



Foundation

WHAT THE UK PUBLIC THINKS ABOUT CHILDREN IN THE JUSTICE SYSTEM

NATIONAL POLLING 2026

FOREWORD



The use of custody for children should only be used as a last resort. But every day, children in England and Wales are being imprisoned unnecessarily.

What's more, the current conditions in youth custody are causing harm and trauma to young people with complex, often unmet needs, in environments that are not child-centred or trauma-informed.

As a funder that is committed to supporting young people to achieve their full potential, and breaking down barriers that prevent this from happening, it's no surprise that we want to see urgent change. Everything we do at the Co-op Foundation helps us build fairer, more co-operative communities - communities that young people and Co-op members have told us they want to see.

In our Future Communities Vision, young people told us they want to live in communities that are safe and crime-free, where the justice system has a greater focus on effectively rehabilitating and supporting people who come into contact with it so they can become active members of their communities. Co-op members have also told us they think it's important to support young people in their community and have asked us to do more to reduce reoffending, too. Our hope is to drive change on these issues through our campaign work.

Listening and learning from others is vital when strengthening communities and tackling issues that affect them. That's why we spent twelve months speaking to youth justice experts, practitioners, campaigners and, most importantly, young people who have come into contact with the youth justice system themselves to understand where we can make a difference with our campaign work. One clear message was consistent throughout: too many children in England and Wales are being imprisoned when they don't need to be.

**We are calling
for greater use
of community
sentences**

We urgently need reform in the use of custodial sentences for children in England and Wales so they are truly only imprisoned as a last resort. We are calling for greater use of community sentences as growing evidence shows that these are more effective at rehabilitating children.

What stands out to me in the research we've carried out is the UK public support this idea. 70% of the public would support community sentences being used more often for crimes committed by children. The public also expressed a strong preference for the use of rehabilitation over punishment for children who come into contact with the justice system.

People often assume they already know what the public thinks about crime and how justice is executed. Our research reveals what UK adults really believe, including those who have been victims of crime in the last four years. We hope this research helps to cut through assumptions and reveals the public's true thoughts and feelings towards crime committed by children and the use of prison for those under the age of 18.

We're proud to be partnering with Alliance for Youth Justice and Transform Justice to end the unnecessary imprisonment of children. We're doing this by calling for greater restrictions on the use of custodial sentences in child cases and a reduction in the use of custodial remand for children.

Thank you to Dr Anne-Marie Day and our campaign partners for helping to shape and deliver this report.

Nick Crofts

Co-op Foundation
Chief Executive Officer

INTRODUCTION

Commissioned by Co-op Foundation, this briefing summarises new UK polling exploring public attitudes towards children and young people who have committed crime, the imprisonment of children and young people, and the use of community sentencing.

A community sentence involves a child being supervised in the community instead of being imprisoned. A community sentence may include a programme of work to address a child's behaviour or requirements and restrictions on what a child may or may not do.

Debates around youth justice often focus on public safety, accountability, rehabilitation, and the long-term impact of early contact with the criminal justice system. This research provides insight into what the UK public really think about these debates.

Although Co-op Foundation's campaign work focuses on England and Wales, as a UK-wide funder, they think it's important to understand what people across the UK think about the use of prison for children. That's why they gathered views from across the UK. They'll use this insight not only to shape their campaign and influencing work in England and Wales, but to explore what other opportunities exist in Northern Ireland and Scotland to positively influence the use of youth custody, too.

METHODOLOGY

Unless otherwise stated, statistics used in this report refer to Co-op Foundation/More in Common survey, January 2026. More in Common surveyed 3,019 UK adults (weighted to be nationally representative). Fieldwork was carried out by More in Common between 9 and 14 January.

We sought the views of people across the political spectrum using More in Common's British Seven Segments. These segments move beyond traditional left-right political divides to understand the deeper values and cultural outlooks shaping public opinion. You can find out more about More in Common's seven segments on their [**website**](#).

YOUTH JUSTICE SYSTEM IN ENGLAND AND WALES



THE YOUTH JUSTICE SYSTEM IN ENGLAND AND WALES

The Youth Justice System in England and Wales oversees all children accused of a criminal offence aged 10-17.

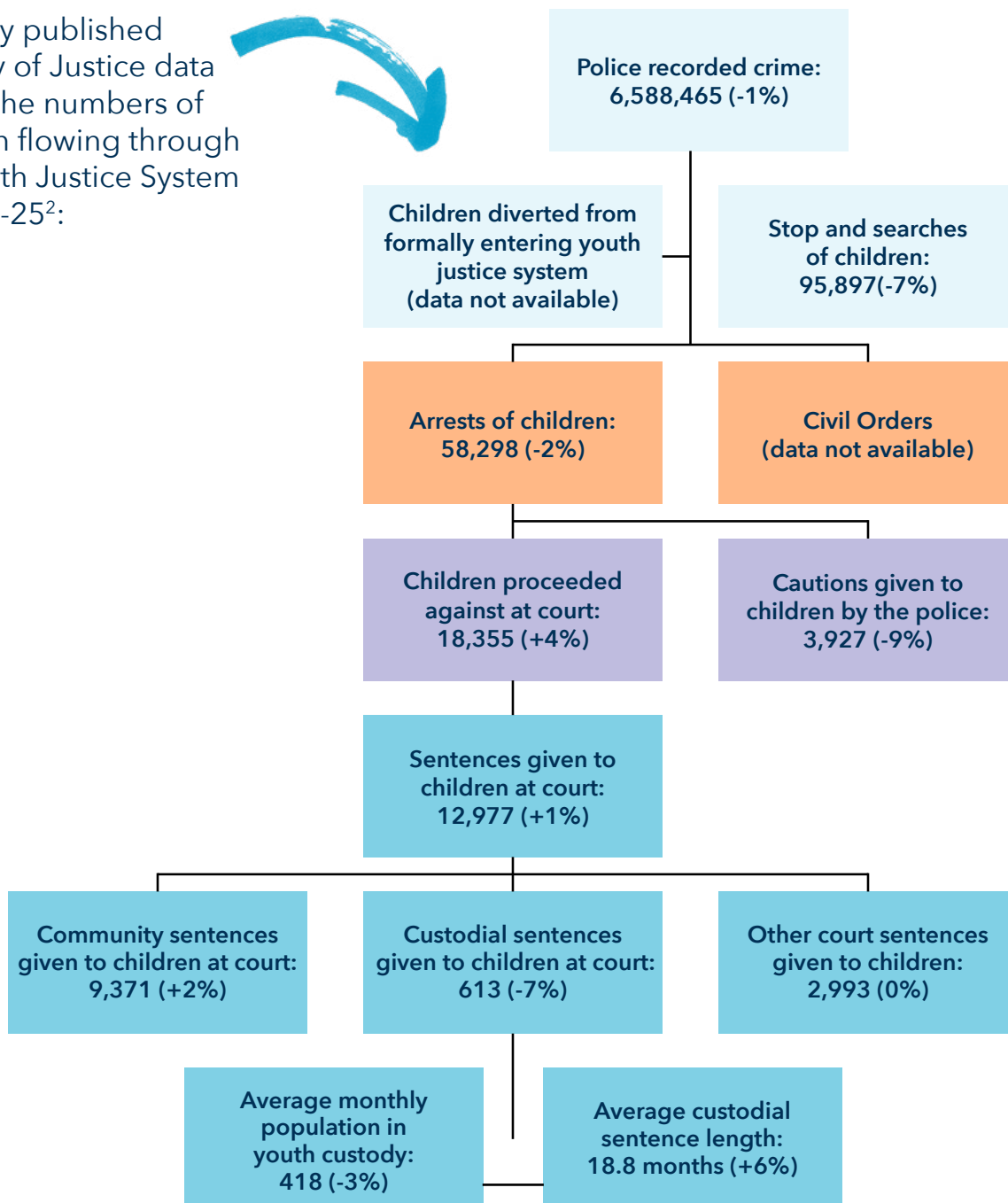
Typically, upon suspicion of a criminal act, the police arrest, question and either charge or release a child. They also have the option to give them an out of court resolution. After a child has been arrested and charged, they are usually sent to the Youth Court to appear before 2-3 specially trained lay magistrates or a District Judge. The Youth Courts deal with criminal cases committed by children aged 10-17. They make decisions about whether a child is released on bail or remanded in custody, determine guilt and sentencing outcomes, and ultimately whether a child will be labelled as a criminal for the rest of their lives. Most offences are heard in the Youth Court, but serious offences are heard in the adult-based Crown Court in front of a judge and jury (if they plead not guilty and it goes to trial).

When a child is sentenced, they can receive a community sentence or imprisonment and are supervised by a local Youth Justice team. Children in the justice system in England and Wales invariably commit offences such as assaults, weapon possession, driving offences, theft and criminal damage. These types of offences account for 69% of all proven offences by children in 2024-25¹.

¹Youth Justice Statistics: 2024 to 2025 - GOV.UK

FLows THROUGH THE YOUTH JUSTICE SYSTEM IN ENGLAND AND WALES, YEAR ENDING MARCH 2025

Recently published Ministry of Justice data shows the numbers of children flowing through the Youth Justice System in 2024-25²:



NOTES ON FLOW CHART:

1. Includes adults as well as children. Age of offenders is often unknown when crimes are reported to the police.
2. Figures in brackets show the percentage change compared to the previous year
3. The number of children diverted from formally entering the youth justice system through Community Resolutions or other diversionary outcomes.
4. Average custodial sentence length refers to the full custodial term imposed (for sentences of a fixed length only), not just the period actually spent in custody.

²Youth Justice Statistics: 2024 to 2025 - Flows through the youth justice system, year ending March 2025 - GOV.UK

KEY FINDINGS



KEY FINDINGS

1. CHILDREN ARE DIFFERENT TO ADULTS

The public makes a clear distinction between adults and children who commit crimes:

- 53% believe adults commit crimes mainly because of their character and choices.
- 58% believe children commit crimes mainly because of external factors.
- 56% of victims of crime also believed children committed crimes because of outside factors, while 33% of victims felt that children committed crime due to their own individual character and choices.

When asked why children might commit serious crimes, the most common reasons identified were:

- Unstable family life (49%)
- Lack of discipline at home (43%)
- Exposure to violence and crime (33%)
- Social media (33%)

KEY MESSAGE:

The public sees childhood offending as shaped by circumstances – not inherent character.

Did you know?

Lots of research³ shows that children become involved in the justice system as a result of factors outside of their control such as being in care, excluded from school, having special educational needs and disabilities, being neurodivergent and having poor mental health. Children have no control over what happens to them when they are growing up, yet if this leads to challenging behaviours, our criminal justice system criminalises them from the age of 10.

³See for example: An evidence-based plan for addressing childhood vulnerability, crime and justice

2. THE AGE OF CRIMINAL RESPONSIBILITY

The current age of criminal responsibility in England, Wales and Northern Ireland is 10 years old.

- Only 15% of people in England, Wales and Northern Ireland believe 10 is the right age.
- 65% believe it should be higher.
- 21% think it should be 16 or older.

The current age of criminal responsibility in Scotland is 12 years old.

- 23% of people in Scotland believe 12 is the right age
- 45% believe it should be higher.
- 19% think it should be 16 and older.

When looking at the UK as a whole, 61% of victims of crime believe it should be higher than 10.

KEY MESSAGE:

There is public support for increasing the age of criminal responsibility.

Did you know?

Scotland recently increased its age of criminal responsibility from 8 to 12. They are now considering increasing it again to 14.

The UK Government has repeatedly been found by the United Nations to have breached children's rights by having the age of criminal responsibility at 10. They recommend a minimum age of 14, ideally 16⁴.

We have one of the lowest ages of criminal responsibility in the Western World.

Children's brains do not fully mature until the age of 24-25⁵. In some areas of life, the UK Government recognise this and want to protect children such as considering a social media ban for under 16s. But when a child commits an offence, they are treated as adults and expected to take full responsibility for their crimes – this is known as adultification bias. Black children are more likely to be subject to adultification bias than all other children.

⁴UnicefUKYouthJusticeExecSummaryInfographic_2020_2.pdf

⁵Scoping-study_Helping-young-people-away-from-criminal-justice.pdf

3. VIEWS ON CHILD IMPRISONMENT

The poll showed that the public did not feel confident in their knowledge about child imprisonment. But despite this they had concerns about the impact of imprisonment:

- 35% believe prison makes children more likely to reoffend.
- 18% think it makes no difference.
- 18% describe children's prisons as "traumatising" – rising to 29% among those who believe prison should never be used for children.

The top public concerns about imprisoning children are:

- Makes a child more likely to commit another crime (42%)
- Risk of harm or abuse (38%)
- Impact on mental health (37%)
- Long-term barriers to employment (28%)

What about the cost of child imprisonment?

Those who identify as more politically right-leaning are more likely to raise concerns about cost to the taxpayer.

Did you know?

Imprisoning children is very expensive – the yearly cost to hold a child in a Young Offender's Institution (YOI) is £120,085 compared to around £7000 for a Youth Justice Service to work with a child on a community sentence⁶.

Prison means higher rates of reoffending than a community sentence. The rate of reoffending for children who have been held in YOIs is 60%, compared with around 30% for children supervised in the community.

⁶Harmful, Expensive and Criminogenic: The Case for Abolishing Detention and Training Orders in England and Wales | The British Journal of Criminology | Oxford Academic

4. IS PRISON THE RIGHT PLACE FOR CHILDREN CONVICTED OF AN OFFENCE?

The public think imprisonment is not appropriate for children in the majority of cases:

- Most believe prison should remain an option for the most serious violent crimes, particularly murder.
- Around 1 in 5 think prison should never be used for children.
- More than a third think it should be used only in certain instances.
- Only around 1 in 8 people (12%) believe prison should be used more often for children.
- 53% of victims of crime believe prison should either never be used or only used occasionally for children, while only 14% believe it should be used more often for children.

Did you know?

The public's concerns are well-founded. Dozens of academic research papers and UK Government Inspections have shown that Young Offenders Institutions (children's prisons) are harmful for children:

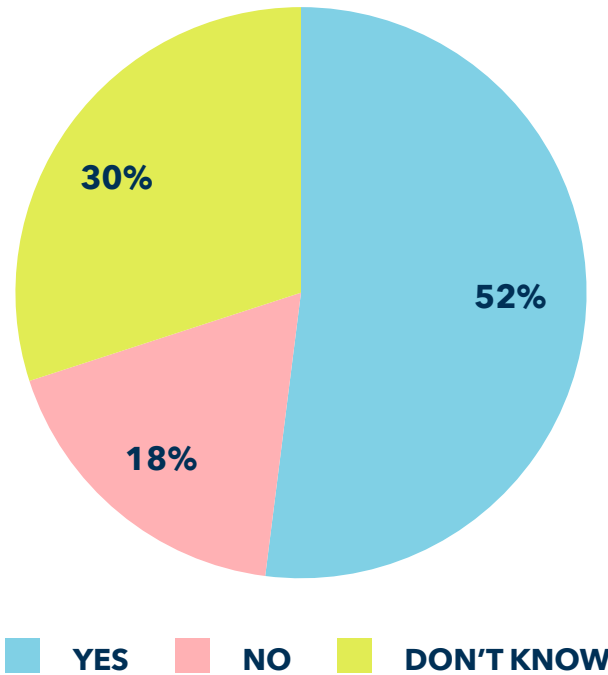
- Many children are locked up alone for 23 hours per day.
- There are high levels of violence in children's prisons.
- Most children receive inadequate education in prison.
- There are virtually no opportunities to rehabilitate.
- Many children leave prison with poor mental health.
- Prison has been called 'institutionalised abuse' by academics⁷.

KEY MESSAGE:

The findings indicate that the public does not favour routine use of imprisonment for children. Instead, most people appear to see imprisonment as something that should be used selectively and sparingly.

⁷Child Incarceration | 5 | Institutional Abuse, the Violent State and the politics of impunity

5. WHAT ABOUT IMPRISONING CHILDREN BEFORE TRIAL (REMAND)?



52% of the public believe that remand (imprisoning children before trial) is wrong, presenting a significant area of public consensus. Only 18% believe it is right (30% did not know).

Concerns focus on developmental harm and the risk of damaging children who may ultimately not be convicted.

52% of victims of crime believe that remand is wrong, and only 19% believe it is right.

Did you know?

Concerns about remand are well-founded. Nearly half of children in custody are awaiting trial, and two thirds of this group will go on to be acquitted or receive a non-custodial (community) sentence⁸.

This presents a clear breach of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child which states that prison should be used as a last resort.

The UK Government have recently acknowledged that they are not adhering to this principle and have doubled down on their efforts to reduce the numbers of children.

⁸Youth Justice Statistics: 2024 to 2025 - GOV.UK

6. PUNISHMENT V REHABILITATION

We asked people whether the criminal justice system should prioritise punishment or rehabilitation (on a 1-5 scale, where 1 = prioritise punishment and 5 = prioritise rehabilitation).

- 34% chose the strongest pro-rehabilitation position.
- Only 9% chose the strongest pro-punishment position.
- The remainder were spread across middle positions.

When combining responses:

- A significantly larger proportion lean towards rehabilitation than towards punishment.
- Relatively few adopt a strongly punitive stance.

What about the victims?

Victims of crime support rehabilitation more than punishment:

- 62% prioritise rehabilitation
- 14% prioritise punishment
- Even among those directly affected by crime, there is strong support for helping children change rather than simply punishing them.

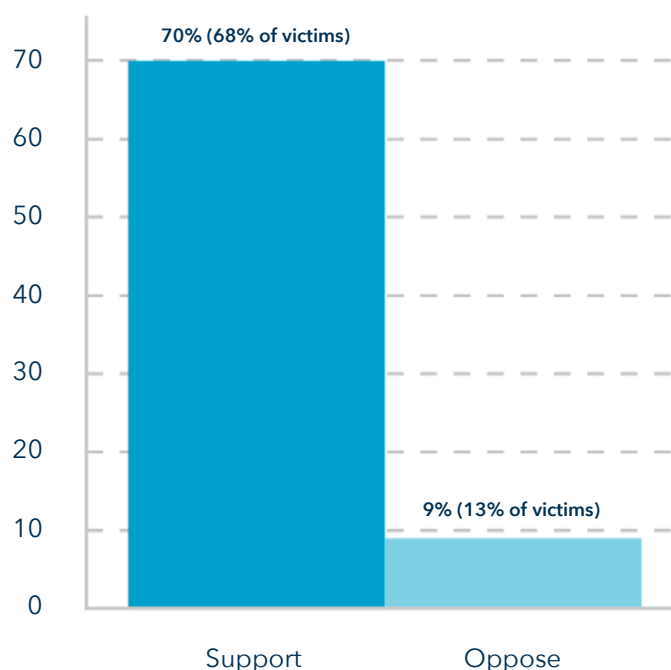
KEY MESSAGES:

The public prefers rehabilitation over punishment, even if there remains support for consequences and accountability.

This suggests that while people recognise the seriousness of youth crime, many believe the justice system should aim to change behaviour and reduce reoffending rather than focus solely on punishment.

Importantly, all groups (especially victims of crime) favour rehabilitation over punishment as the primary goal of imprisonment. Even amongst the minority that supported child imprisonment, rehabilitation is the most commonly cited reason for this.

7. STRONG PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR COMMUNITY SENTENCES



When asked whether they support community sentences for children:

- 70% support community sentences (68% of victims of crime).
- 26% strongly support.
- 44% somewhat support.
- 9% oppose (13% of victims of crime).
- The remainder neither support nor oppose or don't know.

Community sentencing receives broad support because:

- Most people believe it is cheaper than custody.
- It is seen as better for children's future opportunities, especially for those under 16.
- It is popular even among those who think prison should sometimes be used more.

Did you know?

- Youth Justice Services provide community-based support for children and young people in the justice system and do a fantastic job!
- They are significantly cheaper than custody, have low reoffending rates, and achieve consistently good or outstanding inspection ratings from His Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons and Probation (HMIP)

8. DISCLOSURE OF CHILDHOOD PRISON SENTENCES

A majority of the public do not support the current policy that childhood prison sentences always stay on criminal records and can be disclosed forever.

- 70% believe children's prison sentences should not be disclosed forever.
- 22% believe a child's prison sentence should never be disclosed (The rate is slightly higher for victims of crime at 23%).

Many recognise that disclosure can limit employment and life opportunities, but others believe it is part of long-term accountability.

Did you know?

Most children grow out of crime - is it therefore fair that they should be labelled as a criminal for their whole adult lives for something they did as a child?

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS



RECOMMENDATIONS

Increase the age of criminal responsibility from 10 to at least 14 in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Review child sentencing and ensure custody is truly used as a last resort and for the shortest time possible, reserved only for the most serious violent and sexual offences.

End the unnecessary remand of children and put more funding into alternatives, such as specialist foster care.

Invest heavily in Youth Justice Services and more community alternatives to custody.

Close all Young Offender Institutions and the last remaining Secure Training Centre, ensuring that custody is used only as a last resort. When it is deemed necessary, children should be cared for in small residential units close to their homes, staffed by trauma-informed practitioners, following the existing Secure Children's Homes model.

Set out a plan for how best to address the intersecting vulnerabilities of children affected by sentencing - including ethnicity, special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), care experience, and mental health needs.

Implement recommendation 34 of the Lammy review which calls for sealing or expunging childhood criminal records where rehabilitation has taken place.

Embark on a public awareness campaign about children and their experiences in the justice system.

CONCLUSION

The survey found that victims of crime displayed similar levels of empathy and understanding towards children in the justice system as the general public. Their own experiences of victimisation did not appear to sway their views towards children in the justice system. It also found that the public sees clear differences between children and adults in criminal justice. Significantly, childhood criminality is widely understood as caused by external factors, rather than something inherently 'wrong' with the child.

When considering the imprisonment of children, the public saw it as necessary for serious, violent crimes but not as a general solution. In light of this, rehabilitation was strongly preferred over punishment, and the use of community sentences commanded broad, strong support. Imprisoning children before trial was viewed as very unpopular, with a preference for finding more suitable, community alternatives. Finally, the survey revealed that the majority of the public believe children's prison sentences should not be disclosed forever.

It is clear that the public generally prefer to see a humane, community-based youth justice system that considers the individual needs of children and recognises that many of the reasons for their commission of offences is beyond their control.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

You can view the results of this survey in full via the polling table on the **More in Common website**.

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Co-op Foundation is campaigning to end the unnecessary imprisonment of children in partnership with Alliance for Youth Justice and Transform Justice. Thank you to our campaign partners for all their hard work and support.

