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# The Youth Justice System's Response to the Covid-19 Pandemic

## Children's Welfare Needs and Vulnerabilities

### Research Paper 2

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Professor Hannah Smithson  
Andrea Nisbet  
Dr Samuel Larner  
Dr Paul Gray  
Dr Deborah Jump

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# About this Research

**During and after the Covid-19 pandemic, there will be societal implications for all children. However, for those in the youth justice system the impacts are likely to be particularly detrimental. There is an urgent need to develop a clear understanding of the impact of the pandemic on these children and those who work with them.**

This research project aims to understand the unprecedented implications that the Covid-19 pandemic has had on each stage of the youth justice system. Delivered in partnership between the Manchester Centre for Youth Studies (MCYS) at the Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU) and the Alliance for Youth Justice (AYJ), the project documents the impact of the pandemic on policy and practice responses, barriers and enablers to effective adaptation, and children's perspectives.

While the Greater Manchester (GM) region provides an in-depth case study for the project, we additionally draw heavily on the national literature and in-depth interviews with national stakeholders from the youth justice sector. Funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) as part of the UK Research and Innovation's rapid response to Covid-19, findings and recommendations from the 18-month project will be shared widely with practitioners and decision-makers to shape future policy and practice.

## About the Manchester Centre for Youth Studies (MCYS)

The MCYS is an award-winning interdisciplinary research centre at MMU, specialising in participatory, youth-informed research that positively influences the lives of young people. MCYS believes young people should have the opportunity to participate meaningfully in decisions that affect them and employs participatory approaches to engage with young people across a range of issues. As an interdisciplinary research centre, the MCYS team brings together academics and practitioners from a range of disciplines. In addition to collaborating with young people and their communities, MCYS works with agencies and organisations across the public, private and voluntary sectors, both in the UK and internationally.

## About the Alliance for Youth Justice (AYJ)

The AYJ brings together over 70 organisations, advocating for and with children to drive positive change in youth justice in England and Wales. Members range from large national charities and advocacy organisations to numerous smaller grassroots and community organisations. The AYJ advocates for distinct systems, services and support that treat children as children first and foremost - underpinned by social justice, children's rights and a focus on positive long-term outcomes. AYJ aims to promote widespread understanding about the underlying causes of children coming to the attention of the criminal justice system, and champion approaches that enable them to reach their full potential.

## Acknowledgements

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## Glossary of Acronyms

- Alliance for Youth Justice (AYJ)
- Child and Adolescence Mental Health Service (CAMHS)
- Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE)
- Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)
- Greater Manchester (GM)
- Manchester Centre for Youth Studies (MCYS)
- Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU)
- National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC)
- National Youth Agency (NYA)
- Youth Justice Board (YJB)
- Youth Offending Teams (YOTs)

# Research Findings

## Youth Offending Teams (YOTs) in the Context of Covid-19

There are 157 YOTs in England and Wales. GM Youth Offending Services encompasses one of the largest metropolitan areas in the country and comprises 10 boroughs: Bolton, Bury, Oldham, Rochdale, Stockport, Tameside, Trafford, Wigan, and the cities of Salford and Manchester. There are nine YOTs teams across the region (Bury and Rochdale are combined), each with a remit to work with children at risk of, or involved in, offending behaviours.

Despite the crucial role they have played throughout the pandemic, research into the impacts of Covid-19 on YOTs has been minimal. The current project provides one of the most in-depth explorations to date. YOTs have pro-actively attempted to assess and manage safeguarding and risks for children in an entirely new environment alongside, in some instances, losing staff through redeployment to other priority areas of service (e.g. child protection, children's homes, secure children's homes), (Smithson and Axon, 2020)<sup>1</sup>. They have continued to provide face-to-face support in new ways where possible, but have moved a lot of their work—providing digital contact and service delivery—online. This has led to difficulties overseeing some sentences, and in particular communicating with sentenced/remanded children in custody, including preparing for resettlement (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2020)<sup>2</sup>.

Our first research paper from the current project focused on the adaptations to practice and service delivery of YOTs across GM (Smithson et al, June 2021)<sup>3</sup> and drew attention to the digital divide, the challenges of engaging children remotely, and the short-term challenges for YOTs in a post-covid world. This second research paper focuses on professional's views of children's welfare needs and vulnerabilities during the pandemic. It presents the initial findings from 74 interviews with professionals from eight of the nine YOTs across the GM region. The interviews took place between January 2021 and May 2021.

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1 Marginalised yet vulnerable: The impact of Covid-19 on young people in the youth justice system: <https://www.mmu.ac.uk/news-and-events/news/story/12283>

2 HMIP Thematic Review of Work of YOTs during the Covid-19 Pandemic: <https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmiprobation/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2020/11/201110-A-thematic-review-of-the-work-of-youth-offending-services-during-the-COVID-19-pandemic.pdf>

3 The Youth Justice System's Response to the Covid-19 Pandemic: <https://www.mmu.ac.uk/media/mmuacuk/content/documents/mcys/Research-Briefing-GM-YOTs-Adaptations-to-Practice.pdf>

## Children's Welfare Needs and Vulnerabilities

In Harris and Goodfellow's (2021)<sup>4</sup> review of the literature, many examples of the concerns surrounding the wider impact of Covid-19 on children are acknowledged.

### The UN Committee of Human Rights of the Child (April 2020, p1)<sup>5</sup> warned of the 'grave physical, emotional and psychological' impact the Covid-19 pandemic is having on children'.

These wider concerns were expressed by GM YOT professionals. Mental health, increased exposure to domestic abuse, criminal exploitation, worsening living conditions and an increase in risk-taking behaviours, were discussed in detail by YOT staff.

The welfare and safeguarding of children most at risk of harm to themselves, or others, were prioritised by YOT staff during the first lockdown in March 2020, and subsequently throughout the various tier systems and successive lockdowns. However, staff raised significant concerns that while necessary, these measures did not go far enough.

During the first lockdown (March – July 2020), a Covid-19 risk or RAG rating assessment was developed by most GM YOTs to identify a child's risk of harm and re-offending, and level of vulnerability. These assessments were used to prioritise face-to-face home visits. In our first research briefing (Smithson et al, June 2021)<sup>6</sup>, we explored adaptations to service delivery and found that many YOT staff were not convinced of the usefulness of welfare visits. They described these visits as welfare checks, with limited interventions provided on the doorstep.

*"The only difficulty with the home visits and it really is more of a tick box and a welfare check because we can't have those conversations on the doorstep that we need to have... they are quick checks. Are you home? Are you following lockdown? Are you well? Give a chance for Mum and Dad or whoever to let us know what things are going on."*

*(Intensive Surveillance and Supervision Worker)*

The adaptations described above, and the reductions in specialist statutory and non-statutory support came at a time when children in the youth justice system were arguably at their most vulnerable. YOT staff spoke of their safeguarding concerns during lockdowns with children isolated in their homes with family members in crisis, not attending school, and lacking interaction with friends and peers. A nurse attached to a YOT explained,

*"We've got a lot of young people under YOT whose home life is difficult. You know, they might be living with domestic violence, parental mental health... I think we underestimated how much of a protective factor as well education is and schools are safe places for those young people. And once we removed that, it was very difficult. I think it was most notable in the first lockdown... in my role in YOT, those health services that they might need, it's been a lot more difficult for them to get that, if not impossible."*

*(Nurse)*

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4 The Youth Justice System's Response to the Covid-19 Pandemic, Literature Review:  
<https://www.ayj.org.uk/news-content/covid-project-literature-review>

5 The Committee on the Rights of the Child:  
[https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/\\_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=INT/CRC/STA/9095&Lang=en](https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=INT/CRC/STA/9095&Lang=en)

6 The Youth Justice System's Response to the Covid-19 Pandemic:  
<https://www.mmu.ac.uk/mcys/current-research--activities/covid-19-and-youth-justice/>

Lock-down directives such as 'stay at home' often resulted in a lack of good quality assessments in relation to welfare and safeguarding. In addition, further needs were often not identified due to the nature of the checks. Furthermore, when difficulties were recognised, they could not be fully addressed as many specialist support services were either not operating or working at limited capacity (especially during the first national lockdown). This is illustrative of national concerns in the youth justice sector (see Harris and Goodfellow, July 2020; the National Youth Agency (NYA), May 2020, StreetDoctors, Redthread, MAC-UK, September 2020).<sup>7</sup>

YOT professionals were acutely aware of the impacts of reduced and adapted services for children and their families.

*"These young people who had come through court, I knew they had a number of complex needs. I knew they had learning needs and I knew they found it very difficult meeting new people. So I had to do an assessment over the phone, and try and engage them over the phone...they didn't know me. So that was quite difficult – really difficult – because I think you can gauge more from seeing them face-to-face, and you can gauge more from the body language."*

*(Youth Justice Officer)*

The adaptations to practice, the reduction in specialist services and the increased risks and vulnerabilities that children were exposed to during the different stages of the pandemic are undoubtedly going to have longer-term impacts. One of which, children's mental health, was frequently mentioned by GM YOT staff.

## Mental Health

Concerns around children's mental health needs is indicative of the wider concerns around welfare and vulnerabilities. Prior to the pandemic, the prevalence of mental health needs amongst justice-involved children was acute: 71% of sentenced children were assessed as having mental health concerns in the year ending March 2019 (Youth Justice Board, 2020)<sup>8</sup>.



**71% of sentenced children were assessed as having mental health concerns in the year ending 2019.**

Throughout the pandemic, children faced significant challenges that fundamentally affected their lives including isolation, health anxieties, increasing instability and inequalities, and adverse experiences in the home (Cowie & Myers, 2020)<sup>9</sup>.

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7 The Youth Justice System's Response to the Covid-19 Pandemic, Literature Review:  
<https://www.avj.org.uk/news-content/covid-project-literature-review>

Gangs are exploiting vulnerable girls and young women at 'pop-up parties', youth workers warn:  
<https://inews.co.uk/news/gang-are-exploiting-vulnerable-girls-and-young-women-at-pop-up-parties-806948>

Living Through a Lockdown:  
<https://www.redthread.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/lockdown-report-full.pdf>

8 Assessing the needs of sentenced children in the youth justice system:  
[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/887644/assessing-needs-of-sentenced-children-youth-justice-system.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/887644/assessing-needs-of-sentenced-children-youth-justice-system.pdf)

9 The Impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people:  
<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/chso.12430>

It is unsurprising, therefore, that children's mental health worsened throughout the pandemic (YoungMinds, 2020)<sup>10</sup>. By January 2021, children reported that it got harder to cope under continued lockdowns with 83% of respondents reporting that the pandemic had made their mental health worse (YoungMinds, 2021)<sup>11</sup>.



**83% of children reported that the pandemic had made their mental health worse (January 2021).**

The evidence we gathered adds weight to these findings: mental health was a significant and recurring theme.

*"Some of the young people that I've worked with are really, really low in their mood, their mental health, how they're feeling, their diet, like I said, their sleep, everything has really been affected."*

*(Youth Justice Case Manager)*

Anxiety was frequently mentioned by YOT staff as a concern they had about children and their increasing levels of anxiety over course of the pandemic. It was explained that levels had increased due to range of intersecting factors such as isolation, lack of socialising, lack of routine, lack of physical activity and poor sleep patterns. There was widespread agreement that some mental health issues that may have been dealt with pre-covid as 'minor', rapidly escalated into what practitioners described as children "being in crisis". Of significant concern, was the reflections made by YOT staff around the escalation of mental health issues that had led to attempts of self-harm and suicide.

*"What we've seen longer-term is presentation of emotional ill-health with young people and self-harm and suicide attempts as well by the end of the year and just at the start of this year from older teenagers."*

*(Head of Service)*

Others had seen an increase in the use of drugs, with children using them as a means to manage anxiety and depression during the pandemic.

*"Definitely, drugs as well. I think there's been an increase since the first lockdown in my cohort that have been taking drugs. One of my young people said to me, "In the first lockdown, I just started doing it because it was just something to do in the evening and in the day." That's kind of how he just got into smoking so much cannabis."*

*(Resettlement Mentor)*

In light of the national picture, it is disquieting although unsurprising, that some mental health workers, such as those from Children and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) reported fewer referrals coming through from YOT practitioners during subsequent national lockdowns and tier systems. They suggested this was linked to the undertaking of limited assessments, a consequence of which was a lack of emphasis on children's mental health issues.

*"Some of them (children) have been in and out of crisis. I think it's been really hard for them, but I think our concern is our referral rate has massively dropped, our contacts have massively dropped."*

*(CAMHS Practitioner)*

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10 Coronavirus: Impact on young people with mental health needs, Survey 2:  
<https://www.youngminds.org.uk/media/04apxfrt/youngminds-coronavirus-report-summer-2020.pdf>

11 Coronavirus: Impact on young people with mental health needs, Survey 4:  
<https://www.youngminds.org.uk/media/esifqn3z/youngminds-coronavirus-report-jan-2021.pdf>



When assessments were undertaken, practitioners reflected on whether they were appropriate and adequate. Throughout the pandemic, assessments were constrained by Covid-19 restrictions, ranging from social distancing to 'work from home' directives. Our first research paper (Smithson et al, June 2021)<sup>12</sup>, drew attention to the challenges that YOT professionals faced who were seconded to a YOT or whom were not delivering statutory provision, such as speech and language therapists, CAMHS workers and nurses.

They received contradictory Covid-19 working guidance from their 'home' employer, such as the NHS compared with local authorities under which YOTs sit. This not only caused confusion and frustration, but it had a considerable impact on the extent and type of services that could be offered to children (this also differed at a regional GM basis). For instance, some CAMHS workers were able to maintain some face-to-face contact, while others were not.

*"Well, the office was shut. The direction was from the city council, "We'll close the office, so you need to go elsewhere now." It was quite a shock when I looked at my colleagues here in the CAMHS base, where I am now, we remained very much 'business as usual.'"*

*(CAMHS Worker)*

Assessments were typically conducted remotely over the phone or video call (certainly during the first national lockdown) and health professionals and YOT practitioners were clear that safeguarding issues, certain subtle details and important signs that would ordinarily inform a specialist assessment may have been missed.

*"You're having a view, a presented view, but like things like, you know, neglect issues, you can't see properly, the level of detail, you can't see the physical state of the children properly, you can't smell them. I know that, from a neglect viewpoint, that's really important. You don't get the level of detail that you actually need to safeguard these children properly without seeing them face-to-face... you don't get to see the little, the facial expressions, the indicators that might suggest that something's not right."*

*(Speech and Language Therapist)*

Furthermore, mental health staff raised concerns about online and remote counselling as well as doorstep consultations being far from ideal due to their lack of confidentiality.

*"Actually, it's not appropriate, these are personal conversations that we're having about young people and about their health... we've had those suggestions, go for a walk around the park. When I'm trying to do an autism assessment, it's not really appropriate to go and do an autism assessment walking round the park."*

*(CAMHS Nurse)*

It continues to be a mixed picture in GM in relation to both mental health referrals and the delivery of mental health interventions and services. For some teams, delivery was adjusted to online and remote delivery, while for others a reduced and much adapted face-to-face delivery continued throughout the different stages of lockdown and tier systems.

GM professionals were clear that there is a long way to go before specialist mental health services resume to pre-pandemic levels. Indeed, the longer-term impacts of the pandemic on the mental health of justice-involved children was a significant concern for YOT professionals. Their concern was two-fold: how children will be affected, and the increased numbers of referrals to mental health provision and the capacity to deal with the cases.

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<sup>12</sup> The Youth Justice System's Response to the Covid-19 Pandemic:  
<https://www.mmu.ac.uk/mcys/current-research--activities/covid-19-and-youth-justice/>

*“Mental health as well is going to be massive, I think. It’s going to be so big... the fall out of that in the next year or two, I can imagine being horrific... that must have affected so many people over the last nine months, ten months. So, yeah, there are challenges there when you think about it and you start really delving into it there are definitely challenges ahead.”*

*(Police Officer)*

*“And the experiences that they [children] have lived through at home, you know. It may take some time for all of that to kind of come out. I think mental health for the young people under YOT and the experiences that they’ve perhaps lived through at home that they haven’t yet either articulated or expressed. We might see a rise in getting more cases in terms of people needing support in that area.”*

*(Nurse)*

## Exposure to Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation

### Abuse

‘Stay at home’ directives exacerbated particular risks for many children, such as increases in reports of domestic abuse and child abuse. During the initial stages of the Covid-19 crisis, Refuge reported around a 50% increase in demand to its Helpline, and a 300% increase in visits to its National Domestic Abuse Help Line website (Refuge, May 2020)<sup>13</sup>.



**50% increase in demand to the Refuge Helpline, and a 300% increase in visits to its National Domestic Abuse Helpline website (Refuge, May 2020).**

Government data on Serious Incident Notifications relating to abuse or neglect for April to September 2020 shows the number of notifications increased by 27% compared to the previous year, and for those aged 16 and over they increased by a third. (Department for Education, January 2021)<sup>14</sup>.

Many of the risk factors associated with abuse and neglect have been exacerbated by the Coronavirus pandemic, while the support services that would traditionally identify and respond to these concerns have been unable to see many of the children and families they work with face-to-face. (NSPCC, 2020)<sup>15</sup>

Youth justice practitioners in GM were especially concerned that children were exposed to higher levels of domestic abuse during the pandemic.

*“Domestic violence has always kind of been there in the background. But I think definitely in the past 12 months, it’s gone up quite significantly.”*

*(Youth Justice Caseworker)*

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<sup>13</sup> Refuge reports further increase in demand for its National Domestic Abuse Helpline Services during lockdown: <https://www.refuge.org.uk/refuge-reports-further-increase-in-demand-for-its-national-domestic-abuse-helpline-services-during-lockdown/>

<sup>14</sup> Serious Incidents Notifications: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/serious-incident-notifications/2020-21-part-1-apr-to-sep>

<sup>15</sup> How safe are our children? <https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/research-resources/how-safe-are-our-children>

A joint study carried out by the University of Oxford and the University of Manchester exploring the experiences of child and adolescent to parent violence in the Covid-19 pandemic (Condry R, Miles C, Burton-Douglas T & Oladapo A, August 2020)<sup>16</sup> found increased levels of child-on-parent violence, an increase in specialist referrals for support, and practitioners reported an increase in the severity of incidents. Reasons provided for this type of domestic abuse include 'spatial confinement and coerced proximity'(ibid, p21)<sup>17</sup>, changes in structure and routine, fear and anxiety, and a lack of access to support, all of which were reflected by YOT staff in the majority of teams across GM.

*"These young people are coming from backgrounds where there's issues at home, issues of neglect, issues of emotional abuse, physical abuse, and telling someone who's a victim of that to stay at home with those people or people that they are having disagreements with, or arguments all the time, it's affected massively... I mean, we're seeing in pre-court there's been a massive increase in domestic violence cases, which is kind of understandable, really, kind of young people lashing out at siblings or parents."*

*(Youth Justice Case Manager)*

## Neglect

Poverty and financial instability are highlighted in Harris and Goodfellow's (July, 2021)<sup>18</sup> review of the literature confirming that financial instability has increased, and many families reporting their finances have been negatively affected by the pandemic.

## **Greater Manchester has some of the highest proportions of children under 16 living in Relative and Absolute low-income families of all English local authorities (UK Government for Dept. Work and Pensions, 2020)<sup>19</sup>.**

Concerns about poverty and neglect were raised by GM YOT staff. Responses included accounts of children living below the poverty line and that while schools were closed children were unable to access free school meals so did not have enough food. Consequently, some YOT staff spoke of delivering food parcels to meet children's needs.

The account provided below details the extent to which children were struggling with basic living conditions during the pandemic.

A youth justice support officer and other professionals had been seeing a child weekly in his garden during lockdown. They had not been able to enter his supported accommodation because of Covid-19 restrictions. His tenancy expired during lockdown and he was moving to another property. When the housing providers entered the accommodation, they were shocked at his living conditions:

*"It was sad to find out that that's the state he's living in... we were all thinking we were really on it because we were having these weekly contacts in his garden and he was engaging and nothing was sort of flagging up... but he clearly didn't have a clue in terms of budgeting. There was no food in his cupboard, there was bins over piling, he couldn't manage living on his own and nobody could pick it up, nobody was able to pick that up... he shouldn't have been living like that."*

*(Youth Justice Support Officer)*

16 Experiences of Child and Adolescent to Parent Violence in the Covid-19 Pandemic: [https://www.law.ox.ac.uk/sites/files/oxlaw/final\\_report\\_capv\\_in\\_covid-19\\_aug20.pdf](https://www.law.ox.ac.uk/sites/files/oxlaw/final_report_capv_in_covid-19_aug20.pdf)

17 [https://www.law.ox.ac.uk/sites/files/oxlaw/final\\_report\\_capv\\_in\\_covid-19\\_aug20.pdf](https://www.law.ox.ac.uk/sites/files/oxlaw/final_report_capv_in_covid-19_aug20.pdf)

18 The Youth Justice System's Response to the Covid-19 Pandemic, Literature Review: <https://www.ayj.org.uk/news-content/covid-project-literature-review>

19 Children in low income families: local area statistics: <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/children-in-low-income-families-local-area-statistics>

## Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE)

The risks of abuse, neglect and domestic violence in the home and children's vulnerability to other forms of abuse, exploitation and violence are inter-related. As described on the previous page, 'stay at home' directives created heightened conditions for children's exposure to violence, while the removal of protective services such as schools and the government's move to dilute important corporate parenting duties removed many of the crucial safeguards for children in care (Harris and Goodfellow, July, 2021)<sup>20</sup>.

**“Many reports, for example from the Children’s Commissioner for England, The Children’s Society, and NYA [National Youth Agency] confirm children have been at greater risk of becoming involved in gang-associated activity and criminal exploitation as protective systems were stripped away and children were out of sight of professionals.”**

**(Harris and Goodfellow, July, 2021, p 25)<sup>21</sup>**

At the beginning of the pandemic, national press reports suggested that lockdown measures had led to a decrease in violent crime and a potential reprieve for children involved in drug-related violence (Express & Star, 2020)<sup>22</sup>. This was confirmed by data from the Office for National Statistics, which identified a 3% decrease in knife-related offences between July and September 2020 (Office for National Statistics, 2020)<sup>23</sup>. Nonetheless, GM YOT staff were of the view that children were still at risk of organised crime, criminal exploitation and serious violence during lockdown and that exploiters would find innovative ways to operate.

*“We are seeing a lot of organised crime and exploitation. So, we are just seeing more and more adults who are utilising children to, kind of, do a lot of organised crime – so stealing cars to order, burgling houses to get the keys... violence is being used, you know, for the acquisitive crime, as opposed to just violence for the sake of violence... there are concerns around children, who we see as getting younger... and that has definitely increased during lockdown... this is a Covid-specific thing.”*

*(Head of Service)*

Echoing various reports raising concerns that gangs may have capitalised on heightened vulnerabilities and altered their methods in response to lockdown (Harris and Goodfellow, July, 2021)<sup>24</sup>, GM YOT staff expressed significant concerns about the increased risk of exploitation as a result of the reduced capacity in oversight of children during the pandemic. The Children's Commissioner for England, The Children's Society, and the NYA confirmed that children have been at greater risk of becoming involved in gang associated activity and criminal exploitation as protective systems were stripped away and children were out of sight of professionals (see Harris and Goodfellow, 2021)<sup>25</sup>.

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20 The Youth Justice System's Response to the Covid-19 Pandemic, Literature Review:  
<https://www.ayj.org.uk/news-content/covid-project-literature-review>

21 <https://www.ayj.org.uk/news-content/covid-project-literature-review>

22 Violent crime in West Midlands down 41% during Coronavirus lockdown:  
<https://www.expressandstar.com/news/crime/2020/04/02/drop-in-violent-crime-and-burglaries-during-lockdown-say-west-midlands-police/>

23 Crime in England and Wales: year ending September 2020:  
<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/bulletins/crimeinenglandandwales/yearendingseptember2020#knife-or-sharp-instrument-offences>

24 The Youth Justice System's Response to the Covid-19 Pandemic, Literature Review:  
<https://www.ayj.org.uk/news-content/covid-project-literature-review>

25 <https://www.ayj.org.uk/news-content/covid-project-literature-review>

*"I think there's more CCE coming in... gangs a lot more... we've got a lot more cases where we're discussing the whole CCE line at the minute... I can only think it is more like this because of Covid because normally you'd be seeing those kids weekly."*

*(Out of Court Disposal Worker)*

County lines gangs are reported to have adapted to the pandemic, using roads rather than rail networks to transport drugs, and increasingly using social media to recruit and exploit children (Crest Advisory, 2020)<sup>26</sup>. As such, the approach to exploitation changed throughout the pandemic, with children being increasingly exploited through car theft (Crest Advisory, 2020)<sup>27</sup>. This issue was frequently discussed by GM YOT professionals.

*"I think there's a lot more stuff around children may be being used to move drugs around the city as well... they're into now stealing high-powered vehicles to order... burglaries linked to cars."*

*(Head of Service)*

A common theme to emerge was the relationship between boredom and the escalation in the vulnerability of children and the subsequent seriousness of crimes committed by children. Staff suggested that boredom led to increased risk-taking behaviour including online offending (cyber-bullying, accessing inappropriate images and sexual offences).

*"The seriousness of the things that young people are coming through with have escalated. We've had some serious offences in for young people that are quite young, so that's quite worrying and really sad. I think you can put them together because literally young people have got nothing to do, particularly for our young people that we've spoken to... they're knocking about on the streets, they're hanging around in parks, they're really bored. Young people are accessing the internet and accessing some things that they perhaps shouldn't be, and I think Covid has got a lot to do with that."*

*(Youth Justice Case Manager)*

The accounts and concerns from GM YOT staff substantiate the national picture. A lack of 'visibility' of at-risk children during the pandemic was compounded considerably by reductions in specialist statutory and non-statutory support and protective services such as school and college.

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<sup>26</sup> County Lines after Covid – a new threat?  
<https://www.crestadvisory.com/post/county-lines-after-covid-a-new-threat>

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.crestadvisory.com/post/county-lines-after-covid-a-new-threat>



# Conclusions and Considerations

**This briefing paper makes an extensive contribution to the understanding of the increased vulnerabilities of justice-involved children during the pandemic. The national literature has indicated and illustrated that vulnerabilities have intensified and this research provides further insight into how these vulnerabilities have been identified and dealt with ‘on the ground’ by youth justice practitioners. This evidence should inform youth justice policy and practice in a post-pandemic environment.**

Based on the findings described in this paper we consider the following areas to be central for planning how the youth justice system can evolve and adapt to deliver a service that recognises and addresses the exacerbated vulnerabilities that justice-involved children have experienced during the pandemic:

- Consideration should be given to adopting a public health approach to address the impact of Covid-19 on the welfare and vulnerabilities of justice-involved children, with a particular focus on CCE and domestic abuse. The nature of the problem needs to be identified and understood and responses need to be predicated on what works, and informed by theory, data and analysis. Recognising and addressing the impact should not be the sole responsibility of the youth justice system and should be joined up with plans including schools, children's services, youth services, health services, housing and grass roots organisations. For instance, in March 2021<sup>28</sup>, the government announced a £500 million mental health recovery plan, however it is unclear how much of this, if any, will be allocated to children in contact with the youth justice system.
- Recognition that children are likely to be traumatised by their exposure to increased vulnerabilities during the pandemic is needed. Professionals need to acknowledge this trauma and personalised approaches should be co-designed with children to ensure that their trauma is addressed. The commissioning of clinical support is something should be considered by Health Services.
- Children should be supported and encouraged to participate in the planning of post-pandemic service provision and delivery. Encouraging and supporting children to tell their stories and describe their experiences and opinions, provides an opportunity for youth justice professionals and relevant partners to co-create responses rooted in the meaningful engagement of children.

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<sup>28</sup> Mental Health Recovery Plan backed by £500 million, UK Government Dept. Health and Social Security: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/mental-health-recovery-plan-backed-by-500-million>

For further information about the project, please contact,  
Professor Hannah Smithson [h.i.smithson@mmu.ac.uk](mailto:h.i.smithson@mmu.ac.uk)

