

Tackling the youth justice system's persistent challenges

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Phil Bowen, new Youth Justice Board (YJB) Interim Chair, says children with complex needs face a postcode lottery. He argues evidence-led decisions are key to closing the gap and fairness.

This year's Youth Justice Insights Report tells two stories. One is of continued progress with fewer first-time entrants, fewer children in custody and continued reductions in reoffending. The other is a persistent and significant challenge where a child's circumstances and where they live continues to shape the support they receive and the outcomes they face. These inconsistencies, not overall performance, is now the system's central challenge.

The government, in its recent command paper, A Modern Youth Justice System: Foundations Fit for the Future, set out the next phase of reform and it is not about building from scratch. It's about closing the gap between the best of the system and the rest - and making effective practice, informed by the Child First evidence base, available everywhere.

Inequalities that persist

The majority of children in the youth justice system are White, yet Black and Mixed heritage children remain disproportionately represented at key decision points, including stop and search and custody. These disparities are persistent and systemic. But the issue is not only what happens inside youth justice. It is about the pathways into the system too. School exclusion, unmet special educational needs, care experience, inconsistent access to support, and differing experiences of police contact are all persistent problems across the youth justice caseload. These challenges can impact White boys from deprived areas in the northeast just as much as Black boys in South London.

Data quality also remains an issue. Incomplete data recording continues to mask important differences between groups of children. If we are serious about fairness, the youth justice system must be equipped to understand these patterns in detail, and act on them early.

Geography should not decide outcomes

The Insights report also highlights stark geographic variation. Children's needs do not vary this dramatically. Local systems do. Inspectorates continue to find inconsistency at the "front door", where decisions about diversion or formal processing can depend more on local thresholds and partnership strength than on evidence.

Some areas provide rapid, holistic, multi-agency support. Others struggle with fragmented health input or delays in education provision. This is not a failure of commitment. It is a failure of consistency.

The command paper's commitment to multi-year funding and clear national expectations creates the conditions for improvement. But consistency will not happen by design alone. It requires active leadership, strong local partnerships and innovation.

Remand: a litmus test for reform

Few statistics are more striking than this: nearly two-thirds of children (62%) remanded to custody in 2024-25 did not go on to receive a custodial sentence. The disruption and harm caused by short periods on remand are well evidenced. But if custody is truly to be a last resort, courts must have credible, high-quality community alternatives available everywhere and not just in the best-performing areas. Reducing unnecessary remand is one of the clearest tests of whether reform is translating into practice.

Diversion works - when it's consistent

The evidence on diverting children away from contact with the justice system is strong. When children are diverted early and proportionately, reoffending falls and wellbeing improves. Yet access to diversion still varies. Informal police-led approaches are not always recorded, information sharing can be uneven and thresholds differ. The result is that diversion can feel like an opportunity in some areas and a lottery in others. If the Child First evidence base is to mean anything in practice, diversion must be the default response wherever it is safe and appropriate. Crucially, it must be applied consistently, transparently and offer swift access to support.

Improvement and innovation

Many local services deliver exceptional practice and their outcomes for children and victims reflect this. What the youth justice system lacks is universal consistency. This is where the YJB's future role becomes critical.

The next phase of reform demands an improvement and innovation function at the heart of the system, one that can turn data into actionable insight at local level. It must identify and spread effective practice quickly; support areas where performance and inconsistency are most acute; strengthen multi-agency working at the "front door"; and continue to build and translate the evidence base for what works.

As the Modern Youth Justice Service paper sets out, the YJB's renewed focus will be on continuous improvement and innovation, bridging evidence, policy and practice. We will continue to connect central reform ambitions with frontline realities, translating strategy into operational change. Our practice networks, Youth Justice Resource Hub and pathfinders already demonstrate what this can look like when practical support, peer learning and targeted challenge grounded in evidence. The opportunity now is to sharpen and scale that role.

From patchwork excellence to reliable quality

The youth justice system has achieved record lows in first-time entrants and custody. This progress matters. A system that works brilliantly in some places but inconsistently in others is not yet a fair system. Closing that gap requires clarity of purpose, reliable funding and a relentless focus on improvement. It means moving from a patchwork to reliable quality. The reform agenda is clear. The evidence is clear. The task now is delivery and that is precisely where a strong, improvement-focused YJB can make the difference.

Read the Youth Justice Annual Insights Report

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/tackling-the-youth-justice-systems-persistent-challenges>