanted *Challenging Justice Inequalities* to begin to address these knowledge and experiential gaps in Scotland. The project therefore aimed to explore children's understanding and experiences of protected characteristics (as defined by the Equality Act 2010), and how they perceived these characteristics to influence and interact with their experience of the justice system in Scotland. In designing our approach, we recognised that many children mistrust and feel marginalised by justice systems, especially minoritised children. By undertaking the research *with* children and supporting their engagement, ownership and development as researchers, co-production (see Section 2) offered us a way to operationalise an inclusive and intersectional approach to the research.

In this report we start with a brief overview of the relevant literature relating to protected characteristics, intersectionality, rights and justice. For the purposes of brevity, this does not purport to provide an exhaustive or systematic review of the literature but simply aims to situate our research in context. This literature then leads us on to define the problems and research questions that we explore in this project. In the Methodology (Section 2), we outline the values of our project and our practical approach to co-production, including the process of selecting and designing a child-led research project and supporting the development of our young co-researchers. In Section 2.4, we describe the outcome of this process: *'Doing intersectionality 'in justice': exploring intersectional experiences of policing with children and police officers in Scotland'*. This project reveals key themes around children's perceptions, thoughts and experiences of policing, as well as offering the perspective of ten police officers. While Phase 2 of the project can be seen as a discrete component of the study in its own right, or a 'project within a project', we view Phase 2 as an integral part of our overall research aims

¹ The terms 'child' or 'children' is used throughout this report to reflect the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child which asserts that all those aged under 18s are children. However, we acknowledge that many of the children we worked with might not view themselves as 'children'. 'Young people', in this report, refers to people aged 18-25 approximately.

and objectives. Therefore, we synthesise findings from across *all* elements of our project and present these according to key cross-cutting themes in Section 4.

1.1. Justice Inequalities, Intersectionality and Children's Rights

As outlined in the introduction, there is substantial evidence that children in conflict with the law experience significant and overlapping forms of disadvantage and marginalisation. However, research has more rarely explored how these experiences overlap and interact in children's everyday lives.

In the UK, the Equality Act 2010 identifies a range of 'protected characteristics': age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, and sexual orientation. These categories can provide an important legal and policy framework for identifying discrimination and promoting equality. At the same time, scholars have cautioned that protected characteristics can become understood as fixed or individualised 'personal characteristics', detached from the wider social, political, and economic inequalities through which disadvantage is produced and sustained (Taylor et al., 2010). In youth justice contexts especially, this can risk locating 'difference' within children themselves, rather than recognising the structural conditions shaping children's lives and justice experiences.

For this reason, our project sought to work with, but also move beyond, categorical understandings of identity. While protected characteristics offered one important starting point for discussion, identities are often 'in-flux' and "are constructed, carried and modified through social interaction in a particular context" (Cheruvallil-Contractor et al., 2024 p. 21), especially in systems such as care and justice which carry added stigma. Children also identified other dimensions that shaped their experiences of justice (see Section 4.2), including poverty, care experience, neighbourhood stigma, mental health, trauma, family circumstances, previous justice contact or convictions, migration histories, and experiences of exclusion from education. These dimensions are often absent from formal equality frameworks despite being central to children's experiences of criminalisation and marginalisation.

The question of 'missing characteristics', such as care experience (MacAlister, 2022) and carers (Malleon, 2018), has itself generated considerable debate within equality scholarship and policy. In particular, discussions around whether class or socio-economic disadvantage should constitute a protected characteristic highlight the limitations of existing equality frameworks in addressing structural inequalities. While socio-economic inequality is widely recognised as profoundly shaping life chances and justice outcomes, addressing class inequality raises difficult questions about redistribution within capitalist societies, and can therefore become reframed more narrowly as a matter of interpersonal recognition, representation, or individual prejudice. Intersectional approaches draw attention to these tensions by emphasising that inequalities are not reducible to isolated personal characteristics, but are produced through wider social, economic, and institutional relations of power.

Intersectionality offered a way to engage with these complexities. Emerging from Black feminist scholarship and activism, intersectionality is most commonly associated with the work of Kimberlé Crenshaw (Crenshaw, 1989; 1991), who highlighted how legal and social systems frequently fail to account for the overlapping nature of oppression and discrimination. Since then, intersectionality has developed across feminist, critical race, queer, disability, and sociological scholarship, while also becoming the subject of significant debate regarding its meanings, applications, and political uses (Taylor et al., 2010). Rather than viewing inequalities such as racism, sexism, class inequality, ableism, homophobia, transphobia, or age-based discrimination as separate and additive, intersectional approaches emphasise how these forms of power are co-constituted and mutually shaping.

Intersectionality therefore challenges any attempts to isolate single categories of identity or inequality. Research and policy discussions have often privileged what are sometimes framed as the ‘big three’ inequalities of race, class, and gender (Dator, 2022). While these remain critically important, intersectional scholars argue that inequalities cannot be hierarchically ordered or understood independently of one another. Gender is always racialised and classed; race is always gendered; experiences of sexuality, disability, age, religion, migration status, and care experience are similarly shaped through their interaction with other social positions and institutional relations. In practice, some inequalities may nevertheless become marginalised within policy and research agendas. For example, sexuality may be conflated with gender, while religion and sexuality are sometimes positioned as inherently oppositional categories (Taylor & Snowden, 2014). Such framings can obscure the diversity and complexity of children’s experiences and identities.

Importantly, intersectionality is not simply a framework for describing multiple identities. Rather, it is concerned with relations of power and the ways institutions, including justice systems, differentially regulate, surveil, and respond to particular groups of children. This is especially significant within youth justice contexts, where children’s experiences are shaped simultaneously by age-based power relations and by wider inequalities linked to race, poverty, gender, disability, sexuality, and care status. Yet children have rarely been centred within intersectional research (Rodó-de-Zárate, 2017), especially concerning matters of justice. Youth justice research has also tended to examine protected characteristics separately, limiting understanding of how inequalities interact and accumulate over time (Cunneen, 2020). Where multiple inequalities are considered, they are often treated descriptively rather than intersectionally (Holley & VanVleet, 2006). Recent reviews have highlighted the continuing need for research engaging specifically with intersectionality in Scottish policing and justice contexts (Berg & Mann, 2023).

Our project therefore approached intersectionality not as something that can be fully achieved, or completed, but as an ongoing methodological and relational practice. This involved recognising how perspectives, approaches and solutions about justice inequalities can be co-produced through relationships between researchers and participants, and how both are differently positioned within systems of power and privilege. Co-production provided an important means of engaging with children not simply as subjects of research, but as contributors to knowledge-making about justice inequalities and institutional responses. This required attentiveness to whose voices are heard, when those voices are being heard, whose experiences become legible within research and policy frameworks, and how some forms of inequality may remain hidden or minimised. Reflexive research also recognises that the ways inequalities are investigated can also influence which forms of inequality are made visible (Taylor et al., 2010). In this sense, intersectionality informed both what the project explored and how the research was conducted. It shaped our understanding that children’s justice experiences cannot be reduced to singular categories of identity or disadvantage, but instead emerge through the complex interplay of social inequalities, institutional practices, and lived experiences.

The project also coincided with growing recognition of children’s rights in Scotland and increasing awareness of the injustices often experienced by children in conflict with the law (Lightowler, 2020; Independent Care Review, 2020). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) was incorporated into Scot’s law in 2024, within the parameters of the Scottish devolution settlement. Though not without limitations and challenges, incorporation has elevated the legal status, strengthened enforcement mechanisms, and developed the culture of children’s rights in Scotland (McCall-Smith, 2021; Adamson, 2025). Commitments to respect the rights and lived experiences of children in conflict with the law are central to the current policy landscape (Scottish Government, 2021; 2024).

The UNCRC covers an unprecedented range of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights. Children in conflict with the law have specific protections under Articles 37 and 40, promoting age-appropriate treatment and (re)integration into society. Principles of rehabilitation and diversion, with detention as a last resort, are key to a children's rights approach to justice (Kilkelly, 2008; Liefwaard, 2020). Four wider 'general principles' have been identified by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child as influential to the UNCRC's overall interpretation and implementation:

- Right to non-discrimination (Article 2)
- Right to have best interests taken into account as a primary consideration (Article 3)
- Right to life, survival and development (Article 6)
- Right to be heard (Article 12)

The potential contribution of intersectionality to children's rights is increasingly being recognised (Taefi, 2009; De Greave, 2015; Dowd, 2016; de Beco, 2020). A challenge here lies in the universal nature of (children's) human rights. Although the UNCRC lacks a solid theoretical foundation (Eekelaar, 1986; Freeman, 2007; Hanson & Peleg, 2020), it is built on the idea that all children, as a protected group, need special rights. This may overlook diversity and disregard difference. While children's rights are universal, the ways in which they are applied, exercised and experienced varies significantly. Intersectionality has therefore been recognised as a useful framework to explore children's difference and sameness as rights holders (Frödén & Quennerstedt, 2019), to celebrate the diversity of childhood (Alanen, 2016), and to account for children's plural identities and structural inequalities (Hanson & Peleg, 2020).

1.2. Research Objectives and Questions

Our research objectives aimed to capture these complexities, where we were concerned with not only documenting *what* children's understandings of protected characteristics and everyday experiences of inequality were, but also perceptions of *how* they interfaced with their justice interactions, experiences and outcomes. While we wanted to be attentive to children's experiences and portray an accurate representation of their lived realities of justice inequalities, we also wanted to remain hopeful and oriented towards future practice and policy development. We were also interested in engaging with intersectionality both conceptually and methodologically in order to capture important nuances in the experiences of different children.

The main objectives of *Challenging Justice Inequalities with Children in Conflict with the Law* were therefore to co-produce a programme of research to:

- identify and describe intersectional inequalities that affect children in conflict with the law
- explore how inequalities shape children's access to, participation in, and experiences of justice
- investigate the impact of these intersectional justice experiences on children's identities, future hopes and desistance
- co-produce guidance to inform equitable policy and practice for children throughout the justice process
- document the methodological innovation and learning from co-producing peer research with children

Our overarching research questions, designed to achieve these objectives, were:

RQ1. How do children in conflict with the law understand and experience protected characteristics?

RQ2. What are children's perspectives on the relationship between intersecting protected characteristics?

RQ3. How do children describe and experience the intersection between protected characteristics and poverty?

RQ4. In what ways do children perceive that intersecting protected characteristics relate to their interactions with the justice system?

RQ5. What impact do intersectional inequalities and justice experiences have on children's identities, aspirations, and confidence in desisting from offending in the future?

RQ6. How can justice sector stakeholders be empowered to respond intersectionally?

By intentionally integrating the principles of intersectionality and co-production into our research aims, questions, and methods, we sought to actively realise children's rights within our research. We outline how we operationalised these principles in our approach in Section 2.

2. The Co-production Approach and Method

While there isn't one specific approach to intersectional research, underpinning methodologies and practices should recognise the complexity of a person's socially constructed positionalities, and how these experiences are rooted in particular temporal and spatial contexts (Misra et al., 2021). Intersectional research should orient towards social justice in both process *and* outcomes. Co-production, therefore, offered our project a way to operationalise intersectionality in the process of our research as co-production acknowledges the inherent power and privilege of research, challenges the structures of power in knowledge creation and attempts to limit reproduction of inequalities and power imbalances in the research process (Fine et al., 2021; Taylor et al., 2010).

'Co-production' has differing definitions according to the context in which it is applied but broadly involves collaborative effort between 'professionals' and communities to share knowledge and power, and work towards shared solutions in research, policymaking or service design. Despite variation in usage and approaches across disciplines, it is commonly led by several key principles, including: sharing power, incorporating all skills and perspectives; respecting and valuing the knowledge of all of those working on the research; reciprocity; and building and maintaining relationships (NIHR, 2018 p. 2022). Other key features of co-production might include establishing group rules, flexibility, continuous reflection, and evaluating the impact of co-production. Below we set out our methodological approach in more detail.

2.1. Methodological Intentions

As the foundational element of this project, we aimed to establish a Youth Advisory Group (YAG) of 10 children aged between 14-17 with experience of being 'in conflict with the law'. This term was broadly constructed as having current or prior contact with any aspect of the justice system, for example, contact with the police, the Children's Hearings System, the court system, or deprivation of liberty. The use of the word 'advisory' may have been somewhat of a misnomer, as the YAG was implemented to co-produce the research alongside the research team. Specifically, the purpose of the YAG was to explore child-led understandings, conceptualisations and perspectives of key concepts related to intersectionality, inequalities and justice, in order to review, revise or reframe our research aims, objectives and questions to ensure that they were meaningful, relevant and accessible. The YAG were also given the opportunity to design and undertake a research project to enhance our understanding of justice inequalities. Importantly, while centring the voices, perspectives and experiences of the YAG, the YAG was supported directly by the project team which, in turn, was supported by our Interdisciplinary Advisory Group (IAG) of academics, practitioners and policymakers. This involved opportunities for all groups to come together and feed back about the design of the project, as well as the early analysis and findings.

Once all ethical approvals were received from the University of Strathclyde Ethics Committee (see Appendix B), we launched our YAG recruitment drive. Our strategy involved capitalising on the professional networks of our research team and third sector partners, utilising institutional mailing lists for practice audiences, attendance at organisational team meetings, as well as broader advertising on social media, such as Instagram, TikTok and LinkedIn. However, the ask of gatekeeper organisations, and of individual children, to commit to a two-year (or longer) project was not insubstantial. Unsurprisingly recruitment was slow and challenging, and after five months it became clear that an alternative approach was necessary.

2.2. 'Pre' Phase: Exploratory Focus Groups

In January 2025, after several months of slow recruitment, we pivoted our approach instead to organising a series of one-off focus groups. We were aware that we were rarely reaching children directly through gatekeeper organisations, often related to increasing resource and capacity pressures on third sector staff. Asking organisations and children to commit to a single session felt more realistic in the short-term. However, we remained confident that children would enjoy and benefit from the opportunity to join the YAG. The intention of these focus groups was therefore to progress the project, as well as to connect directly with children by offering taster sessions that would potentially act as a stepping-stone and facilitate recruitment to the YAG over the longer term.

The early YAG sessions had been designed to be exploratory sessions, to introduce and engage with key project concepts relating to protected characteristics, justice and intersectionality. These were originally planned as four two-hour long sessions to provide a solid foundation for the project to build on, and to underpin the YAG-led research in Phase 2. In order to cover these same topics within a single focus group we had to strip back our topic guide to the core elements. This involved dedicating time to exploring children's thoughts and understandings of protected characteristics and justice, finishing with a short introduction to, and discussion of, intersectionality. We recognised that we would not obtain the same depth in these sessions as we might have done within our original plans; however, we instead obtained a breadth of perspectives that were instructive both to our thinking and overall analysis of young people's perceptions and understandings of protected characteristics, justice and intersectionality.

We conducted 11 focus groups, reaching 42 children, expanding considerably beyond the original plan of 10 YAG members. These focus groups were conducted across the central belt of Scotland, within organisations that support children and young people who are: LGBTQ+; racially minoritised; refugee and asylum-seeking; care experienced and/or living in deprived communities. Participants all had self-identified contact with various aspects of the justice system. Seven of the focus groups took place in secure care, which offered additional perspectives of justice that were unlikely to have been obtained within the original YAG plans, due to institutional limitations on attendance (both in-person and virtual) at community YAG sessions from custodial and restricted settings. Importantly, the focus groups in secure care led to the establishment of a 'sounding board', with whom key YAG decisions or interpretations were additionally reviewed and sense checked. The idea of the sounding board came from the children in secure care who wanted to take part in the YAG, but who were unable due to the aforementioned limitations on their attendance. We wanted to ensure their voices were included within the project, and we therefore agreed to return to the secure care centre and share our progress.

Key findings from the exploratory focus groups were used to support the early discussions with the YAG, and inform their decision-making. These findings are interwoven into the overall project findings (see Section 4).

2.3. Phase 1: The Youth Advisory Group (YAG)

In the weeks following the exploratory focus groups, we engaged with the organisations and young people who took part to discuss the YAG opportunity in more depth. The focus groups facilitated recruitment into the YAG by children gaining first-hand experience of the project as well as having the chance to meet the research team involved. This small, but direct, interaction helped to break down initial barriers to participation and started to build a little familiarity and trust. From these follow-up discussions we recruited nine YAG members who first met as a group in May 2025. At the time of writing this report, six children and young people are still engaged in preparing outputs and dissemination.

YAG members, at the time of recruitment, were all aged 14-17, with varied justice experience from stop and search, to arrest. There was some, albeit limited, experience of formal justice institutions such as the Children's Hearings System or courts. Below, the table shares a little information about all nine YAG members, but this has been limited to ensure their anonymity. The six YAG members who remain actively involved at the time of writing provided their own pseudonym, current age and specified other information they wished to share with the reader. The three YAG members who are no longer actively involved have been allocated a pseudonym and we have provided their age and gender. While they are no longer involved in the project, we want to recognise their involvement in shaping the project and sharing their valuable time, energy and experience with us.

Pseudonym	Age	Other Information
Kodiak	16	Non-binary, autistic
Leo	16	
Momori	17	Black, gender-fluid
Ember	18	Transgender, queer and neurodivergent
M	17	
David	17	Autistic and queer
Yusuf ²	17	male
Joe ²	17	male
Omar ²	16	male

We did not expect the YAG to represent all protected characteristics and justice experiences; instead, it was our hope that we could recruit a diverse group of young people to bring their different identities, experiences and lived expertise together. While we undoubtedly achieved this, it is important to reflect on who can be involved in these opportunities in the first place, and who can sustain engagement in a longer-term project. Despite our efforts to minimise barriers to participation, we know that we were unable to reach children facing the greatest challenges to engagement. Others withdrew from the YAG around the end of Phase 1, although their reasons for doing so were not specified. While it would be overly simplistic to draw a clear distinction between those who remained involved and those who withdrew, the children who continued to engage may have been less deeply embedded in the justice system. This interpretation should not, however, be taken to minimise the significant and often difficult experiences of justice system interactions among those who remained. Additionally, those with continued engagement may have been supported by other factors. For example, prior experience of participation or activism may have provided some children with the confidence, skills, relationships, or resources needed to sustain their involvement throughout the project.

Practicalities and Processes

We met with the YAG on a fortnightly basis for the first few months of the project, typically in a two-hour session held on university campus in the early evening. This was agreed with the YAG due to their increased time and capacity during the summer school holiday period and then we shifted to monthly sessions for the remainder of the project. We outline the focus of each YAG Session in Appendix D, but provide a short flavour of our approach below.

The first four sessions were part of the 'exploratory phase'. This included dedicated time for the YAG to get to know each other and the project team, build trust and to begin learning what is involved in

² Withdrew at the end of Phase 1, although remained in sporadic contact.

co-producing a research project. Building trust was an essential part of the process and involved creating an environment where the children felt listened to, respected and understood their role in shaping the project. Crucially, trust was built into our ongoing relational approach and not considered a one-off activity. In session one, we made a group charter, which focused on how we would treat each other in the group, how decisions would be made and how we intended to communicate with one another both within and between sessions. The charter was written up as a group, with doodles and illustrations from the YAG. We made copies of it to display on the table during subsequent sessions. We hoped that in creating shared agreements and demonstrating how we intended to share decision-making power with them, that we could help establish a sense of safety and ownership across the group.

Session three was centred on research ethics, exploring ethical dilemmas and using case studies to determine what we might consider 'good' and 'bad' research ethics. We then created our own researchers' code, encouraging the group to think about their ethical non-negotiables. Not only did this encourage the YAG to begin taking ownership of the research process, but also supported the development of their research skills and critical thinking. Session four was a rotating methods session which offered the YAG a chance to learn about and try out different research methods, for example, we set up stations about designing surveys, conducting interviews, exploring how we can use storytelling in research and trying collage as a form of data generation. The session was highly interactive and involved the wider project team. The aim was to not only provide a taster of potential methods to draw on, but also to build relationships with one another as well as the project team. Beyond the skills development, we wanted to ensure the YAG was an enjoyable and fun space, so during longer sessions, we broke up the hours with a pizza delivery and marked key milestones with an activity such as laser tag or visiting a restaurant.

This was then followed by nine sessions that made up the 'planning phase' for the project to be undertaken in Phase 2. To start the planning process, we presented our findings from the Phase 1 exploratory focus groups to the YAG and spent time discussing the key topics with them. This gave the YAG an opportunity to critically engage with data for the first time. Together, we mapped out ways to connect some of the findings, and then used voting systems to help support and prioritise our shared decision-making to inform the Phase 2 project. For example, we gave each member of the YAG a sticky dot and asked them to mark their main preferences and priorities from the cross-cutting themes they had identified. Activities like this helped make decision-making processes more transparent and enable the YAG to meaningfully take part in the process of creating this project.

Across the planning phase, the YAG played an active role in developing the Phase 2 research aims, questions, identifying the key audiences and doing some of the practical planning ahead of fieldwork. As we progressed our sessions, we continuously worked with the YAG to demonstrate our intentions to take seriously their voices. Between sessions, we workshopped ideas between the YAG and the project team, reinforcing the co-produced nature of the project. As we neared the end of the planning phase, we held a joint YAG/IAG meeting, bringing together our team of interdisciplinary experts to hear about the YAG's progress and plans for Phase 2. The YAG presented their ideas for the project and then we created breakout discussions to allow the IAG to provide constructive feedback on the proposal. This was a pivotal point in our Phase 2 planning, as we used this opportunity to refine our project and start planning our ethics submission. This was also an opportunity for the YAG to practise their presentation skills, and increase their confidence in communicating with a wider audience. The remainder of the 'planning phase' covered safeguarding procedures, team-building activities and practical skills with mock interviews and practice focus groups to support the YAG's confidence in

working with the chosen methods. Overall, the YAG received adapted, but comprehensive, training in research work to support Phase 2 of the project.

Following ethical approval, three YAG sessions were scheduled across the fieldwork period to support preparation, enable regular check-ins, and facilitate future-planning discussions. These sessions created valuable opportunities for the group to come together, share reflections, and maintain a sense of cohesion during a particularly busy time, when YAG members were often separately undertaking fieldwork alongside the project team. While this section has focused on the process of *how* the Phase 2 project was selected and developed, Section 2.4 below outlines *what* was designed and delivered by the YAG.

2.4. Phase 2: Exploring Intersectional Experiences of Policing

After input from the YAG, the project team and our IAG, the final project was titled '*Doing intersectionality 'in justice': exploring intersectional experiences of policing with children and front-line police officers in Scotland*'. The aim of the project was to explore how intersectional identities have shaped, and continue to shape, young people's interactions with police in Scotland over the last decade and how police officers understand, respond to, integrate and embody intersectionality within their own policing practices and professional lives. Our methodological approach consisted of creative focus groups with children aged 14-17, and semi-structured interviews with police officers, which will be discussed in more detail below.

The Phase 2 project reflects that police contact was a cross-cutting experience for our YAG, as well as the key issue raised in the early exploratory focus groups. While we recognised this, we felt it was important in our role as the project team to try to encourage thinking beyond policing, and to include reflections on other parts of the justice system (e.g. the Children's Hearings System or courts). However, conversations were repeatedly brought back to policing as the face of the justice system, and crucially, as a site where the children's experiences converged. We also gently prompted the YAG to consider what research might already exist about children's experiences of policing, and supported them to engage with some of the relevant literature which is summarised below.

Existing Research into Children's Experiences of Policing

Research on children's attitudes, perceptions and experiences of policing in the UK is a well-studied topic, and our Phase 1 focus group data largely reflects the existing literature. Indeed, the research shows that many young people feel targeted, judged and mistreated by the police (Crane et al., 2016, Gleeson and Byrne, 2017; Deuchar et al., 2019). These findings are echoed internationally, with children and young people in Ireland (Ilán, 2018), Australia (Ellem and Richards, 2018) and the US (Gau and Brunson, 2015) sharing the belief that police unfairly target them. It is widely recognised that trust and confidence in the police is fragile among young people (Hinds, 2009), with negativity peaking in later teenage years (Piquero et al., 2005). This coincides with a time that children are more likely to experience police interactions, with higher levels of stop and search and increased involvement in crime (McAra and McVie, 2005). More recent research has demonstrated the long-term impact of early interactions with the police, showing how early interactions with authorities can shape negative perceptions of justice and lead to a lack of trust in the people and the systems that surround it (Hunter et al., 2026).

The literature most frequently engages with informal police interactions (e.g. being moved on from parks or public spaces) or being officially stopped and searched (Wooff, 2015; Johnstone, 2016). These interactions are framed negatively when young people felt they were being stereotyped because of their age, or when they lacked voice in their interactions. Young people commonly felt that

the police viewed all young people as troublemakers, which caused young people to approach the police defensively, creating antagonistic interactions for both. Throughout the literature, 'demeanour', clothing, gender, sexuality, race and space are routinely highlighted as a reason for targeting and labelling when young people discuss their interactions with the police (Ellem and Richards, 2018; Deuchar et al., 2019; Girardi, 2022). It is worth noting that, while this is a well-researched topic, almost all of the cited literature is pre-pandemic, positioning our contemporary research in the evolving contexts of the post-pandemic world.

There has been less academic attention on individual police officers' attitudes and perceptions of children, and we saw this as an opportunity to contribute something novel to the literature alongside the voices of children and young people. From what does exist, it is fair to say that police attitudes vary, with some recognising certain biases and attitudes, while others feel they are justified in their duty to police the values of society (Bolzan, 2003; Richards et al., 2019). However, research does indicate that police tend to have more negative opinions of young people than, for example, teachers do (Bolzan, 2003). Variation between officers was often related to their particular roles and responsibilities, which shaped their attitudes and approach towards young people. For example, front-line officers felt they were duty bound to utilise stop and search tactics with groups of young people, whereas local School Liaison Officers or 'campus cops' felt that building positive relationships and open communication were key to their duties, encouraging them to offer clear and explanatory reasons when they were required to stop children, or take details from them (Deucher et al., 2015).

The YAG felt it was important to bring both child and police perspectives into conversation with one another. Therefore, Phase 2 explored children's perceptions and experiences of policing, as well as how police officers respond to and perceive interactions with children. Importantly, this research also asks both children and police officers about strategies for building better relationships. The specific questions that the YAG selected for Phase 2 were:

RQ1. How do young people describe their experiences of police contact? Do young people's experiences align with existing research findings?

RQ2. What characteristics and circumstances do young people, today, identify as shaping their interactions with the police?

RQ3. How, and why, do front-line police officers engage with and incorporate research evidence in their policing practices? What types of evidence are influential or useful, and why?

RQ4. How do police officers understand and practice intersectionality in their policing practices with children and young people? Do the intersectional experiences of police officers shape their policing practices and professional lives?

RQ5. What are the solutions that young people and police identify to better incorporate intersectional awareness and practices into policing

Phase 2 Methods and Approach

Recognising that discussing interactions with the police might be sensitive or difficult for participants, the YAG were keen to use creative methods to explore children's experiences in a safe and accessible way. Focus groups with children were therefore two hours long and revolved around zine-making. Zines are a form of indie media, the word 'zine' being short for 'fanzine', a term coined in the 1930s to refer to self-publications of readers' reactions to comic books or science fiction publications. They have evolved over the years and are nowadays often used to represent personal stories, or reflections

on topics of interest (art, music, media). In research, they can be used as a recruitment tool, a creative method for data collection or for dissemination (Biagioli et al., 2021; Meifang, 2024)

We ran a total of five focus groups, involving 31 children, predominantly but not exclusively held across the central belt of Scotland. These groups all came from a range of existing youth organisations, including organisations that specifically supported diverse groups such as racially minoritised or LGBTQ+ children and young people. Participants were aged between 14-17 and had self-identified interactions with the police. Each focus group had at least two project team members, and one or two YAG members. The session was structured as a chronological exploration of children's perceptions and experiences of the police. The level of involvement from the YAG varied, with some choosing to get involved in introducing the project or facilitating the zine-making, while others observed, or took notes in the background.

The YAG were keen to gain the perspectives of front-line response officers as part of Phase 2, as these were the officers they most regularly encountered in schools and communities. We endeavoured to recruit such officers; however, due to time and resource constraints on front-line staff, we ultimately engaged with an available sample of officers from Police Scotland and the British Transport Police. While all police participants had experience of front-line policing, many were currently working in more strategic or partnership roles. In total, we interviewed 10 police officers, which was fewer than originally anticipated. Interviews were semi-structured, exploring the officers' motivations for joining the police, how their identity and life experiences have shaped their policing practice, their experience of policing young people and the challenges of their job. Importantly, the YAG elected to use the zines produced in the focus groups with children as a visual prompt in the interview, to help elicit a response on a deeper, more reflective level from officers, rather than potentially a standard or corporate response. Interviews typically lasted between 40 to 90 minutes, and either took place online using Microsoft Teams, on campus at the University of Strathclyde, or at a Police Scotland office.

The findings from Phase 2 have been integrated into the overall project findings, as outlined in Section 2.5 and presented in Section 4.

2.5. Phase 3: Assimilation and Analysis

The findings presented in this report were identified through a collaborative process, originating with the YAG and built upon by the research team. The YAG spent three sessions focussed on analysis, which involved creating a broad analytical framework. We took printed copies of the zines, and sections of each transcript so that the YAG could become familiar with a range of data. We used a range of techniques to draw out some of the key themes in the data, including encouraging the YAG to try and give each zine a 'headline'. This helped us identify similarities, differences and patterns among the data. Following the first session the YAG created an outline structure of key themes, signifier words and questions arising from the data, that we could take back to the wider project team to work from.

This YAG framework formed the starting point of the project team's analysis. The framework was reviewed by the team at the start of the project team's first analysis session, before engaging with the data, so that the YAG's perspectives and questions were at the forefront of our thinking before beginning the process of analysis. Over a full-day meeting the project team then reviewed hard copies of key data outputs, including transcripts, zines and notes and discussed and drafted a more detailed coding framework. This framework was then shared, reviewed and responded to by the YAG. Individual members of the research team then separately undertook initial coding and thematic

grouping on a selection of data using NVivo qualitative software. We then met again for a further full day to identify, discuss and refine our primary themes and interpretations.

It should be noted that the purpose of Phase 2 was to provide an opportunity for a YAG-led exploration of protected characteristics, intersectionality and justice, in order to answer our original and overarching research questions. Phase 2, *“Doing intersectionality ‘in justice’: exploring intersectional experiences of policing with children and police officers in Scotland,”* constitutes a discrete study within the broader project. It is guided by its own research questions and methodological approach which have been reported separately in Section 2.4. However, the selection of policing as the focus for Phase 2 emerged from Phase 1 findings, where it was identified as a common and emotive theme across all focus groups—unsurprising given the police’s role as the primary gatekeepers to the youth justice system. When identifying the core findings and reflections for the project, there was sufficient alignment between Phases 1 and 2 to allow these insights to be integrated and presented together as outlined in Figure 1 below. However, before the findings are presented in Section 4, we first reflect more deeply on the practicalities and realities of our co-production approach.

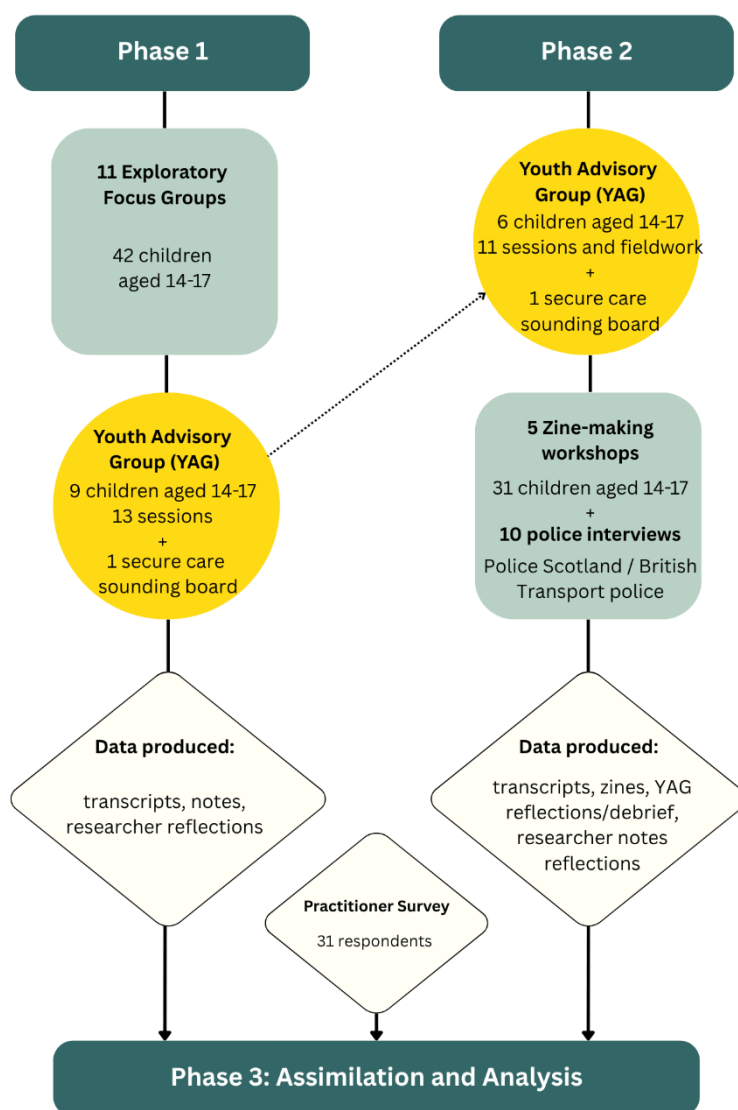


Figure 1: Flowchart of overall project structure

3. Reflections on Co-producing Research

This section introduces a series of reflections about work with the Youth Advisory Group. This includes, firstly, reflections from the project team about the relationships we created, and the skills developed by the YAG. The section then offers reflections from the YAG themselves, about what they hoped they would get out of the YAG and about their own development and growth.

3.1. Reflections from the Project Team

Our intention was to empower the YAG, amplify their voices and support their participation throughout the research process. To ensure that the YAG was accessible and non-exploitative, we compensated the YAG's time either in cash or vouchers, depending on the young person's circumstances, and provided travel expenses. Further, we partnered with YouthLink Scotland who support organisations and young people taking part in group decision-making to complete a [Participative Democracy Certificate](#) (PDC). The PDC is a youth award worth 2 credits at SCQF Level 5. Four of our YAG completed the PDC while working on the project. Beyond the formal benefits, we hoped that the YAG would benefit in other ways. When we conceived of the project, we outlined our hopes of personal development and skills that would be transferable to education, workplaces or civic settings, such as:

- Confidence, self-esteem, communication, teamwork, negotiation, conflict resolution, problem solving (Brett et al., 2014).
- Research and technical skills (e.g. critical thinking, analytical skills)
- Increased knowledge and understanding about intersectionality, inequalities and rights.
- Increased social capital (Norström et al., 2020), e.g. by broadening horizons or obtaining references for education or employment.

We believe our relational approach with the YAG has been highly successful, and we have witnessed a huge amount of personal growth and new skills from all YAG members. Below we offer some reflections, first, about the relationships we built, and then reflections from the YAG themselves about their experience and development.

Relationships

Central to the research was relationship building. This means both relationships between the YAG members, and the YAG's relationship to us as a project team. In order to provide the consistency and familiarity that would facilitate building trusting relationships, only one researcher and the participation worker were allocated to facilitating the YAG sessions – although each project team member attended one or more sessions to allow the YAG to meet and engage with the wider team. We carved time and space for the relational work before, during and after sessions, recognising that this was foundational to a successful project. At the start of our sessions, we would have time to catch up and check in with one another. Similarly, at the end of sessions, we would check in with the YAG members and offer any additional support or resources that they might need. During sessions we did our best to ensure we created an environment where they felt comfortable to express what they needed.

Ember: Another break?
Julia: Would you like another break?
Kodiak: Yeah
Kayleigh: Ok let's do 5 mins

YAG Session

We also observed, listened and learnt about them and their needs as we progressed, and provisions could be built in without them having to ask (e.g. preferences for times of meeting, preferred mode of transport home). We learnt their favourite drinks and snacks and made sure to provide them with these at every session. We talked about music, art, films, sports, video games and also created space for them to share about their school experiences, home life, etc.

Kodiak: Julia, have I showed you my cat before?

Julia: I don't think so.

Kodiak: Because I was showing M. Hold on. I've got a photo of him sitting on my brother's Xbox.

YAG Session

Further, the YAG often joked with us and expressed a level of comfort in doing so. There would be light teasing toward the researchers, which resulted in running jokes about forgetting our names, or our interior design style. We made a point to ensure we celebrated birthdays, or milestones. We organised a Christmas event, and a YAG birthday trip to celebrate and spend time with them outside of the focused sessions. All this work was crucial to the success of the project but also incredibly meaningful and rewarding for all involved.

Julia: Can I suggest having a little birthday party for the group?

Kodiak: Oh my god, yes.

Kayleigh: Oh, yeah. Get cake. Yeah. Do you know what? Yeah, let's do that.

YAG Session

YAG Skills Development and Growth

At the start of the YAG, we asked them to complete a short survey asking what they hoped they would get out of their participation, with answers ranging from gaining a better understanding of the justice system, to experience of undertaking a research project. More specifically, we asked what skills they hoped that taking part in the YAG would help them with. The group unanimously wrote that they hoped the YAG would help them develop their communication skills. Confidence, research specific skills and teamwork were also highlighted in the responses.

The YAG spent a lot of time in sessions developing their research skills and learning about research ethics, research methods, interviewing techniques, as well as safeguarding approaches. Phase 2 involved a number of other, more hands-on learning opportunities through fieldwork, analysis and dissemination processes. This included presenting their ideas to the IAG, communicating with the wider project team, and fieldwork. During preparations for fieldwork, YAG members were able to understand the different roles required, and were able to identify and communicate their different strengths, interests and hopes for the fieldwork:

Momori: I think being the support and note-taking. So I'm doing, I'll do that. Should the notes be online mostly and digital, or can they also be paper?

Kayleigh: Okay, and what about the interviews? They're more one-on-one, so a bit more in-depth and a bit more kind of like, yeah, questioning.

Kodiak: That's actually low-key the part I'm most excited about, because I kind of love doing interviews.

YAG Session

All zine workshops with children were attended by at least one YAG member, and all police interviews were attended by two. Project researchers kept reflective notes from after the zine-making focus groups and interviews, and from our debriefs with the YAG, where we reflected on the YAG's confidence, developing research skills and involvement in sessions:

Ember took charge of explaining zines and did a really fantastic job of doing this, they also clarified a few points as I explained consent/anonymity etc

Researcher Notes, FG4: Phase 2

Young people were excited and ready and divided up the questions between themselves. I wasn't allocated any of the questions.

Researcher Notes, FG5, Phase 2

In our observations, the YAG grew into confident facilitators and offered encouragement and validation to their peers while conducting the focus groups, whether that was reassuring the group that their experience was valid and welcome in the research or trying to connect their experience of the YAG to help open up the conversation and allow people to feel more comfortable sharing potentially negative experiences.

Ember: Thank you. Welcome to my TED Talks. Everyone has individual experience and no one's experience is greater than another person's. ... So, it doesn't matter what experience you have, as long as you've had an experience and that is both valid in this research.

FG4: Phase 2

Youth Worker: You're not going to get in any bother if you say negative things.
Kayleigh: Absolutely... We're just really interested, based on conversations that we've had with other young people in our youth advisory group about...
M: We've definitely said some negative stuff about [police] there [at the YAG].

FG3: Phase 2

While we did not obtain sufficient feedback from the YAG at the post-project survey stage to numerically assess their development, there were positive signs that the YAG had developed new skills and confidence. The group also shared their personal development outside of the YAG, including one child receiving an unconditional offer from college. YAG members also described benefits such as joining other youth advisory boards that will allow them to continue this kind of work, or the transferrable skills they could utilise in their college and part-time work applications. Another YAG member was delighted to report that they received a place on a summer school of their choice, to support their UCAS applications for competitive university degree entries.

3.2. Reflections from the YAG

As part of our relational and co-produced approach, we actively checked in with the YAG about the processes of the project, while gently monitoring their progress, development and growth. To do this, we used Indeemo, the mobile ethnography app. This allowed us to set periodic tasks for the YAG to encourage reflections and check-ins at their own pace. When reflecting on their experience of the YAG after six months, participants were asked how they felt, what aspects they had enjoyed, and whether they believed their views had been listened to. The YAG were excited to do the research,

they felt a real sense of ownership over the project direction and what they wanted to gain from the peer research phase.

Leo: I have enjoyed learning the steps involved in making a research project as well as learning more about research methods and ethics. Being a part of this project has been good as I like listening to others, hearing their opinions and seeing how everything comes together to alter and add to the plans we've made.

YAG Feedback

Ember: I am feeling really excited about this project. I've enjoyed learning a lot about what goes into a research project and how we have so much say on the direction of the project. Creating the project is amazing and I've been learning so much about researching and thinking about things I didn't expect to.

YAG Feedback

During the fieldwork, each focus group or interview finished with a debrief. Sometimes we recorded this as a private 'mini-podcast' episode in the car on the way home, or just as a verbal check in. Beyond this, we wanted them to have a space to reflect in the days afterward, so we set up a task on Indeemo, asking them to reflect on what they found easy or difficult during fieldwork. Responses highlighted the challenge of interviewing police officers, including feeling confident to follow up with appropriate questions. Otherwise, the YAG reflected positively on the fieldwork, mentioning how comfortable they felt talking to other young people, and how much they enjoyed learning about young people's formation of attitudes toward the police and their solutions and visions for the future:

Momori: It was a fun interview with the police officer, I found it difficult at first to ask the appropriate questions that aren't too invasive but it was easy enough to get him to talk and the conversation went smoothly, the facial expressions definitely added more to the interview and made it easier to ask the right questions, the experience overall was a lot of fun.

YAG Feedback

The YAG were then asked to reflect on whether the findings were as they might have expected and whether anything they heard had changed their thoughts on the topics we are studying.

Momori: The findings were surprising in the sense that I didn't think so many people wanted to become police officers, and yet so many were also critical of the police.

YAG Feedback

And finally, we asked the YAG about their project hopes. Responses included:

Leo: I hope the project will be able to improve experiences with police for young people in the future.

YAG Feedback

Momori: I hope this project informs more young people and police officers about each other, and I'm hoping it becomes easier for everyone to recognise how they impact each other.

YAG Feedback

4. Findings

In this section we outline the key findings from the study, although for reasons of both brevity and accessibility we have only focused on the main findings, rather than attempting to account for all of the learning in the project. Within the data there were many other themes and multiple perspectives which have not been presented in this report. Subsequent publications will engage with different themes in more depth. Within this report, selected quotes and extracts from the data are used to illustrate key themes, substantiate our findings, and highlight areas of alignment or divergence in participants' perspectives.

As outlined in Section 2.5, we have drawn together the data from all phases of this project, and have grouped our initial research questions to present these findings as:

- Protected characteristics, intersectionality and children's rights: Covering overarching research questions 1, 2, 3 and partially 4.

This section explores children's knowledge and understanding of protected characteristics and intersectionality more generally. It considers their experiences in education, care and family settings as 'pre-justice' encounters, although we recognise that within these environments there is some overlap with formal justice systems (e.g. Children's Hearings System or School Liaison Officers, referred to as 'campus cops').

- Intersectional Justice Experiences: Covering overarching research questions 4 and 5.

This section focuses more directly on the intersections between protected characteristics, other experiences and justice. While all aspects of the justice system are within scope here, the findings are primarily shaped around police interactions as that was the dominant agenda in Phase 1 and therefore the focus of Phase 2.

- Solutions and visions for the future: Covering overarching research question 6.

Here we focus on how justice systems could, and should, develop in the future, focusing on the big vision ideas and practical or iterative steps suggested by children or police officers. We return to, respond and refine these in our recommendations for the future in Section 6.

4.1. Protected Characteristics, Intersectionality and Rights – 'pre justice'

Knowledge and understanding of rights, protected characteristics and intersectionality

There was evidence of rights consciousness across child participants, involving awareness of the UNCRC and evolving legal and policy frameworks with understanding of participation rights, particularly within the YAG. This perhaps reflected the YAG's prior engagement and participation experiences, with their knowledge and interest in rights acting as both a motivator and mechanism for why and how they engaged with the project, but also might have developed as a result of their participation in, and learning from, the project.

I asked them to all share a key word that was coming up for them in this project – we got words like, rights, action, intersectionality, discrimination.

Researcher Notes, YAG Session

Rights awareness was often taught, with schools educating children about the UNCRC, or at least displaying posters about the UNCRC. This reflects the wider political environment in Scotland, with UNCRC incorporation into Scot's Law, and the Scottish Government providing grant funding for UNICEF UK to offer the Rights Respecting Schools Award to every primary and secondary school in Scotland, providing training, resources, support and accreditation for free. With 83% of schools in Scotland opting in to this offer (UNICEF UK, 2025) rights were a common language and a visible feature in children's lives.

C61: I mean, I think people know their rights a lot more now 'cause of the UNC...

Ember (YAG): UNCRC.

C61: Yeah, in schools and stuff.

Ember (YAG): Who knows what the UNCRC is?

C59: The United...

C61: [interrupts] Who doesn't?

C60: The United Nations Rights of the Child

C61: It's the rights of a child.

C59: Oh, they're all over our walls

FG4: Phase 2

However, the terminology and language of the Equality Act 2010 and protected characteristics was perhaps less well understood across all participant groups. Overall, children were generally aware of the concept of protected characteristics, and could often name key protections relating to age, gender and race, but were often less familiar with the other characteristics. Knowledge varied across participants: for example, one participant was able to name every characteristic, and another had not heard of the term.

They expressed that they didn't understand what we were talking about and that it was too difficult to think about.

Researcher Notes

C19: race, age, I know there's sexuality, there's sex, there's gender reassignment, oh god, disability, there's one for pregnancy and oh hmm...religion.

FG6: Phase 1

Knowledge of protected characteristics and intersectionality was more directly linked to personal identities and lived experience. When prompted all children could reflect on the concepts, especially in relation to their own experiences, although at times they struggled to recognise that they were, in fact, discussing protected characteristics. Some groups found it harder to reflect on protected characteristics that they had no experience of, whereas children who were already more actively engaged in activism or connected to participation and rights organisations such as the Scottish Youth Parliament, were more familiar with these terms.

C21: Intersectionality is when you compile characteristics, so let's say you're a brown female lesbian, you experience them all individually but also together and how they intersect. So they will have different experiences to white lesbians. So, it's sort of, it can be, it comes with a lot more challenges definitely.

FG7: Phase 1

Experience of Protected Characteristics

This project engaged with a modest, but highly diverse, number of children. Children came from many different backgrounds, and expressed many different identities and experiences in relation to race, religion, socioeconomic status, family composition, gender, sexuality, nationality, physical and mental health, justice experience and many other factors. Yet, regardless of this significant diversity in relation to protected and other characteristics, age emerged as the defining feature of children's experiences. Naturally, with the research focusing on a narrow range of children aged between 14 and 17, age was the one universal factor across all of the participants and therefore was a prominent and unifying feature across all focus group discussions. However, age transformed children's experiences of justice, as well as their lived experiences of other protected characteristics.

Differential and detrimental treatment relating to age was often experienced long before contact with the justice system occurred. At this stage of adolescence, in which children were navigating important transitions towards more independence and agency, they encountered dismissive attitudes in health, education and other settings, where they were not always taken seriously.

C20: Even just with doctors, it's hard to get an appointment for chronic illness as a young person because they don't see as many young people with chronic illnesses.

FG7: Phase 1

C59: There was like an incident at my school in my year that happened to a girl and basically we were talking sort of about domestic violence in RE and our teacher basically said there's not really a point of going to the police at your age if you are in a toxic relationship because they're not going to do anything because we're so young.

FG4: Phase 2

In many of the focus groups, children and young people reported widespread surveillance, restrictions or outright bans on their access to spaces and amenities. While these were familiar experiences to many of the children who participated, there was an additional place-based element, in that particular locations or communities appeared to experience this to a greater extent than others. This predominantly affected disadvantaged communities, but also locations where groups of children might wish to visit, such as city centres, parks and beaches.

C59: A group of older people are stood like outside, they're having a respectful conversation but if a bunch of teenagers are stood outside St Enoch's [city centre shopping centre], we're loitering, but I don't understand the difference because we're probably having a conversation about the same thing. I don't understand.

FG4: Phase 2

As ever, there were complexities here too, as there was an acknowledgement that some children and young people do cause issues for local businesses and the local area, such as vandalism, or antisocial behaviour in retail or hospitality premises. In this exchange between three children, they discuss the negative stereotypes of young people that unjustly restricted their right to use public amenities, but at the same time repeat and reflect some of the same stereotyping language that labels others too. This perhaps highlights the deep rooted and pervasive stigma and societal attitudes that shape children's (often young working-class boys) experiences of (in)justice and marginalisation (Brewis, 2025).

C22: Oh yeah definitely. Especially if we are hanging out or if it's later at night, they just assume we are doing bad things. It's based on portrayal on media and public perception of groups.

C21: Fun fact. See McDonalds, like ones in the [local shopping centre] and that, they've started refusing entry to those under 16 because of the neds and chavs and that.

C20: KFC do that too.

FG7: Phase 1

These concerns and complexities were amplified when it came to justice interactions, especially those involving the police. Not only in how they felt judged and targeted, but in how they perceived they would be treated as victims or witness to crime. See Section 4.2 for more detail on justice interactions.

C23: I think it is very based on age as well, if you're younger, the police aren't going to believe you.

FG7: Phase 1

There were also several other features which emerged in discussions about protected characteristics that were deemed to have a bearing on how children were perceived or treated. Most commonly appearance (particularly clothing), class, previous criminal convictions and care experience were suggested as potential characteristics. These 'missing' characteristics, and their implications for justice are discussed in more detail in Section 4.2.

Experiences of School-based Justice

Education settings were often locations where early injustices occurred. Children described experiences of bullying, exclusion or harm within the school environment, but typically felt that they had experienced inadequate responses from teachers or authority figures when reporting harms or concerns. This included breaches of trust, dismissive attitudes, lack of follow-up action and, at times, what was perceived to be discriminatory treatment.

C17: This one time, this person called me a derogatory [racist] term and they [teacher] said 'oh who was it' and they spoke to the person and once they spoke to the person, I told them not to tell the person, because you know like, people would come up to me and be like 'what you saying' and I didn't want that, and nothing happened anyway.

FG6: Phase 1

School-based injustices appear to have been frequently influenced by age, but were also linked to wider intersectional dynamics, such as race, gender, sexuality and family background.

C22: Kind of sensitive subject but there was an incident at my school, where a dude manipulated me into doing stuff, right, but the school didn't take it as seriously as other stuff because it was like, at the time, I was also a dude so it was 'gay stuff'. So it was by technicality SA [sexual assault] right, but the school didn't take it seriously because technically I was gay at the time

C21: that doesn't matter, that's still illegal.

FG7: Phase 1

Children often did not want schools to know the details of their lives, as they perceived that this would be more likely to have a detrimental impact on them, rather than result in positive adjustments or additional supports. This was illustrated in one child's experience of familial imprisonment:

C26: Because that's why I'm getting treated differently

Youth Worker: So you think you're getting treated differently because of your parents right now at school? And why do you think that is?

C26: Because my Dad's in jail, that's what I'm trying to say.

Youth Worker: But you're not your Dad.

C26: That's what I said.

FG8: Phase 1

Schools were also where justice system contact was initiated (especially in relation to School Liaison Officers or 'campus cops'). Campus officers are police officers assigned to schools as part of their regular duties. While there is no standard job description for this responsibility, the role is broadly seen to have ostensibly preventative purposes: to act as a visible deterrent for crime and antisocial behaviour, to act as a source of education (re drugs, or knife crime etc) and also to create familiarity and potentially build positive relationships between children and police (Fronidoun et al., 2013).

While police officers are a key part of the justice system, their presence in schools has been considered as 'pre-justice' here, in that children's everyday engagement with education should not be viewed in terms of justice system contact. Certainly, there was pervasive contact with 'campus cops', especially in urban areas, and in more heavily policed or disadvantaged neighbourhoods, linking early police contact with both place, poverty and class.

C61: I don't really hear about police, like campus officers in like outside of Glasgow though ... think it's because we've got such like bad crime, especially in the south.

FG4: Phase 2

Despite the stated intentions, children often viewed campus officers as either an irrelevant or negative presence in their schools, who did little to engage with children constructively.

C17: we had this person called PC Jenner³, she was our school police officer

C15: oh yeah, we had one police officer who just roamed about at our school

C17: PC Jenner made no difference

C15: there was this one police officer who would go about, the only time I would actually see him, he'd just be talking to teachers, like what are you doing, just having a little chat?

FG6: Phase 1

³ All names have been changed

Kayleigh: Do you interact much with her [campus officer]?

C45: No, she doesn't even talk to us.

C44: She literally done all that training, just sitting at school all day doing nothing. Like, not trying to be nasty or anything. Sorry if you're hearing this.

C45: I don't care who's hearing this. I genuinely believe that school officers do nothing...

C46: ... I don't really know, like, sometimes I generally think, why are you here? Like, not in a bad way, but I don't, like, am I here in case there's a crime needs to report? Am I here, like, why is there, why does my school have a police officer? ...

C43: We barely see her as well.

FG1: Phase 2

While school-based justice was often characterised by inaction or dismissiveness, the presence of campus officers raised anxiety in children about the potential for overreaction or escalation for everyday issues and incidents that would inevitably occur throughout the school day. At times, it was felt that the police roles in relation to crime detection, community safety and protection within communities and their more pastoral and educative role with schools became blurred. Incidents that once might have been dealt with by family or teachers were often problematised, escalated and, potentially criminalised.

C46: We have police in our school, right? If you were to go to a police officer and you were to tell them how you actually feel, they would like get the teachers in, like get your mum or dad in. So, like people obviously don't want to tell the police stuff because then they think that they just like call a whole riot team, you know what I'm saying? But they'd get so many people involved.

FG1: Phase 2

C56: The police is the reason I'm grounded for a month. I've no had my phone in weeks. It's only cause the campus cop caught me patching¹, ... Another week added on because he found me again patching. He always finds me. ... they just drive about and come see if anybody is patching at school. I was sitting at the bus stop, waiting to get my pal on the bus and then go back to school.

FG3: Phase 2

When injustices were experienced, or justice wasn't forthcoming, and children experienced inaction or dismissal by authorities, they often felt forced to enact their own form of justice by taking matters into their own hands. While no children reported experiencing serious consequences due to this, it does increase the risk of their future criminalisation as well as reduce the likelihood of them reporting incidents of further harm or victimisation in informal and formal ways.

C17: Outside of school, most of the time, I'm thinking I wanna do something myself, like it sounds bad but I'm thinking I wanna hurt you, like, I remember one time, my mum is Indian and her English isn't really good ... [describes a language mix-up in a shop]. I remember this family behind us giggling and laughing, and I remember we walked away and they really burst out laughing and my mum turned around like 'what's so funny?' and they were like 'You mate, you. You can't speak English.' I was only like 10 but I remember thinking 'I want to kill these people.'

FG6: Phase 1

C22: There's been a few cases of stuff like that [assault] happening, and there's been cases before and people have gotten expelled but obviously they didn't this time and I see him [person C22 was assaulted by] every day at school. Don't get me wrong I still bully him every day but still...

FG7: Phase 1

Wider Systems and Institutions – Children's Hearings System and Secure Care.

While the Children's Hearings System and secure care centres are part of both the care and justice systems (see Appendix A), they have been discussed here under 'pre-justice' as part of a predominantly welfarist system. Importantly, there is a substantial body of evidence that involvement in the care system can lead to a disproportionate risk of later encountering the justice system, in part due to an accumulation of childhood adversity and disadvantage, compounded by institutional and system practices that have led to the overcriminalisation of children in care (Corrales et al., 2025).

There was limited knowledge and understanding of the Children's Hearings System across the participants, and knowledge was mainly concentrated in those children with direct experience of the system.

C37: I don't even know what it is. I was meant to go to Sheriff Court then I got a letter saying I had to go to a children's hearing or something, I don't know what will happen though.

FG11: Phase 1

Contact with the Children's Hearings System was felt to be intrusive, and while hearings ostensibly act 'in the best interests of the child' this was not always how the system was experienced, and decisions and processes were sometimes perceived to be at odds with their rights. Some children felt that the disclosure and discussion of sensitive and personal information, often with unfamiliar adults, did not support their privacy rights.

C21: I don't think a wee bairn would want to go in and talk about their feelings to some random person. Because that's what it is wi' a children's panel.

Julia: Yeah, it's a lot to just have all these people that you don't know when they're talking about your life.

C21: Actually, it's quite personal and private.

FG8: Phase 1

Similarly, there was a strong sense of procedural unfairness within the Children's Hearings System. A children's hearing, with its panel of lay volunteers, informal hearing rooms and emphasis on voice and participation (Robertson, 2022; Donnelly, 2026), is intended to be conducted in a more inclusive, child-friendly manner. However, those with direct experience of the system described a lack of agency and power at children's hearings. Their views and perspectives were often dismissed, and while this may have been necessary, as a result of difficult decisions to be made in the light of genuine welfare concerns, it appears that children did not receive effective and sensitive communication – even more important at times of high stress. Some felt that they didn't get a say or an opportunity to voice their opinions or experiences. Children described becoming riled up, often by the adults in the room, and then asked to leave the room to calm down. Subsequently, decisions were then made without them.

C21: Throughout my life, I've had like social work and all of that, and ... like every time we'd go down, like they'd think that my mum and dad are very violent people but then see when I try and explain they're very nice people at first when you know them. They just, they just actually blank me. It's like when you try and get them to listen, but they don't listen to a single word. It's like it just goes one ear and goes out the other. Yeah. It's really disrespectful.

FG8: Phase 1

In secure care settings, disparate treatment between boys and girls was acknowledged, with participants highlighting how gender can influence expectations and responses to behaviour. Age was also highlighted as a compounding factor, particularly in relation to younger boys who were perceived as 'getting away with' behaviours that older boys might be reprimanded for. Some young people in secure care described inconsistencies in what rules applied and how they were applied, often depending on what staff member was on shift, or indeed whether the staff member had capacity to deal with behaviour.

Gender was covered a fair amount – definitely a recognition that boys are treated with more suspicion and a heavy hand compared to girls, even in secure care (examples of boys getting reprimanded for things girls were getting away with).

Researcher notes, FG9: Phase 1

4.2. Protected Characteristics, Intersectionality and Rights – 'in justice'

Discussions in Phase 1 focused heavily on policing, with police emerging as the most visible and prominent gatekeepers to the youth justice system. In Phase 2, policing was purposefully foregrounded, resulting in the police featuring frequently in depictions, lived experiences, and symbolic representations of justice throughout the project. Although the findings in this section engage with multiple aspects of the justice system, and the section begins with a reflection on overarching conceptualisations of justice, policing therefore remains the dominant feature in this analysis.

What is Justice?

Justice was described as a process, as an outcome, but predominantly as an institution - a tangible entity such as a building, a place or a person.

C16: Um... justice alone symbolises sort of, getting closure. For me, when I think of justice, I think of injustice happening in the word. Unequal things. Justice things are thinking about them getting treated the way they sort of, deserve to be treated and getting the respect they deserve.

FG6: Phase 1

Kayleigh: ...what comes to mind when we hear justice?

C37: Judge. Court room

C38: Police.

FG11: Phase 1

Knowledge of the justice system varied considerably and was often shaped by perceptions and information obtained from external sources. Beyond widely recognised institutions, such as police and the courts, the more welfarist-oriented foundations of Scottish youth justice, such as the

Children's Hearings System, were rarely recognised or understood, except by those with direct experience of the system.

Momori: In RMPS [Religious, Moral and Philosophical Studies], we learn about punishment and the different reasons for punishment. Deterrence, protection, retribution and rehabilitation right?

YAG Session

Nina: has anyone heard of the Children's Hearings System?

C37: ...what is that?

FG11: Phase 1

Children did not perceive justice as something effectively delivered through existing systems, nor did they feel that the justice system worked in their interests as they believed it was designed for adults. Instead, power was understood to be concentrated within a narrow demographic.

Kayleigh: What happens to 'justice' when we place it into a system then?

C20: It gets diluted, it gets diluted into um just whoever is in control of shaping that and changes that for whatever they see fit. When it enters the system, no matter what, the system is ruled by straight, able-bodied, white, cis men.

FG7: Phase 1

Rights and Justice

There was mixed, but growing awareness of rights in justice interactions, particularly among children with prior justice experience and who 'knew the system', or those who were educated and coached on their rights due to their involvement in activist communities or family experiences. They demonstrated procedural awareness and could, at times, exercise both their right to participation and right to silence or 'non-participation'.

Kayleigh: So, if they came up to you and asked you a question?

C55: No comment and I walk away.

FG3: Phase 2

C25: They told me nothing at all, I think they should like at least read our rights now. Instead of just like saying, you're under arrest for this and that, and then putting us in the car and saying nothing, because that's all they do. The amount of times I've had to phone my lawyer for my rights, honestly.

C26: Do they no have to wait for a parent if you're under the age of 16?

FG8: Phase 1

However, children highlighted perceived risks associated with asserting rights, suggesting that knowing and acting on your rights can be interpreted as 'cheeky', eliciting tougher responses from justice personnel:

C17: They [police] can get quite patronising though, thinking you're being smart.

FG6: Phase 1

Even when there was good awareness of rights, age and power imbalances intersected to cause fear and anxiety about exercising rights.

C61: Never. Obviously I know my rights but like they don't make it clear to me.

C59: I'm kind of like scared of them generally so like even if they did say my rights I'd kind of just freeze and just be like oh ok. Oh you're talking to me and you are an adult I have to listen....

Ember (YAG): Do you think they maybe use their authority a bit too much?

C61: Yeah. Also a lot of people get scared because some people have to interact with the police before. They think if they tell you your rights, it's only if you're getting arrested.

FG4: Phase 2

Protected Characteristics and Intersectional Justice

As with their childhood experiences more generally, age emerged as a crucial protected characteristic within justice settings, frequently resulting from widespread stereotypes and misconceptions about children and young people. Age typically resulted in detrimental treatment or, where individuals were treated 'equally' this produced deleterious effects due to their age and developmental stage. On a rare occasion it was recognised that differential treatment based on age could act in children's favour and that adults would be treated more harshly because technically they were recognised as more responsible for their actions within the law.

C47: Like if the police saw all of us, for example, out on the street at night time. They'd automatically think they're causing trouble, even if we weren't. That's just because they've had other experiences with teenagers who have, I can't remember what the exact thing is called, but like who've had reckless behaviour, basically.

FG1: Phase 2

C24: Well, I was 14, I was put in cuffs, I had to ask for a lawyer. 14, 15 I think. ...There's no right for them to do that. You have to wait for a lawyer for anything to happen because you're underage and you shouldn't be explaining anything.

FG8: Phase 1

Race was also a dominant theme, with widespread agreement that justice interactions, particularly in policing, were underpinned by bias, prejudice, and what were often perceived to be racist practices. This included children of colour not being taken seriously when reporting racist incidents or other crimes, as well as being targeted and discriminated against in stop and search. While many white participants observed this targeting in action, and displayed a sense of allyship with their racially minoritised peers, others found it harder to perceive race as a defining characteristic in these actions. While it is understandable that children's understanding of justice and wider social issues is rooted in their own personal experiences, this becomes more problematic when considering the 'whiteness' of the justice system, with a lack of racial diversity documented across key justice organisations, such as Police Scotland, the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service, the Scottish Courts and Tribunal Service and the Law Society of Scotland (Scottish Government, 2023).

C16: I think people of colour can't escape from the police, the police will just assume they are doing something up to no good. People that aren't of colour, if they stay away, they're good. One thing you guys should try and find out, is how many white people, no colour, experience police brutality. Even if people of colour try to stay away, they can't escape.

FG6: Phase 1

They went through the game⁴ really easily, the white participants couldn't figure out why 'Ben' was followed around the shop but the others quickly decided it was because of race.

Researcher notes, FG7: Phase 1

Key intersections were perceived to be age and gender, with particular resonance for boys or those who were perceived as boys. While being a man was often sufficient to draw attention, or result in unwarranted contact or unwanted treatment within justice systems, being a *boy* or a *young* man meant almost inevitable suspicion, and was perceived by many as being deeply unfair. There were complexities though, in that there was recognition that some crimes, particularly those of a violent and sexual nature, were more likely to be committed by boys and men. This muddled the waters about what was fair and unfair in how people were treated and targeted.

C47: Like, if they [police] see a man on the street, they're probably more likely to be like, 'he is up to something'. If they saw a woman walking in the street, they'd be like, 'it's fine'.

FG1: Phase 2

An intersectional lens, as well as the experience of some of our transgender participants, brought unique insights into differential treatment based on gender. Similarly, gender and race (along with age) was perceived as an important intersection that mediated how justice was experienced. There was almost universal agreement that police officers were biased towards people of colour, whether consciously or unconsciously, and treated them with suspicion.

C23: Also like, the switch from being a brown girl to a brown boy. You know, being followed around, that used to never happen to me, I used to look a lot older with longer hair, and now security guys watch me and one time I was stopped like 'oh show me what's in your pockets wee man' but I was like 'I'm not a shoplifter guys!'

FG7: Phase 1

In response, children were taught by family members, teachers and others in the community to fear the police from a young age, for their own safety. This led to a perpetuating cycle of mistrust and negative interactions.

C61: It was like the teachers were kind of like influenced that, I guess, in a way. Like...I've watched another person when I was in primary, like of the same race talk about how they were scared of the police and the teachers, they'll be like, "that's good", instead of being like, that's bad, shouldn't be scared of the police, like they're...yeah.

FG4: Phase 2

Missing Characteristics

Furthermore, while age was seen as the defining characteristic, participants identified many other 'missing' characteristics that, at times existed independently, but primarily functioned with, and alongside, age. Appearance was a frequent and cross-cutting issue, perhaps of near significance to age, and which certainly intersected strongly with age. Appearance, often in the form of visible clothing and accessories, takes on increased significance in adolescence, symbolising individual identity and self-expression as well as signifying belonging and peer acceptance within a group (Jenkinson, 2020). But these markers, such as black clothing, certain styles of bags, or e-bikes, also drew unwanted

⁴ A scenario-based activity used in the research

attention or suspicion. For other children their appearance made them additionally visible in public spaces.

C37: I think it depends on what you look like and where you are

Nina: What do other people think? What are the main things that would make a police officer stop you? Why do the girls not get stopped?

C41: they don't look like suspicious and they don't wear full black

C37: it's true then when you wear all black you look like a thug

FG11: Phase 1

David: Yeah. I think it's also if like you're like visibly queer as well, because me and Ember were in St. Enoch's⁵ once. And we were sitting down, because we had an hour or something to our train, and we were just sitting down, having a can of Monster, and every single officer or security guard that passed us by gave Ember a look...

Ember: I have green hair and pronouns!

YAG Session

Conversations around socioeconomic status, class or poverty were rarely explicit but occurred implicitly in discussions around appearance and place. Clothing choices, as outlined above, were a signifier of identity which frequently drew suspicion. This typically occurred as a result of wearing a tracksuit or 'trackie', often traditionally sported by boys and young men in predominantly working class or urban areas across Scotland, and seen by the police, the media and the wider general public as concerning indicators of class, socioeconomic status, antisocial behaviour and crime (Brewis, 2025).

C14: I think it's age, race, and the way you dress. If we were all wearing suits and stuff, it would be different [group laughter]. Because we are wearing trackies, and hoods, and gloves and some of my mates would be on bikes. I think bikes is the number one thing, they automatically think you're a drug dealer.

FG6: Phase 1

While 'trackies' were frequently expensive, they were associated with being 'working-class poor' (Brewis, 2025). Yet even children who opted for designer clothing and accessories (tracksuit or not) drew suspicion, perhaps due to a perceived discrepancy with their supposed class or socioeconomic status. This suspicion interacted strongly with gender and place, in that children stood out in a deprived or disadvantaged community.

C37: yeah age, and all of us were wearing designer

C40: like...how's that suspicious?

FG11: Phase 1

Place also featured as a 'missing' characteristic in its own right. Children understood clearly that where they lived strongly shaped their interactions with the police. There was great variation between highly policed communities or events, compared to more rural or remote communities. Even comparing Scotland's two biggest cities, children perceived there to be substantial differences in the policing presence and approach.

⁵ City centre shopping centre

Kodiak: There was a far-right march through the town, and they were doing all sorts of far-right white supremacist stuff and there were barely any cops about but if you compare it to Pride or the protests down at Barclay's⁶, there was so much more there and I don't get that.

YAG Session

Heavily policed neighbourhoods increased fear and anxiety in children who felt less able to access their communities as a result, rather than a police presence making the community feel safer for them.

C64: It's bad to go outside at night. In the day, you can go like outside and it's like, but at night is not good because you never know...

Youth Worker: Do you feel danger?

C64: Yeah.

Youth Worker: Of police or of other people?

C64: Both.

FG5: Phase 2

There were complexities too, in terms of 'place'. While living in a small, rural area could be 'protective' in that it typically meant greater distance and therefore minimal interaction from the police, there were risks too, in that becoming 'known' to the police in a small community often lead to additional and ongoing visibility, scrutiny and targeting.

Becoming 'known' in a small area if you do something one time, i.e. one time caught with a knife, or one time caught with drugs, ruining your reputation and then always getting stopped and searched.

Researcher Notes, FG10: Phase 1

Relatedly, being known to the police either through their own, or family history, was felt to increase the likelihood of future police contact and to have a detrimental effect on a child's ability to move on or refrain from future offending behaviours. Importantly, children often felt that the justice system did not take these experiences or other characteristics into account when making justice-related decisions, especially experiences, characteristics and identities that did not fit within a formal or legal framework.

Ember: The police don't get the full picture of someone's life, they only get the crime they committed and they are not able to defend it until they are brought to court, and even then if they don't have money to hire a professional lawyer, they get a court appointed lawyer or whatever is called and they usually have big caseloads anyway so you're not getting the trial you're legally entitled to but they don't care because to them you're not a young student who is working a part-time job and a young carer, you're just someone who has committed this crime.

YAG Session

4.3. Shifting Developmental Perspectives

Age is not a static characteristic. Throughout Phase 1 and Phase 2, a recurring theme reflected a chronological perspective in children's experiences of the police, and justice. The importance of this perspective could be seen in the formative impact of early experiences of the police for children, as well as in some police interviews, where childhood experiences even led to a desire to become a police officer in the first place. However, we were struck by the disconnect between childhood

⁶ Typically, protests in Glasgow relating to Barclay's ties to Israel

perceptions and representations of the police, and the lived realities for young people in their first and subsequent contacts with the police in later life, as depicted in the zine-making sessions.

We must recognise that our approach within the zine making sessions has significant influence here. Participants were asked to make a zine, and given freedom to create whatever they wanted, however for those who preferred, a suggested structure was available, which consisted of 'Early memories of the police', 'How I think about the police now', and 'What I would change about the police'. Naturally, this suggested to participants that they should document these separately, and may have implied that these 'should' be different. However, the zines created were stark in their differentiation between views and early memories of the police, and current views.

With some notable exceptions, early memories and experiences of the police were typified (perhaps predictably) by childish imagery which often utilised cartoon depictions of police (e.g. Paw Patrol), referenced books or experiences in school, and were generally positive. These memories and perceptions situated the police as helpful or protective, but it is interesting to note that these positive experiences tended not to be directly related to crime, justice, or criminality, but rather to public health and public safety.

C47: Trains! Sorry, the police used to always come to our school to show us a video of the trains...
Yeah, they used to come for like, safety stuff, I think. I'm thinking of primary school, that's when they're like, that's when they come into the class.

FG1: Phase 2

Alongside some of these more positive early memories, zine makers also highlighted explicitly negative memories, usually related to direct experiences of either arrests or other interactions between adults in their lives and the police. These were often clearly traumatic events for the children, and were distressing to read or hear about, and they appeared to be highly formative of children's views of the police. Experiences of witnessing arrests and rough handling of family members appeared to imbue children with fear and mistrust of police officers. This also highlights an intergenerational element, where experiences of parents or family members coming into contact with the police which may have happened a decade or more ago, continue to influence children's perspectives of the police.

C47: I think in a way I did probably fear them more than I did trust them, but that's just because like how my family was around them as well. So, I was like kind of brought up to think like, oh, right. But then now at this age, I think now I'm a bit more like, I understand this is their job. We need to put everything like into consideration.

FG1: Phase 2

Many of the zines in Phase 2 presented, directly or indirectly, a change in attitudes or understandings of the police from the child-like simplicity of 'heroes' who are there to help and protect, to a recognition that they could represent more negative elements, from an unwelcome presence, to a physical or emotional threat. While some of these were via sudden traumatic events such as those described above, for others it was reflected in a more gradual change in how they were treated as they aged. This could take the frame of felt 'surveillance', negative experience with 'campus cops', or experiences of direct contact with police in public spaces.

C73: They get scarier the older you get.

FG5: Phase 2

As previously noted, much of the children's early contact and understanding of the police reflected public health or safety concerns, rather than criminality. It is perhaps unsurprising therefore, that children's experiences became more negative as they aged, and as issues of wrongdoing, criminality, or law enforcement become more prominent in their relationship with, and understanding of, the police. These developing understandings were also seen to result in cognitive dissonance, as their views and perspectives were challenged by new information or experiences. One participant highlighted the role of peers in informing these opinions, where although their personal experiences and attitudes towards the police were relatively positive, the opinion and experiences of their peers shaped those attitudes, as they took account of the views and experiences of those they knew and trusted.

Adolescent Realities

The reality of adolescent experiences and perspectives of the police was, overall, fairly negative. A far cry from the public health and safety messaging of their early understandings, here, adolescents appeared to feel cast as the 'bad guys' by the police. Surveillance, stop and search, campus cops, and being 'moved on' from public spaces appeared to be definitional of their experiences as adolescents. Beyond these 'mildly' negative experiences, some gave examples of more harmful experiences of physical assault or humiliation, with all members of one focus group within a secure care setting reporting experience of rough handling by police officers (**FG5: Phase 1**).

Adolescence is a time of significant physical, emotional, cognitive and social development, in which risk-taking, boundary-pushing, and impulsivity are normative developmental traits (Icenogle & Cauffman, 2021). It is, therefore, almost inevitable that experiences of the police in adolescence will be more complicated than as younger children. Where younger children are almost exempt from being perceived as potential 'offenders', as they age into adolescence, boundary-pushing behaviours are more likely to bring them into conflict with the police. It is also the case that as they age, interpretations or perceptions of their behaviour may change as well. Many children talked about how they were treated differently (and to their mind more harshly) compared to adults because of their age, but adolescence as a period of change and development may also be bounded at the lower-end, by favourable perceptions and interpretations of younger children's behaviour. As adolescents, the children appear to feel caught between two stools, too old for a presumption of innocence in perceptions of their behaviour, and too young to benefit from the rights, respect, and expectations of responsibility, afforded to adults.

It was also notable that there was an emotional element to children's experience of negative encounters with the police. Having come through younger childhood with an understanding and expectation of the police as friendly supports, concerned to help and protect you, having these expectations confounded by negative experiences appeared to elicit a response that went beyond the negative experience itself, and triggered an emotional reaction to having their image of the police challenged or damaged by their first-hand experience.

Nina: what do you think when people make those assumptions?

C38: Hurts my feelings.

FG11: Phase 1

4.4. Complexity and Ambivalence

As highlighted above, as children developed and gained more direct experience of policing, their understandings and perspectives of police officers, childhood simplicities were replaced with something more nuanced and layered.

C6: The world would be a mess without police, but it's also a mess with bad police.

FG3: Phase 1

Of course, all aspects of children's interactions with police officers are complex and nuanced. A single encounter can contain both positive and negative elements, and experiences may vary across different contacts with the police. This complexity was reflected in children's accounts, as they frequently recognised that police actions or behaviours they perceived as unfair or inappropriate were sometimes intended to protect their safety, as illustrated in the excerpt below.

C60: There was this one time where I was like, this was at night, so it was a little bit fair, but not really. Like I was, so I was gonna, I was coming home at like 11pm after hanging out with my friends and I'm walking down in [name of area] over this bridge and then I'm just walking and then and I drop something and it falls into the bridge and I look down and then I turn around and this police car swerves over through the corner really fast and I'm like, what's going on? And then a bunch of police officers get out and start shouting at me.

FG4: Phase 2

Children also acknowledged the challenges of policing, noting that officers are often exposed to distressing, harmful, and difficult situations, including those involving children and young people. Likewise, officers demonstrated an awareness of the frustrations that children and young people may experience and described efforts to adapt their approach accordingly. However, they emphasised that their primary responsibility remained the protection of the public, which ultimately shaped their approach.

Police3: I get that we can be intimidating, even I had one of my neighbours get broken into and the police came to my door in uniform and I felt a wee bit nervous, and I've been in the police for twenty-two years, so I can get that, but part of our core duty is, protecting life, property, keeping people safe. And a big bit of that is about control at times.

Phase 2

For police officers, the acknowledgement that there were some officers who did not have the aptitude or motivation for policing children and young people appropriately was also frustrating, and undermined trust and community relations.

Police2: And like everywhere, there's good officers and there's bad officers out there. There's lazy and there's people who are quite proactive and things like that. So I can't comment on that specific case because I wasn't there, I don't know. But I wouldn't let one police officer hinder or make you feel like you know, because I can guarantee you there's millions more out there who absolutely would genuinely take on that and deal with it. So yeah, please don't let that judge how your perspective of all police officers, because we're not all the same.

Phase 2

However, this complexity fostered a profound ambivalence towards the police. For children who had been antagonised, rough handled, or experienced physical harm or abuse from police officers, attitudes were overwhelmingly shaped by fear and mistrust, alongside a persistent belief that such behaviour was entrenched and institutionalised within policing practices and unlikely to change. Yet even among these children, many acknowledged differences between individual officers, recognising that not all could be characterised as ‘bad cops’.

Ember: When they see that uniform, it just instills fear. With them, when they see the highlighted cars in the high-vis. It can be a trigger for them. And I've seen physical reactions to like a police car going by from some young people. And it's... don't think that trust could ever be rebuilt with that young person because of the experience that they went through has been so traumatic for them. That trust will never be rebuilt. And I think it's how that young person was handled when confronted with police.

YAG Session

C3 was very reflective and talked about the tensions between individual officers and ‘police’ as an institution or a ‘badge’. He repeated numerous times that they can learn to like an individual officer, but he will never like the police as an institution.

Researcher Notes, Secure Sounding Board: Phase 2

While harmful experiences of police contact were too often shared, children more frequently described police contact that was pervasive, ordinary and everyday, rather than exceptional. Furthermore, children reported being both overlooked and overpoliced, simultaneously surveilled and dismissed. At times this stemmed from a false dichotomy, related to how they were perceived in the eyes of the law, either as a ‘victim’ or as a ‘suspect’. In either case, these seemingly opposing responses of inaction or overreaction often produced the same result: a sense of not being heard, believed, or taken seriously due to their age. This is clearly highlighted in Child 46’s narrative below, in which they express both a need for early and swift police action to potential online harms, and a desire to be left alone.

C46: But then I think it's the fear, it's like I was just feared that like a police officer would run out of the car and just start like... not like this meaning this wrong, but like patting me down basically and saying, what do you have on, like why are you here? At the end of the day, I understand you, it's your job and stuff, so why are you interrogating people that are just walking down the street?

FG1: Phase 2

C46: I think you need to take more action if someone comes into the police and is like, oh, this person's messaging me online, or oh, this person's, even if it's like, even if it's like one time, it's still an offence, or it's still an action that they should be taking into place, because what if that person offends another time?

FG1: Phase 2

This ambivalence produced conflicting responses and often led to contradictory and complex solutions (see Section 4.6). Children naturally tended to adopt a strategy of avoidance with the police, to avoid drawing attention, arousing suspicion or being the recipient of unnecessary or unwarranted contact. Often, they simply wished to be left alone. This was perceived to be a self-preservation approach to police contact. At the same time, children expressed a desire to see a more human side of policing, characterised by friendlier, everyday interactions and more understanding. With improved

communication and mutual understanding (see Section 4.6), these two desires need not remain in opposition. Importantly, some police officers also reflected on their own similar interactions with the police as a child, which were hard to reconcile with their own adult identities as officers, but also helped to foster empathy and understanding.

C63: See if I walk past a police officer. Like, I'm not expecting them to have a conversation with me, but even just like 'Oh hi'. Like, they need to make a good impression, but I think most times I've walked past the police officer, they didn't say much, and it's kind of like you're meant like you're meant to be a person that I can trust and you're not trying to like even make yourself known.

FG4: Phase 2

Police2: One of the things that always sticks in my mind when I was younger is we would always kind of hang about. There was... It's like a wooded area and stuff. So we'd all hang about down there and you would see police coming ... we'd all shout CID and you'd think they were chasing you. And so... there was always that fear there of even if you weren't doing something wrong, if they came, you would run anyway because they just assumed you were doing something wrong because you're a young person hanging about.

Phase 2

4.5. Police Officer Perspectives

Police Officers' Understanding and Knowledge of Human Rights Frameworks

Police officers showed notable variation in their understanding of human rights frameworks relating to children, or their confidence in talking about the rights of the child. For example, some officers described in depth the importance of the UNCRC, and outlined how they were embedding the UNCRC in their work, while others were not aware of the details of the UNCRC. However, the principles of *Article 12*, which outlines a child's right to participation and to be heard, appeared to be fairly well understood across police divisions, although this extract suggests that their application may, at times, have been more procedural than participatory:

Ember: Were you aware that the UNCRC is part of Scot's law?

Police4: You need to tell me more about what that is, because we see...

Ember: The Convention on the Rights of the Child. So it's rights set out by the UN about rights that all children have, all children and young people have, and within Scotland it was incorporated into the law ... So things like Article 12 is children and young people have the right to speak and be heard. That sort of means that governments and organisations must consult young people on those sort of issues and get their thoughts and opinions...

Police4: No, I'm aware it goes on and I'm aware it happens, but I don't know like articles and legislations and things like that. I know that our paperwork in terms of like consulting young people about what they want has gone up.

Phase 2

While officers generally recognised the importance and commitment of the UNCRC, some expressed concerns about its implications for everyday policing practice. In particular, officers described feelings of uncertainty and tension when attempting to balance the rights and needs of those who have experienced harm with those of children accused of causing harm. This was increasingly evident in their depictions of older children's entitlement to the additional protections that exist within UNCRC due to their age. These accounts suggest that, in the complex and often ambiguous realities of policing, there may be a tendency to rely on binary notions of 'victim' and 'perpetrator' as a means of navigating what are perceived as competing rights-based claims and reconciling officers' own sense of 'justice'.

Police5: Because the way the system is set up now, very few kids go through custody. It's all looking after the rights of a child and all that. But the frustration, I think, for my team is that they see, when I say kids, maybe somebody who's 16 or that committing quite serious crime and not going through custody, so therefore their fingerprints and DNA, none of that's held. And then they're straight back out doing something else. So it can be quite a challenge for them. And I think youngsters that are maybe committing a lot of the crime know what their rights are. So they're very much in that space, which, it's fine, they know their rights, but it becomes quite frustrating when they're trying to deal with them because it's like a toothless tiger, nothing's happening to them.

Phase 2

Police Officers' Understanding of Protected Characteristics

There was also some variability when it came to police officers' understanding of protected characteristics. Initial police officer training did not seem to specifically address children and young people, or relevant characteristics relating to identity and although we invited officers to consider intersectionality, this was not directly reflected in their responses.

Kodiak: ... did you do any specific training in protected characteristics or intersectionality?
Police2: I don't recall anything specific. I would imagine there would be stuff included in there. I can't really recall anything specific. That's probably stuff that's been ongoing learning as our service has went on.

Phase 2

Some officers reported engaging with mandatory training modules to support their learning and development, which typically appeared to have a greater emphasis on race-related issues. This is reflected in the practitioner survey, which engaged with wider justice actors and the children's education and care workforce who reported having good knowledge around some characteristics such as age, sex and race, with reduced knowledge around perhaps less 'visible' characteristics such as sexuality, transgender and gender identity, religion or disability.

Police 5: We've just done recently... it's online and it's on the Police Race Action Plan and racism... So I've just finished mine last week, I did that and it's all about the history, understanding black people and the history of black people in the UK and prior to that and the whole intersectionality bit, and everything about that, just sort of a history of it, and then looking at the legislation that came in and the things that happened to influence the legislation and why black people feel potentially the way they feel when we stop and search and things like that.

Phase 2

However, access to training was not consistent across divisions and officers explained that some topics were considered serious enough for mandatory training, inferring that other training packages would not be prioritised among other duties:

Police7: But what I would say is that the fact that anything that is serious enough to mandate some level of understanding around it that is usually a mandatory package that means you have to do some kind of e-learning on it or in-person attendance.

Phase 2

As a result, some officers described their attempts to draw upon their own experiences and up-skill themselves and their colleagues to fill what were felt to be important gaps in knowledge or practice:

Police8: I am neurodivergent. I'm autistic and I carried out training myself ... in relation to neurodivergent people. So, it wasn't specific to children but it very much covers a lot of neurodivergency within younger people. But that wasn't training given to me by the police. That was just training that, if I'm being honest with you, I felt that needed looked at.

Phase 2

Barriers to 'Best Practice'

Officers openly discussed some of the organisational barriers that made their notions of 'best practice' more difficult to achieve. Time was discussed in a number of ways of relevance to this research. Time affected officers' ability to stay up-to-date with training, even when it was available:

Police7: As for time put aside for that specifically, not specifically, no. It's one of these things where it's like if I'm on for the next 5 days, I'll come in and it's up to me to try and manage my time between everything else that I'm doing. So I might come in on Monday morning and say I'm going to do that thing today. And then I get an e-mail or a phone call or a job I need to go to or something and it gets pushed back. So you just have to manage it yourself.

Phase 2

In terms of everyday practice, there was insufficient time to spend with people. Response officers were described as 'a slave to the radio' (**Police3, Phase 2**), unable to prioritise a more person-centred approach and consistently discussed the reality of juggling a demanding job and the impact of this on police practice or wellbeing. While this felt true to many participants, one officer highlighted a slightly different perspective:

Police 8: I disagree with time constraint within the police. If anyone says there's a time constraint issue within the police, I think that's wrong. Because I don't believe that any sergeant or any inspector or any boss would ever criticise anybody for dealing with a member of the public in the best way.

Phase 2

4.6. Solutions and Visions for the Future

In this section we bring together both perspectives, to outline the solutions and future visions identified by children and police officers. Conversations about solutions and future aspirations were deliberately encouraged during the zine workshops, with the final two pages of the zines prompting participants to reflect on these future-focused ideas. Notably, children rarely called for transformational institutional or system change. Instead, their solutions were rooted in the everyday practices of police, and of others within the justice system, and converged around a central theme: dialogue. Dialogue was understood as key to humanising relationships and interactions, improving communication, building mutual respect and trust, and ultimately fostering more restorative and healing relationships between children and the police.

Humanising relationships and interactions

A central aim in the YAG's design of Phase 2 was to encourage a shift in perspective on both sides: encouraging children to view police officers as individuals rather than as a monolithic, dehumanised force, and supporting officers to engage with children as unique individuals, rather than resorting to stereotypes. This mutual recognition was considered crucial to humanising interactions and improving relationships between children and the police. Indeed, police officers felt that bringing a little more of their own personal identities into their policing practices was a positive step, with the potential to significantly improve interactions. Adopting visible signifiers of identity did not come without risks for officers though, who were sometimes on the receiving end of abuse.

Police2: I think more personally now more than ever, I see lots of cops going about with kind of pride badges and things that represent who they are, and I think it's brilliant. I think more than ever now, cops will be who they want to be and represent that now. We've got lots of stuff within the police in terms of LGBTQ and all that as well and lots of groups now that are, that probably more than ever, we're trying to make that difference.

Phase 2

Police2: Because I can tell you that what I have just, without knowing me, and just because of my uniform, the names and the verbal abuse I have received, and sometimes people don't recognise that as well. The verbal abuse I have received numerous times off people and the names that I have been called.

Phase 2

Children wanted officers to be less intimidating and to be more approachable. A simple suggestion was that a welcoming expression, a friendly 'hello' or a quick wave was sufficient to break down some relational barriers. However, this should be referenced with the aforementioned contradictions and conflicts around the desire to avoid unwarranted police contact and normalisation of everyday police interactions.

C46: And maybe like, I don't know, maybe not have such nasty looks on their face. Oh, they just look so serious. It's like, guys chill.

C47: They need to make a serious, like, they need to be serious basically. Like, because their job is a serious job. Like, they are dealing with really like touchy subjects and stuff, and they're dealing with like bad people. But then again, it's okay to break a smile when you're like just walking the street.

FG1: Phase 2

Police uniforms presented a more difficult barrier to humanise. Uniforms serve practical and protective functions and are designed to quickly identify and distinguish officers from members of the general public. They are also intended to convey legitimacy, authority, public reassurance and compliance (Sargeant & Simpson, 2024). However, uniforms provoked discomfort and intimidation in both children and officers alike.

C46: I know it's such a stupid thing. I think it's a uniform that throws people off personally. If you see, if you see a police officer and they've got a gun and they've got a handcuffs and that, you're not even going to want to talk. That's why I believe, that's why I believe people go to, like, their constituent, women's aid helplines. They don't want to go to the police because they look so intimidating.

FG1: Phase 2

Police1: So there's a thing about uniforms, isn't there? Right. So the uniforms we wear, you know, the black and the hats and the body, the protector and the high vis. Yeah, there's a thing about uniforms that that's always going to look a bit intimidating, maybe off-putting. A lot of us find it quite uncomfortable wearing the uniforms, keep that in mind. And what I would say to you would be like, as with any uniform, don't get too distracted with the uniform. If there's something on your mind, if there's something you want to speak to a police officer about, don't get distracted with the uniform. Because once you're speaking to the human being, you're with a human being. ... Just try and find the human being inside the uniform.

Phase 2

Communication

Overall, children suggested that improved communication was key for better relationships with the police, and that it could encourage more people to turn to the police when they need help. This applied not only to everyday interactions but also to procedural contexts i.e. clearer explanations during stop and search encounters and better feedback after reporting a crime. During stop and search interactions, some children indicated they did not fully understand what was happening or why something was happening, and that improved communication should be the standard:

C25: They're like meant to ask the questions, ask for your details and that, and they just jump to like, oh, you're under arrest and that. They should be talking to you about what's happened and all that, but they just put you in cuffs and then they say they right get in the van. That's what they are doing.

FG8: Phase 1

Crucially, some children felt that improved communication during these interactions would support police officers to better understand the child, as well as important context about them, their circumstances or identity that they might not otherwise know. For all children, but especially those with speech, language and communication needs, or who are neurodivergent, using clear and accessible language is essential. However, this relies on officers receiving the appropriate education and training.

C59: If they explain what's going on fully, I feel like sometimes they don't tell you what's going on. If they say like, hey...this is what I need to talk to you about, can I talk, I'm going to talk to you about this. Like if it's optional or if it's not optional... I'm quite anxious ...I think they shouldn't tell you really what's going on, like this is going to happen, then this, because they also can't tell if someone is maybe autistic as well. And that could also be a thing because it's like, a lot of people do have autism who maybe don't seem like they do have it from first glance. So being like, this is what's happening, like explaining it clearly, and giving people time to process stuff as well.

FG4: Phase 2

Communication was closely tied to police accountability, with children emphasising that officers should listen to what children have to say, be transparent about their decisions and actions, follow through on commitments, and openly acknowledge when mistakes have been made. This included the provision of ways for children to communicate anonymously and provide feedback on their treatment or experiences.

C59: I think they need to take accountability, even if they try to say they're one of the good ones. You're part of a force that... like systemically has... sort of tested minorities and smaller groups, so you are a part of the problem by continuing to uphold that system.

FG4: Phase 2

Education

One route to achieving this vision was education, which was brought up in two main ways, firstly, for children to receive direct education about their rights and the processes of the justice system and, secondly, for the police to receive more education about children and young people, protected characteristics and intersectionality. However, it was also mentioned that the police as an institution could make more of an effort to educate school pupils more directly by being present and talking about the role of the police to them.

Kodiak: I feel like, see classes like PSHE⁷, I feel like they could teach you stuff like that in PSHE

YAG Session

Generally, while the children we spoke to had some awareness of their rights, it was recognised that justice procedures were complicated and included inherent power imbalances. This alludes to the importance of not only educating children about their rights in theory, but making sure that they know how to exercise those rights in practice.

Ember: Well, police have independent bodies that are in charge of in charge of them, so there is ways you can report it.

Julia: Yes, like you can make formal complaints, but they're...

C61: It's not really known how to do complaints though, like where to go ...

Ember: People don't know how to make complaints and also people worry that if they do make a complaint and then police will just go harder on you. So, an example might be somebody who's arrested if they were treated horribly while being arrested. Then if they can make that complaint, it could harm their case if they are charged with something. That's the fear that a lot of people have.

FG4: Phase 2

⁷ Personal, Social, and Health Education

In terms of educating the police, children felt that the police were missing specific knowledge and information about working with children and young people, especially those with protected characteristics. Education around discrimination, stereotypes and labelling were most often highlighted as important areas for the police. And finally, education around who the police are and their role and purpose in society was mentioned to help build relationships with children and create a positive example of the police from a young age.

C61: How they're like taught in training about like, because like, I don't know how they're taught, but like just because I don't think they're taught enough about discrimination.

FG4: Phase 2

C47: That's something that they probably could have done because when kids are like younger, like you want to make sure that you like, you know that these kids can trust you. I feel like the best way to do that is going into school is just basically like, we're here to help you. Like, you know, we're like protecting. I don't know like what they can say, obviously. I'm not a police officer but.

FG1: Phase 2

5. Discussion

The *Challenging Justice Inequalities Project* is one of the first studies to foreground children's intersectional experiences of justice in Scotland, and in the wider UK, with a particular focus on policing. While many of the findings echo themes identified in earlier research on children's encounters with the police (e.g. Ellem and Richards, 2018; Deuchar et al., 2019), this project makes a distinct contribution. Our co-production approach and creative zine-making methods were intentionally designed to capture the emotional dimensions of these experiences, while also eliciting and incorporating police officers' perspectives to provide a more nuanced and multi-layered understanding.

The policy environment in Scotland in relation to policing and youth justice is often lauded as progressive and has certainly developed over the past 20 years, and continues to do so. Recent practice changes include a greater awareness and incorporation of the UNCRC and children's rights, as well as training in adverse childhood experiences and trauma-informed practice (Brodie et al., 2023), although research has signalled the limitations of operationalising this knowledge in restrictive and authoritative settings like justice and policing (Vaswani et al., 2024; Vaswani & Paul, 2019). Planned legislative changes include the recently passed Children (Care, Care Experience and Services Planning) (Scotland) Act which aims to reduce the number of children detained in police custody, by enabling police officers to take children, where appropriate, to an alternative place of safety. However, our research has shown that children's experiences of policing are still characterised by fear, mistrust and avoidance and too many children still experience harmful interactions with police. Importantly, the experience of potentially discriminatory or harmful practices that persist across these earlier studies, and in our study, raises critical questions about the extent, nature or implementation of policing reform and policy.

Knowledge of protected characteristics and intersectionality is patchy and variable, but appears to be increasing within Scottish policing, at least in our small sample of officers. However, training and policy appears to be more heavily focused on racism and racial disproportionality in response to the *Black Lives Matter* movement, and high-profile local incidents such as the death of Sheku Bayoh in police custody, which is still the subject of an independent inquiry at the time of writing (Buchan et al., 2025). The upfront institutional acknowledgement of institutional racism, sexism, misogyny and wider discrimination that exists within Police Scotland is an important first step on the road to culture change (Vaswani et al., 2024). However, from our limited engagement with officers in this study it appears that other protected characteristics, such as gender, sexuality, disability and especially age, currently receive less emphasis in officer training and workforce development.

Limitations of protected characteristics as understood in the Equality Act

Children perceived differences in treatment both 'pre' and 'in' justice, from either their own personal experience or that of others, as evidence that the world was unfairly stacked against them, primarily as a result of their age. Age therefore functioned not just as a demographic variable but also as a key structuring factor which shaped how children were perceived and treated and, in our research, age was the defining feature of children's intersectional justice experiences. While age is unusual in that age-based distinctions are legally permissible in certain circumstances, it is striking to consider whether comparable restrictions and differential treatment on the basis of other protected

characteristics would be regarded as acceptable today⁸. Therefore, despite its significance, we conclude that age is not adequately protected for children in the Equality Act 2010.

While the principle of non-discrimination is a fundamental feature of all human rights frameworks, the Equality Act 2010 protections against age discrimination only apply to under 18s in limited circumstances (such as employment rights), as treating children differently based upon their age is generally accepted or justified based on perceived capacity in childhood, or for reasons of safeguarding and protection (Daly et al., 2022) e.g. minimum age restrictions for the purchase of alcohol or voting rights. Non-discriminatory practice is not simply a levelling process, whereby all people are treated the same irrespective of age. Indeed, it may often be necessary to treat children differently due to their age and developmental stage, but this must be done in a way that does not resort to detrimental age-based stereotypes, much in the same way as would be seen as unacceptable for adults.

Importantly, although protection against age discrimination may be limited at younger ages, the Equality Act is intended to provide full protection for children in relation to all other characteristics. Relatedly, in their examination of all concluding observations of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child between 2005 and 2020, Daly et al. (2022) assessed that *Article 2*, which sets out the right to non-discrimination, is almost exclusively applied to children from particular groups which are vulnerable to discrimination, such as racially minoritised children or children with disabilities, rather than more generally applied to children as a social group who are subject to age-based disadvantage. While many marginalised groups in society face comparable forms of prejudice and unequal treatment, adopting an intersectional lens in this study has helped highlight how age can constitute an additional layer of disadvantage, shaping both access to and experiences of justice. Certainly, many children who took part in this research believed that age intersected with numerous other characteristics to amplify and intensify their differential treatment.

This indicates that much clearer guidance is needed in relation to the application of the Equality Act 2010 to ensure that age-related protections are secured for children and young people. At the same time, the identification of several additional or ‘missing’ characteristics points to limitations in the extent to which the human rights-based framework of protected characteristics in the Equality Act can adequately help us to understand intersectional justice. It is noteworthy that social class is widely recognised as one of the ‘big three’ markers of identity (Dator, 2022), and a significant determinant of children’s contact with the justice system (McAra & McVie, 2005; 2015), as well as a range of broader life outcomes, yet does not constitute a protected characteristic under the Equality Act.

Education about Rights, Protected Characteristics and Intersectionality

Education settings were frequently identified as key sites where perceived or real injustices were first experienced. For many children, school also represented their initial point of contact with the ‘justice system’, particularly through the presence of School Liaison Officers or ‘campus cops’. This contact ranged from passive exposure to active involvement, including surveillance, formal disciplinary measures or, in some cases, active criminalisation during the school day. The importance of these early ‘justice’ interactions should not be underestimated, and the use of ‘campus cops’ approached with caution, as even these informal and everyday exchanges can often go on to negatively shape trust, confidence and legitimacy in more formal justice systems.

⁸ Recent judicial interpretations of ‘sex’ in the Equality Act remind us that differential treatment based on other, intertwined protected characteristics can be imaginable, actual and permissible.

At the same time, educational contexts were seen as offering important opportunities to improve young people's engagement with justice. Children often demonstrated limited understanding of the justice system, including their rights, how to respond during police interactions, and how to navigate formal processes. However, while children's rights and the UNCRC are increasingly taught within schools, learning about protected characteristics and intersectionality was limited. Similarly, education relating to justice tended to remain largely theoretical and taught within subjects such as Modern Studies, rather than equipping students with practical knowledge and skills for engaging with justice in real-world situations.

From our small sample of police, it appears that officers might benefit from guidance and support in understanding and adjusting to the full implementation of the UNCRC and rights-based frameworks, particularly as they apply to older children, and in navigating policing when there are perceived to be competing rights between communities or individuals.

Hope and Vision for the Future

We anticipated stories of harm and injustice, and while these negative experiences were, unfortunately, often shared, children more frequently described police contact that was pervasive, ordinary and everyday, rather than exceptional. A chronological and developmental lens highlighted tensions between childhood expectations of justice as a helpful process providing safety and protection, contrasted with the, sometimes stark, realities of adolescent experiences of police and other justice institutions. At the same time, adolescence also brought more nuanced and human understandings of the role and purpose of the police and justice institutions. Furthermore, children reported being both overlooked and overpoliced, simultaneously surveilled and dismissed. This gave rise to deep ambivalence about the police, bringing complexity and conflicts in their experiences, understandings and solutions. At the same time children, and therefore this research, recognise the complexity in that officers are frequently dealing with difficult and potentially dangerous situations that require split-second decisions and judgement calls that have implications for their own, or public safety.

These complexities mean that there will not be any easy or quick solutions to bringing intersectional practices to policing and to improving relationships between children and police. However, our study suggests that we should remain positive and hopeful for the future. Policing and justice remained important and fundamental processes, institutions and concepts for children, who often (but not always) perceived a future in which inequalities were reduced and justice was delivered. The children who took part in this study rarely shied away from such challenges, and demonstrated capability in helping adults to understand, articulate and navigate a path forward. The police officers who participated – albeit a sample of officers who were particularly interested in discussing these issues – were reflective, open and willing to listen and engage in dialogue. This commitment to collaboration and change means that we can end our study on a hopeful note.

6. Recommendations

These recommendations were developed from the project team's synthesised findings from Phase 1 and Phase 2, as well as ongoing discussions and reflections from the YAG throughout all stages of the project.

6.1. Government and Organisational Policy

- Review the rights-based framework of protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010 to ensure that it adequately protects children against age-based discrimination.
- Develop clear guidance to support the interpretation and application of the Equality Act 2010 in ways that avoid reinforcing age-based discrimination for children, and that account for the cumulative effects of intersecting forms of inequality and disadvantage.
- Raise awareness among childcare, education and justice practitioners that the Equality Act 2010 protections do not account for children's intersectional experiences. Encourage organisations to review policies and practices to ensure inclusive, non-discriminatory approaches for children with 'missing' characteristics, such as care experience, class, socioeconomic status, and prior contact with services.

6.2. Education

- Provide formal education within schools about children's rights, protected characteristics and intersectionality and facilitate the application of knowledge through practical skills in how to navigate justice interactions and systems.
- Review the benefits and drawbacks of 'campus cops' and, where officers are deemed necessary within schools, develop a clear and consistent remit which is co-produced with pupils and communicated clearly across the entire school.
- Consider also providing rights-based education and practical skills training beyond formal school-based environments, such as in colleges, youth work or community education settings.

6.3. Police

- Provide mandatory training for all frontline police officers across Scotland in understanding child development and working with children and young people. Provide training for officers in relation to the UNCRC and children's rights, protected characteristics and intersectionality. Consider the potential for specialist frontline officers dedicated to working with children.
- Facilitate dialogue, communication and interactions with police, children and young people from minoritised communities, to understand their contexts and concerns. Workshop together to problem-solve how to balance and identify appropriate responses to children feeling both overpoliced and overlooked.
- Consider how intersectional approaches might be further embedded across policing, from frontline practice through to senior personnel and management. This could begin by considering internal practices, staff experiences and wellbeing, alongside opportunities to reflect on how these approaches shape the policing of children and members of the public more broadly.
- Consider how police uniforms can be redesigned to be functional and protective without relying on intimidating and overly militarised insignia.
- Explore how restorative approaches could inform policing practice, including through co-designed and participatory approaches which create opportunities for children and young people and police to come together to understand experiences, repair relationships and identify constructive ways forward. The project offers just one example of how such approaches might be developed

collaboratively, with children and young people involved in shaping both the process and potential responses.

6.4. Children and Young People

- Continue to build on the networks, relationships and collective forms of action already developed by and evident amongst children and young people, recognising these as important sources of knowledge, support and potential for change.

6.5. Wider Justice Systems and Research Funders

- Undertake focused intersectional research on specific justice experiences. Our project focused on policing as the shared justice experience across diverse participants. Intersectional research bringing together diverse perspectives in relation to school, Children's Hearing System, courts, or secure care settings is also needed.
- Value children and young people's contributions appropriately. Their time, knowledge and expertise should be recognised and resourced, including through appropriate compensation, practical support and accessible participation arrangements.
- Consider how to reach, inform and include children and young people who are the most marginalised or without current access to social or service support networks.

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8. Appendices

8.1. Appendix A: The Scottish Youth Justice System

The age of criminal responsibility in Scotland is 12, which is one of the lowest in Europe, and lower than the age (14) recommended by the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child.

When a child is arrested by Police Scotland (or the British Transport Police) the police have access to a range of options, including a formal warning, or referral to Early and Effective Intervention (EEI), which was introduced in Scotland under the Whole System Approach in 2011. The purpose of EEI is to divert children from formal justice systems, while providing a timely and proportionate response to a child's needs. Models of EEI differ across Scotland, but typically involve screening and multi-agency decision-making to identify needs to inform tailored supports. With EEI, at times the most appropriate response will be no formal agency response, and the child will be supported by their parents, carers or universal services.

The Children's Hearings System

The central element of the youth justice (and care) system in Scotland is the unique Children's Hearings System (CHS). In Scotland, the support offered to children has long been shaped by the Kilbrandon principles, which underpin the CHS. A committee, led by Lord Kilbrandon, was established in 1961 in response to concerns about rising levels of youth crime. Reporting in 1964, the committee observed that the needs of children in conflict with the law did not differ from the needs of children who required welfare and protection and proposed that these needs should be met through a single system. In a radical shake up of the youth justice system, this proposal was enacted in the Social Work (Scotland) Act 1968 and led to the establishment of the CHS in 1971.

The CHS remains the defining feature of the Scottish youth justice system today, supporting the vast majority of children with welfare and/or offending concerns. When concerns exist about a child, a referral can be made to the Children's Reporter. Referrals typically come from police, social work or education, but anyone can make a referral. If, following investigation, the Children's Reporter believes that there is sufficient evidence of relevant grounds of referral (for example, care and protection concerns, non-attendance at school, or offending behaviours) and considers compulsory measures of supervision to support the child are necessary, then the Reporter will arrange a Children's Hearing.

A Children's Hearing consists of the panel of three specially trained lay members. Panel members make legal decisions relating to the child, such as whether a legal order is needed (e.g. a Compulsory Supervision Order) and if so, what measures should be attached to this order (such as where the child should live and any conditions the child must comply with). A hearing is typically attended by the child, parents and carers, a social worker (who prepares a report for the panel), as well as any other relevant adults, or professionals (such as a safeguarder or legal representative).

The Scottish Courts System

In certain circumstances, children aged 12 and over who are charged with offences can be referred to the Procurator Fiscal (a public prosecutor and gateway to the Scottish court system) and have their cases dealt with by the court. The court system has historically been the default for most children aged 16 and 17 who have been charged with offences. However, children up to 17 years and 6 months who have an open referral to the CHS, or who are subject to existing measures through the hearing system, can still be referred to the CHS. Coming into effect in 2027, the Children (Care and Justice) Scotland Act 2024 ('the 2024 Act') will increase the minimum age of referral to the Reporter to 18,

meaning that the CHS will become accessible for any child under 18 who requires this support, including children who commit offences.

If a child is prosecuted in court, authorities must ensure the child's rights are upheld, including that the child's welfare, safety and participation is promoted. This includes preparing and supporting a child at court. The courts can still remit a child back to the CHS for advice or disposal in certain circumstances and the 2024 Act will strengthen the requirements for remittal of under 18s convicted in court. In some local authorities there are dedicated youth courts for those aged under 21. The 2024 Act also ended the use of Young Offender Institutions or prisons for children aged under 18 who have been remanded or sentenced. Instead, children can be detained in secure care accommodation and are treated as a 'child looked after', thus conferring ongoing rights such as access to local authority aftercare.

For a more detailed explanation of the Scottish Youth Justice system, please refer to the Children and Young People's Centre for Justice's [Practice Guide 2026](#). The guide is updated annually.

8.2. Appendix B: Overview of Ethics Processes

Intersectional youth justice research requires us be attentive to, and mitigate, the power relations and inequalities experienced by children in conflict with the law. In this project, we wanted to stay true to intersectionality's "radical praxis of emancipatory knowledge production" (Konstantoni & Emejulu, 2017: p. 8) and centre children's voices to establish an inclusive and distinctive knowledge-base from which to enact intersectional justice-making.

Co-production is increasingly recognised as a means of conducting research more equitably with communities and marginalised groups, while also enhancing the translation of research into policy and practice (Bandola-Gill et al., 2023). In this study, co-production served as a mechanism for operationalising intersectionality throughout the research process. However, redistributing power within research remains challenging, particularly within inherently hierarchical systems (Hopkins et al., 2024). Moreover, co-production should not be seen as a panacea as it is not without its costs and limitations (Oliver et al., 2019). Even when implemented successfully, it raises complex ethical considerations and requires careful reflection and planning to ensure research is safe, rigorous, and meaningful for participants.

There is insufficient space in this report to dedicate to the ethical, methodological and practical complexities of co-production in this study. This will be explored in depth in a forthcoming paper in 2027. Here, we briefly outline our ethical process, simply to help inform other researchers who are co-producing research with children in conflict with the law.

Application Stage

While the application was not co-produced with children and young people, we consulted with young people on our draft research questions, co-production plans, and a high-level outline of our ethical approach.

Phase One: Youth Advisory Group (YAG) Approval

We adopted a two-stage ethical approval process for this study for two main reasons. First, the ethics review process prompted critical reflection on our strategies for recruiting, supporting, and engaging members of the Young Advisory Group (YAG), while also providing valuable external scrutiny and guidance. Second, we intended, with participants' informed consent, to incorporate the YAG's perspectives, reflections, and experiences from Phase 1 into the dataset for our study. Therefore, in this study, the YAG were not simply co-researchers, but also participants. This dual role enhanced our research by providing a richness and depth to both the YAG's experience of participation, and to the data gathered. However, it also introduced a number of ethical challenges, particularly in balancing the protection of children's privacy and anonymity with the need to appropriately acknowledge and recognise their contributions to the research.

For some projects, it may not be necessary to seek ethical approval at this stage, but we would still recommend this if institutional processes allow. Where children and young people simply act as 'co-researchers', this reduces, but does not negate, some of these complexities but also limits some of the meaning from their participation.

The first task undertaken by the YAG was the development of a YAG Charter, which established a shared set of principles and expectations to guide the group's work. All YAG members contributed to the development of the charter and subsequently signed a document confirming their agreement. The

charter was then printed and displayed at each subsequent session, serving as both a practical reference point and a symbolic reminder of the YAG's collective commitments and values.

The process of developing the charter reflects a key methodological principle of co-production and resonates with broader discussions of shared governance and power-sharing within participatory research (Smithson et al., 2021). Rather than positioning young people as passive recipients of researcher-defined rules and procedures, this activity sought to redistribute decision-making power by involving YAG members in shaping the expectations and conditions that would govern their participation. In doing so, the charter functioned not only as a tool for establishing group agreements but also as an early mechanism for fostering ownership, agency, and collective responsibility within the project.

Phase 2: Exploring intersectional Experiences of Policing

In our funding application, Phase One of the project was specified in considerable detail, whereas Phase Two was intentionally less defined, reflecting the commitment to co-produce this component of the research with the Youth Advisory Group (YAG). While this approach was methodologically important, it introduced additional complexity for Nuffield, who were required to make an informed funding decision and maintain accountability to Trustees, external stakeholders, and the wider public despite having access to relatively limited information regarding this phase of the project. Co-production also posed a challenge for the University Ethics Committee in being able to provide institutional scrutiny and oversight of our approach without detailed information about scope, participants, materials and processes.

To maintain the methodological integrity of the project and meet external requirements, we incorporated a series of review stages before progressing to Phase Two. The YAG developed the project alongside experienced adult researchers, who provided initial guidance and support. The Phase Two proposal was then reviewed in a joint session with the YAG and the Interdisciplinary Advisory Group, providing a further layer of scrutiny and feedback. After revisions were made, the proposal was resubmitted to Nuffield, who reviewed and approved the plans. Finally, the approved proposal underwent full ethical review by the University Ethics Committee. These review processes strengthened the quality and rigour of the research and were essential to the project's delivery. However, they also required additional time and effort from the project team, funder and ethics committee, which extended the overall project timeline.

8.3. Appendix C: Overview of YAG Sessions

Block 1: Introduction to the YAG and Learning about Research	
Session 1	Introductions, project overview and timeline. Creating the group charter
Session 2	What is research? Why do research? What are research questions?
Session 3	Research ethics
Session 4	Exploring research methods
Block 2: Planning Phase	
Session 5	Research question and aim
Session 6	Finalising research question and aim
Session 7	Thinking about audience and methods
Session 8	Joint IAG Session – review and feedback on Phase 2 proposal
Session 9	Planning ahead and looking at the research literature
Session 10	Literature search and creating research materials
Session 11	Safeguarding and professional boundaries
Session 12	Mock zine-making workshop
Session 13	Team building week
Block 3: Fieldwork phase – Zine workshops	
Session 14	Preparation for fieldwork + reflection on co-production process
Session 15	Check in & reflection on core topics
Session 16	Early analysis and coding framework
Block 4: Analysis / Police Fieldwork	
Session 17	Data Analysis
Session 18	Check in and continued analysis/methods discussion
Block 5: Dissemination/Outputs	
Session 19	Co-writing and planning dissemination activities
Session 20	Practice Consultants engagement
Session 21	National Youth Justice Conference presentation
Session 22	Reviewing and Discussing Outputs
Session 23	Filming Workshop 1
Session 24	Filming Workshop 2

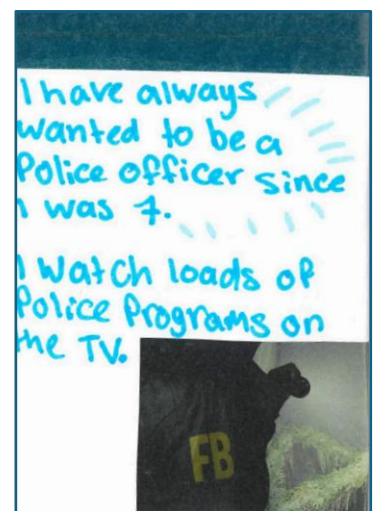
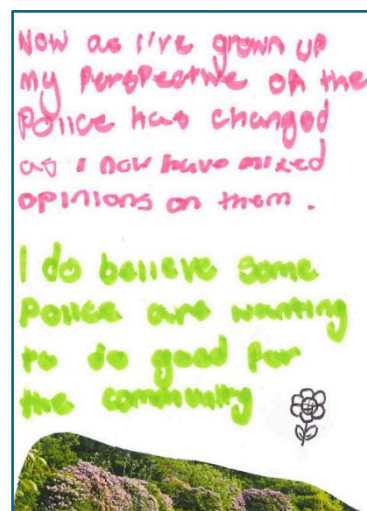
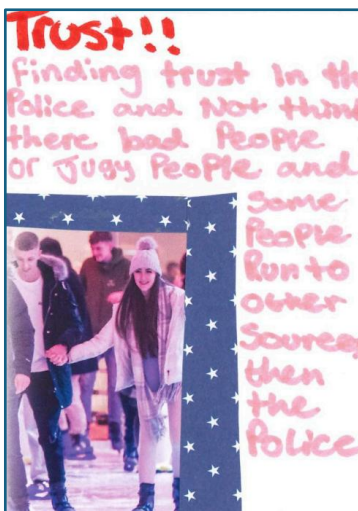
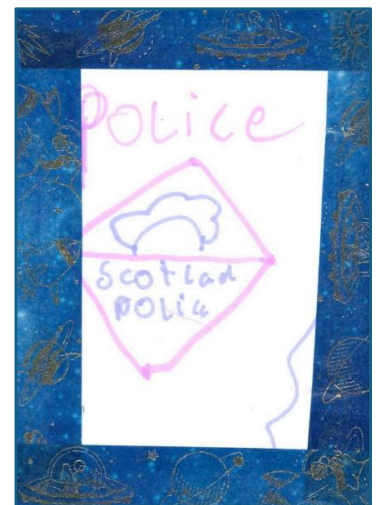
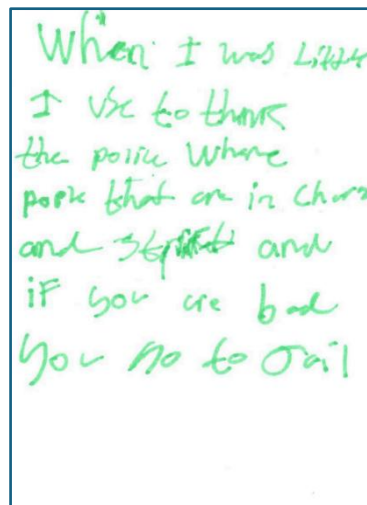
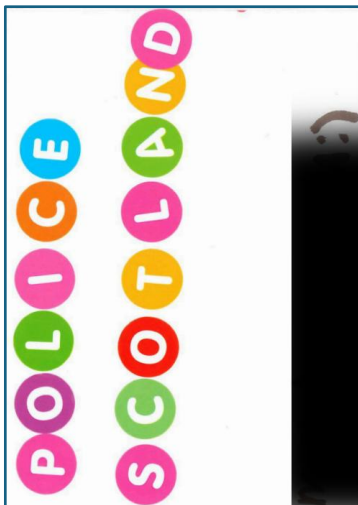
8.4. Appendix D: Participant and Organisational Details

Exploratory Focus Groups (Phase 1)			
Focus Group	Organisational description	Number of Participants	Participant Codes
1	Secure Care Centre	3	C1, FG1, Phase 1 C2, FG1, Phase 1 C3, FG1, Phase 1
2	Secure Care Centre	2	C4, FG2, Phase 1 C5, FG2, Phase 1
3	Secure Care Centre	3	C6, FG3, Phase 1 C7, FG3, Phase 1 C8, FG3, Phase 1
4	Secure Care Centre	3	C9, FG4, Phase 1 C10, FG4, Phase 1 C11, FG4, Phase 1
5	Secure Care Centre	3	C12, FG5, Phase 1 C13, FG5, Phase 1 C14, FG5, Phase 1
6	Organisation supporting young Black people and people of colour	5	C15, FG6, Phase 1 C16, FG6, Phase 1 C17, FG6, Phase 1 C18, FG6, Phase 1 C19, FG6, Phase 1
7	Organisation supporting LGBTQ+ youth	4	C20, FG7, Phase 1 C21, FG7, Phase 1 C22, FG7, Phase 1 C23, FG7, Phase 1
8	Organisation supporting care experienced children in rural area	3	C24, FG8, Phase 1 C25, FG8, Phase 1 C26, FG8, Phase 1
9	Secure Care Centre	4	C27, FG9, Phase 1 C28, FG9, Phase 1 C29, FG9, Phase 1 C30, FG9, Phase 1
10	Secure Care Centre	5	C31, FG10, Phase 1 C32, FG10, Phase 1 C33, FG10, Phase 1 C34, FG10, Phase 1 C35, FG10, Phase 1
11	Secure Care Centre	7	C36, FG10, Phase 1 C37, FG10, Phase 1 C38, FG10, Phase 1 C39, FG10, Phase 1 C40, FG10, Phase 1 C41, FG10, Phase 1 C42, FG10, Phase 1

Zine-making Focus Groups (Phase 2)			
1	Youth work provision in deprived urban area	6	C43, FG1, Phase 2 C44, FG1, Phase 2 C45, FG1, Phase 2 C46, FG1, Phase 2 C47, FG1, Phase 2 C48, FG1, Phase 2
2	Youth work provision in deprived urban area	4	C49, FG2, Phase 2 C50, FG2, Phase 2 C51, FG2, Phase 2 C52, FG2, Phase 2
3	Arts-based youth work organisation in urban area	6	C53, FG3, Phase 2 C54, FG3, Phase 2 C55, FG3, Phase 2 C56, FG3, Phase 2 C57, FG3, Phase 2 C58, FG3, Phase 2
4	Organisation supporting young LGBTQ+ people	5	C59, FG4, Phase 2 C60, FG4, Phase 2 C61, FG4, Phase 2 C62, FG4, Phase 2 C63, FG4, Phase 2
5	Youth work provision in deprived urban area supporting young Black people and people of colour	10	C64, FG5, Phase 2 C65, FG5, Phase 2 C66, FG5, Phase 2 C67, FG5, Phase 2 C68, FG5, Phase 2 C69, FG5, Phase 2 C70, FG5, Phase 2 C71, FG5, Phase 2 C72, FG5, Phase 2 C73, FG5, Phase 2

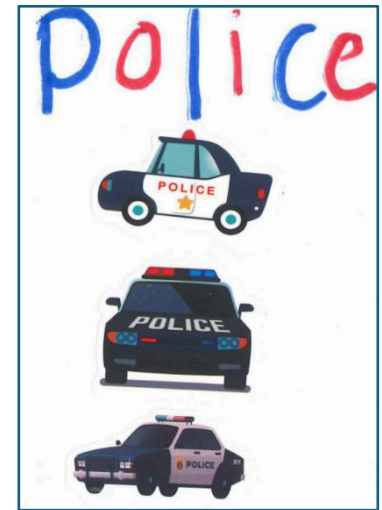
8.5. Appendix E: Zines

In this Appendix we provide a one-page snapshot of each Zine that was created, where permission was given to share. Full Zines can be accessed on the project website.

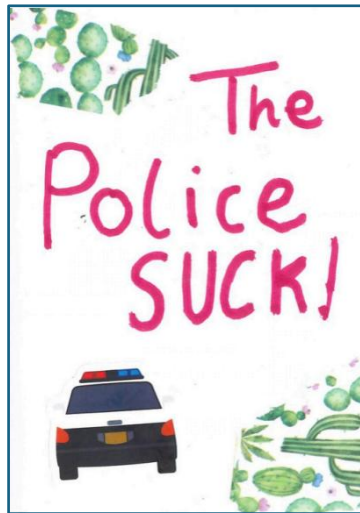




I don't think
they help
that much
outside of
schools and
when I see
them they
intimidate
me.



Thoughts &
feelings on
the
POLICE



I have been saying most
but in reality it's just
the corruptions that
get shown on TV.



hopefully things will
change, more people
will get their voice
and the perception will
change, letting people
like me believe in
something better!




**POLICING IN
SCOTLAND.**

my views, my old views,
what I believe needs to
change!!

