

**Challenging Justice Inequalities
with Children in Conflict with the Law**

Summary Report

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1. Introduction

This report outlines the summary findings from *Challenging Justice Inequalities with Children in Conflict with the Law*, funded by the Nuffield Foundation between 2024 and 2026. The full research report can be accessed at www.challengejustice.org/outputs.

The project focused on children¹ aged under 18 who encounter justice systems due to suspected, alleged, or confirmed involvement in offending behaviour in Scotland.² It stemmed from evidence that 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). Across the UK, and worldwide, minoritised groups are over-represented in justice systems, including children from racialised communities (Brodie et al., 2025; Lymperopoulou, 2024), with care experience (Day, 2021), living in poverty (McAra & McVie, 2015), with neurodiversities (King & Murphy, 2014) or communication needs (Chow et al., 2022). Limited research exists 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. 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 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 them as researchers, our coproduction methods helped us to operationalise an inclusive and intersectional approach to the research.

1.1. Research Objectives and Questions

Our research objectives were concerned with not only documenting *what* children's understandings of protected characteristics and everyday experiences of inequality were, but also their perceptions of *how* they interfaced with their justice interactions, experiences and outcomes. We aimed to engage with intersectionality both conceptually and methodologically to capture important differences in children's experiences. Our overarching research questions 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?

¹ We use the terms 'child' or 'children' 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' refers to people aged 18-25.

² The Scottish youth justice system includes, but is not limited to: police contact; early intervention and diversionary supports; the Children's Hearings System; the criminal court; and other justice institutions, like secure care.

2. The Co-production Approach and Method

Co-production involves collaborative effort between ‘professionals’ and communities to work towards shared solutions in research, policymaking or service design. Co-production offered a way to operationalise intersectionality in our research, as it 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). Despite disciplinary variation, co-production is typically underpinned by several key principles, including: sharing power; incorporating all skills and perspectives; respecting and valuing the knowledge of all involved; reciprocity; and building and maintaining relationships (NIHR, 2018).

2.1. Exploratory Focus Groups

We conducted 11 initial focus groups, reaching 42 children across Scotland’s central belt, 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 experience of being ‘in conflict with the law’: a term 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 secure care.

2.2. Youth Advisory Group

From these focus groups, we recruited a Youth Advisory Group (YAG) of nine children aged 14-17. The purpose of the YAG was to explore child-led understandings, conceptualisations and perspectives related to intersectionality, inequalities and justice, to help review or reframe our research aims, objectives and questions. The YAG also designed and conducted a research project to enhance our understanding of justice inequalities (Phase 2), including engaging in research methods training, fieldwork, output development and dissemination.

2.3. Phase 2: Exploring Intersectional Experiences of Policing

With support from the project team, the YAG developed the Phase 2 project, titled ‘*Doing intersectionality ‘in justice’: exploring intersectional experiences of policing with children and front-line police officers in Scotland*’. The focus reflects that police contact was a cross-cutting experience for the YAG, and the key issue raised by children in the early exploratory focus groups.

The aim of Phase 2 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 zine³-making focus groups with children and semi-structured interviews with police officers. We ran five focus groups, involving 31 children, predominantly across the central belt of Scotland. These groups came from existing youth organisations, including those that specifically support diverse groups like racially minoritised or LGBTQ+ children and young people. Child participants were aged 14-17 and had self-identified interactions with the police. Each focus group was delivered by two project team members, and one or two YAG members.

Additionally, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 10 police officers, exploring their motivations for joining the police, how their identity and life experiences have shaped their policing practices, their experience of policing young people and the challenges of their job. Importantly, the

³ A self-made pamphlet or booklet, often used to share personal stories or reflections on topics of interest.

YAG elected to use the zines produced in the focus groups with children as a visual prompt in the police interviews to help elicit deeper, more reflective responses.

2.4. Assimilation and Analysis

Our findings were identified through a collaborative process, originating with the YAG and built upon by the research team. The YAG spent three sessions working on analysis to create a broad analytical framework, which was the starting point for the wider project team's analysis to develop a more detailed coding framework. This framework was then shared, reviewed and responded to by the YAG. There was sufficient alignment in core findings and reflections to allow Phases 1 and 2 insights to be integrated and presented together.

3. Findings

In this summary we outline only some of the high-level findings from the study, with a broader and more detailed presentation of the findings provided in the full report.

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

Rights, protected characteristics and intersectionality

The project coincided with the incorporation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) into Scot's law in 2024. 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. Children were certainly aware of their general rights, with schools often educating children or raising awareness about the UNCRC. However, the language of the Equality Act 2010 and protected characteristics was less well understood across all participant groups. Despite the diversity of the children who participated, age emerged as the unifying feature of their experiences. Age transformed children's experiences and shaped the significance of other characteristics, long before contact with the justice system occurred. Children 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

In many of the focus groups, children reported widespread surveillance, restrictions or outright bans on their access to spaces and amenities. There were complexities too, as there was an acknowledgement that some children do cause issues in local areas, like vandalism or antisocial behaviour in retail or hospitality premises.

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

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 often felt that the responses from teachers or authority figures were inadequate when reporting harms or concerns. This included breaches of trust, dismissive attitudes, lack of follow-up action and, at times, reported discriminatory treatment. School-based injustices appear to have been frequently influenced by age, and also linked to wider intersectional dynamics, like race, gender, sexuality and family background.

Additionally, schools were where justice system⁴ contact was initiated, most often in relation to School Liaison Officers or ‘campus cops’, who are police officers specifically assigned to schools. There was pervasive contact with campus officers in urban areas, and in more heavily policed or disadvantaged neighbourhoods, linking early police contact with both place, poverty and class. Children typically viewed campus officers as an irrelevant presence in their schools, who did little to engage with children constructively. However, the presence of campus officers also raised anxiety in children about the potential for overreaction to everyday issues and incidents. At times, it was felt that police roles in relation to crime detection, community safety and protection within communities and their more pastoral and educative role in schools became blurred. Incidents that once might have been dealt with by family or teachers were often 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

3.2. Protected Characteristics, Intersectionality and Rights – ‘in justice’

Knowledge of the justice system varied considerably. Beyond widely recognised institutions, like the police and courts, the more welfarist-oriented foundations of Scottish youth justice were rarely understood. For example, there was more limited reflection on the Children’s Hearings System, except by those children with direct experience of it who felt that processes and decisions could be intrusive and at odds with their rights, and reported a lack of agency, power and voice often in proceedings characterised by high stress. Children generally 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.

There was mixed, but growing awareness of rights in justice interactions, particularly among children with prior justice experience, or those coached on their rights due to involvement in activist communities or family experiences. However, even when children had good rights awareness, age and power imbalances intersected to cause fear and anxiety about exercising those rights. Children highlighted perceived risks associated with doing so, suggesting that knowing and acting on your rights can be interpreted as being disrespectful.

⁴ While police officers are a key part of the justice system, their presence in schools has been included in ‘pre-justice’ here, in that children’s everyday engagement with education should not be viewed as justice system contact.

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

FG6: Phase 1

Differential treatment based on age was amplified when it came to justice interactions, especially those involving the police. Frequently, this arose from widespread stereotypes and misconceptions about children and young people, affecting not only how children felt judged and targeted, but also in how they perceived they would be treated as victims or witness to crime.

C59: ...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

Race was also a prominent theme, with widespread agreement that justice interactions, particularly in policing, were underpinned by bias, prejudice, and perceived racist practices. This included children of colour not being taken seriously when reporting racist incidents or other crimes, and 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 struggled to perceive race as a defining characteristic in these interactions. It is understandable that children's understanding of justice and wider social issues is rooted in their own personal experiences, but this becomes problematic when considering the 'whiteness' of the justice system, with a lack of racial diversity across key justice organisations, like 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. ... Even if people of colour try to stay away, they can't escape.

FG6: Phase 1

An intersectional lens brought unique insights into differential treatment based on gender, frequently intersecting with race and other characteristics. While being a man was seen as sufficient to draw police attention, being a *boy* or a *young* man meant almost inevitable suspicion which was viewed as being deeply unfair. There were complexities though, with 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 fairness in how people were treated and targeted.

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

Missing Characteristics

While age was seen as a defining characteristic, participants identified many other 'missing' characteristics that shaped their justice interactions, which included care experience, prior contact with justice and social class. Appearance, often in the form of clothing and accessories, takes on increased significance in adolescence (Jenkinson, 2020). Appearance was frequently mentioned, although may have functioned predominantly as a marker through which assumptions about identity, including class, gender, or sexuality, were made. For example, clothing, especially that typically worn by young men in working class communities, such as tracksuits, all black clothing, or certain styles of bags, drew unwanted attention or suspicion. Conversely, children who opted for expensive clothing and accessories, such as ebikes, also drew suspicion, perhaps owing to perceived discrepancies with their supposed age, class or socioeconomic status.

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

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

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's **Error! Bookmark not defined.** once...and every single officer or security guard that passed us by gave Ember a look...

Ember: I have green hair and pronouns!

Similarly, place also featured as a 'missing' characteristic, and was strongly associated with social class and socioeconomic status. Children understood that where they lived strongly shaped their interactions with the police. Heavily policed neighbourhoods increased fear and anxiety in children who felt less able to access their communities, rather than making their neighbourhoods feel safer for them. There were complexities too in that living in a small, rural area could be 'protective' due to greater distance and therefore minimal interaction with the police. But there were also risks of becoming 'known' in smaller communities, often leading to additional and ongoing visibility, scrutiny and targeting.

Developing understandings of the police

The zines produced in Phase 2 revealed a shift from the child-like simplicity of the police as 'heroes', there to help and protect; towards more negative perceptions in adolescence, from an unwelcome presence to a physical or emotional threat. For some this was caused by a sudden event, such as being arrested, for others it was reflected in a more gradual change in how they were treated. 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

The simplicities of early childhood perspectives were also replaced with something more nuanced and layered. Children frequently recognised that police actions, or behaviours they perceived as unfair or inappropriate, were sometimes intended to protect their safety. Children also acknowledged the challenges of policing, noting that officers are often exposed to distressing, harmful, and difficult situations, sometimes involving children and young people. Likewise, officers demonstrated awareness of young people's frustrations and described efforts to adapt their approach. However,

they emphasised that their primary responsibility remained public protection, which ultimately shaped their practice.

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 22 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 children who had experienced physical harm or abuse from police officers, attitudes were overwhelmingly shaped by fear and mistrust. Yet, while harmful experiences of police contact were often shared, children more frequently described police contact as pervasive, ordinary and everyday, rather than exceptional. Adding further nuance, children reported being both overlooked and overpoliced, simultaneously surveilled and dismissed. 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 complexity contributed to profound ambivalence towards the police.

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

FG3: Phase 1

This ambivalence often led to contradictory or complex responses. Children tended towards strategies of avoidance with the police, to avoid drawing attention, arousing suspicion or receiving unwarranted contact. Often, they simply wished to be left alone for self-preservation. At the same time, children wanted to see a more human side of policing, characterised by friendlier, everyday interactions and improved communication. Importantly, some police officers also reflected on their own similar interactions with the police as children, which were hard to reconcile with their adult identities as officers, but helped to foster empathy and understanding.

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

3.3. Police Officer Perspectives

Police Officers' Understanding of Rights and Protected Characteristics

Police officers showed variable understanding and confidence regarding children's human rights frameworks. Some officers described the importance of the UNCRC and how they were embedding it in their work. Others were not aware of the specific provisions of the UNCRC. However, the principles of *Article 12*, outlining the child's right to be heard, appeared to be well understood across police divisions, albeit perhaps with more procedural, rather than participatory, application.

While officers generally confirmed a commitment to the UNCRC, some expressed concerns about its implications for everyday policing practice. Some 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 evident in their depictions of older children's

entitlement protections under the UNCRC. These accounts suggest that, in the complex and ambiguous realities of policing, there may be a tendency to rely on binary notions of 'victim' and 'perpetrator' to navigate what are perceived as competing rights-based claims and reconcile officers' own sense of 'justice'.

There was also variability when it came to police officers' understanding of protected characteristics. Initial police officer training appeared not to specifically address working with children and young people, nor engage with relevant identity-related characteristics. Although we invited officers to consider intersectionality, this was not directly reflected in their responses. 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. However, access to training was inconsistent across divisions and staying up to date with training was a challenge highlighted by multiple officers due to the demands of the role:

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 five 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

3.4. Solutions and Visions for the Future

Notably, children rarely called for transformational institutional or system change. Instead, their solutions were rooted in everyday practices and converged around a central theme of dialogue. Dialogue was understood as key to humanising relationships and interactions, improving communication, building mutual respect and trust, and fostering more restorative and healing relationships between children and the police.

Humanising relationships and interactions

Mutual recognition, viewing each other as individuals, 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: 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.

Phase 2

Children wanted officers to be less intimidating and more approachable. Simple gestures, such as a friendly greeting or wave, were seen as ways to reduce relational barriers. However, these suggestions should be understood alongside children's concerns and conflicts about unwanted police contact and the normalisation of everyday police interactions.

Police uniforms presented a more difficult barrier to humanise. Uniforms serve practical and protective functions and are designed to identify and distinguish officers from 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 children and officers alike.

Police1: 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 needed for better relationships with the police. This applied to everyday interactions as well as procedural contexts i.e. clearer explanations during stop and search encounters and better feedback after reporting a crime.

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 better communication during these interactions would help officers to better understand the child and gain necessary context about their circumstances or identity. For all children, but especially those with speech, language and communication needs, or who are neurodiverse, using clear and accessible language is essential.

Education

Education was brought up in two main ways, firstly, for children to receive direct education about their rights and the processes of the justice system. While children had some awareness of their rights, it was recognised that justice procedures were complicated, with inherent power imbalances. Thus, it is important to educate children not only about their rights in theory, but also to ensure that they know how to exercise those rights in practice.

Kodiak: I feel like, see classes like PSHE⁵, I feel like they could teach you stuff like that in PSHE.

YAG Session

Second, children felt that the police lacked specific knowledge about working with children and young people, especially in relation to protected characteristics and intersectionality. Education on discrimination, stereotypes and labelling was frequently highlighted as a priority for police training.

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

⁵ Personal, Social, and Health Education

4. Discussion

Challenging Justice Inequalities is one of the first studies to foreground children's intersectional experiences of justice in Scotland, and the UK, with a key focus on policing. While many findings echo earlier research on children's police interactions (e.g. Ellem and Richards, 2018; Deuchar et al., 2019), this project makes a distinct contribution through its co-production approach and creative zine-making methods, which captured the emotional dimensions of children's experiences, while incorporating police officers' perspectives to provide a nuanced, multi-layered understanding.

Scotland's youth justice policy landscape is often viewed as progressive, with key developments in policing over the past 20 years. Recent changes include UNCRC incorporation, training on adverse childhood experiences and trauma-informed practice (Brodie et al., 2023), although challenges remain in implementing approaches in justice settings (Vaswani et al., 2024; Vaswani & Paul, 2019). Ongoing legislative changes, such as the Children (Care, Care Experience and Services Planning) (Scotland) Act, aim to reduce the use of police custody by enabling alternative places of safety for children. Yet children in our study continued to describe policing in terms of fear, mistrust and avoidance and too many still experience harmful interactions with police. Importantly, the persistence of potentially discriminatory or harmful practices across earlier studies, and in our own, raises critical questions about the extent, nature and implementation of policing reform and policy.

Knowledge of protected characteristics and intersectionality appeared variable but increasing within Scottish policing. However, training and policy is more heavily focused on racism and racial disproportionality. While Police Scotland's acknowledgement of institutional racism, sexism, misogyny and other forms of discrimination is an important step towards culture change (Vaswani et al., 2024), our research suggested that other protected characteristics, like gender, sexuality, disability and especially age, currently receive less attention in officer training and development.

Limitations of protected characteristics as understood in the Equality Act

In our research, age was the defining feature of children's intersectional experiences, shaping how they were perceived and treated. Children perceived detrimental age-related differences in treatment both 'pre' and 'in' justice, including surveillance and exclusion. 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 today. Therefore, despite its significance, we conclude that age is not adequately protected for children in the Equality Act 2010.

The Equality Act 2010 protections against age discrimination only apply to under 18s in limited circumstances (such as employment rights). Treating children differently based upon their age is generally accepted or justified based on their 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. It may be necessary to treat children differently due to their age and developmental stage, but this must be done without resorting to detrimental age-based stereotypes, much in the same way as would be seen as unacceptable for adults.

Importantly, although protection against age discrimination is limited for children, the Equality Act is intended to provide full protection for all other characteristics. Daly et al.'s (2022) assessment of UNCRC *Article 2*, which sets out the right to non-discrimination, concluded that it is almost exclusively applied to children from groups who 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. Adopting an intersectional lens has helped

highlight how age intersects with other characteristics to amplify and intensify differential treatment and constitutes an additional layer of disadvantage

This indicates that much clearer guidance is needed for the Equality Act 2010 to ensure that age-related protections are secured for children. The identification of several 'missing' characteristics also points to limitations in how the framework of protected characteristics in the Equality Act can adequately help us to understand intersectional justice. It is noteworthy that social class is recognised as one of the 'big three' markers of identity (Dator, 2022) and is 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 legally recognised protected characteristic.

Education about rights, protected characteristics and intersectionality

For many children, school represented their initial point of contact with the 'justice system', often through the presence of 'campus cops'. This contact ranged from passive exposure to active involvement, including surveillance, formal disciplinary measures or, sometimes, 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 often go on to negatively shape trust, confidence and legitimacy in more formal justice systems.

At the same time, educational settings were seen as offering important opportunities to improve children's engagement with justice. Children often demonstrated limited understanding of the justice system, including their rights during police contact, 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, 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

Our study highlighted tensions between childhood expectations of justice as protective and the often-stark realities of adolescent experiences. However, while stories of harm and injustice were often shared, children more frequently described police contact as pervasive and ordinary, rather than exceptional. Children reported being both overlooked and overpoliced, simultaneously surveilled and dismissed. These experiences fostered deep ambivalence about the police, creating complexities and tensions in both their perceptions and proposed solutions for advancing intersectional policing practices and improving relationships between children and police. At the same time, adolescence brought more nuanced understandings of the role and purpose of the police and justice institutions. Children recognised the difficulties officers face in managing complex situations requiring split-second decisions and judgments, with implications for both officer and public safety.

Our findings also offer some optimism. Policing and justice remained fundamental concepts for children, who often, though not always, envisioned a future in which inequalities were reduced and justice was delivered. The children who took part demonstrated their ability to help adults understand these challenges and identify a path forward. Participating police officers, while a self-selecting group, were reflective, open, and willing to listen and engage. This commitment to collaboration and change allows us to end the project on a hopeful note.

5. 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.

5.1. 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.

5.2. Education

- Provide formal education within schools on 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.

5.3. Police

- Provide mandatory training for all frontline officers on child development, children's rights, protected characteristics, and intersectionality, and consider the introduction of specialist frontline officers for work with children and young people.
- Facilitate dialogue between police and children and young people from minoritised communities to better understand their contexts, experiences and concerns. Work together to address the sense of being overpoliced and being 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. This project offers an example of how such approaches might be developed collaboratively, with children and young people involved in shaping both the process and potential responses.

5.4. 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.

5.5. Wider Justice Systems / 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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7. Appendix: Selection of Zines

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





