

# Evidence review: Do interventions to prevent school exclusion reduce and/or prevent offending?

November 2024

---

## Summary

Interventions to prevent school exclusion have garnered increased attention among central government, policymakers, and funders in the UK as a potential offending and youth violence reduction strategy. This rapid evidence review discusses the existing evidence for their impact on reducing school exclusion, as well as on reducing and/or preventing offending. Our review of available literature is enhanced by insights we have gained through evaluating these types of intervention for the Youth Endowment Fund (YEF) and for Violence Reduction Units (VRUs). The review highlights that:

- **School exclusion has associated detrimental effects on progression and attainment within education**, such as poor academic performance, lack of motivation for academic goals, and dropping out of school altogether.
- Evidence shows **school exclusion correlates with involvement in the criminal justice system** and wider adverse life experiences. However, at this stage a school exclusion is not an established causal factor in progression to offending or involvement in violence.
- When researching this and designing interventions, it is important to **consider disproportionality in school exclusion**, related to factors such as ethnicity, household income, special education needs (SEN), and gender.
- **Interventions to prevent school exclusion** can take the form of either, a) **targeted** interventions for at-risk students, or b) **universal/whole-school** interventions that benefit all students.
- These interventions **have shown success in reducing school exclusions**, particularly targeted interventions that include: mentoring, counselling/a focus on mental health, support to enhance academic skills, and skills training for teachers.
- However, **their influence on reducing offending is less clear**. Further exploration and evidence is required to determine whether and how they help to reduce offending.
- Effective implementation and **robust, ongoing assessment** will be key to enhancing the potential of these interventions as an offending and/or violence prevention strategy.

## 1.1 Introduction

**Interventions to prevent school exclusion have garnered increased attention as a potential offending and youth violence reduction strategy among central government, policymakers, and funders in the UK.** In August 2024, the Department for Education published statutory guidance on ‘Working together to improve school attendance’ (DfE, 2024c). This guidance argued that regular attendance is an important protective factor for the most vulnerable students, with evidence that 81% of children that had been cautioned or sentenced for any offence had been persistently absent at some point, with this at 85% for serious violence offences.

Multiple organisations, such as the YEF and local VRUs have been funding research into preventing school exclusion and offending, and the effectiveness of interventions targeting this (e.g. YEF, 2020; London’s VRU, 2024). Cordis Bright has conducted evaluations of a number of these interventions, for both the YEF and VRUs.

This short report examines the strength of the evidence base for interventions to prevent school exclusion and whether they also reduce and prevent involvement in offending. It demonstrates that further research is needed to definitively establish school exclusion as a causal factor in progression into offending, and to understand whether and how interventions to prevent school exclusion impact on the likelihood of future involvement in offending. Risk factors and disproportionality in school exclusion are also highlighted, including how this influences the design of interventions.

**Note on terminology:** Research in this area uses a mix of terms and varies in the outcomes measured. This report uses the terms ‘interventions to prevent school exclusion’ and ‘offending’ unless otherwise specified in the literature.

## 1.2 Definitions of school exclusion

Schools use different methods to manage disruptive behaviour, including punitive actions like detention and loss of privileges, as well as non-punitive strategies like behavioural support and violence reduction interventions.

**School exclusion** is one of the more serious disciplinary measures implemented by school authorities, which includes both (Department for Education, no date):

- **Suspension** (fixed-term or fixed-period exclusion), which is when a child is removed temporarily from school. They can only be removed for up to 45 school days in one school year, even if they’ve changed schools.
- **Permanent exclusion** (expulsion), which is when a child is no longer allowed to attend a school. The local council must arrange full-time education from the sixth school day (e.g. at another school or a pupil referral unit).

**In 2022/23 there were 786,961 suspensions in England, and 9,376 permanent exclusions.** Figure 1 below shows the top three most common reasons for permanent exclusion:

Figure 1: Reasons for permanent exclusion of pupils in 2022/23 from state-funded schools in England<sup>1</sup>



Source: Department for Education (2024b)

### 1.3 Complex relationship between school exclusion and offending

#### 1.3.1 Correlation between school exclusion and offending

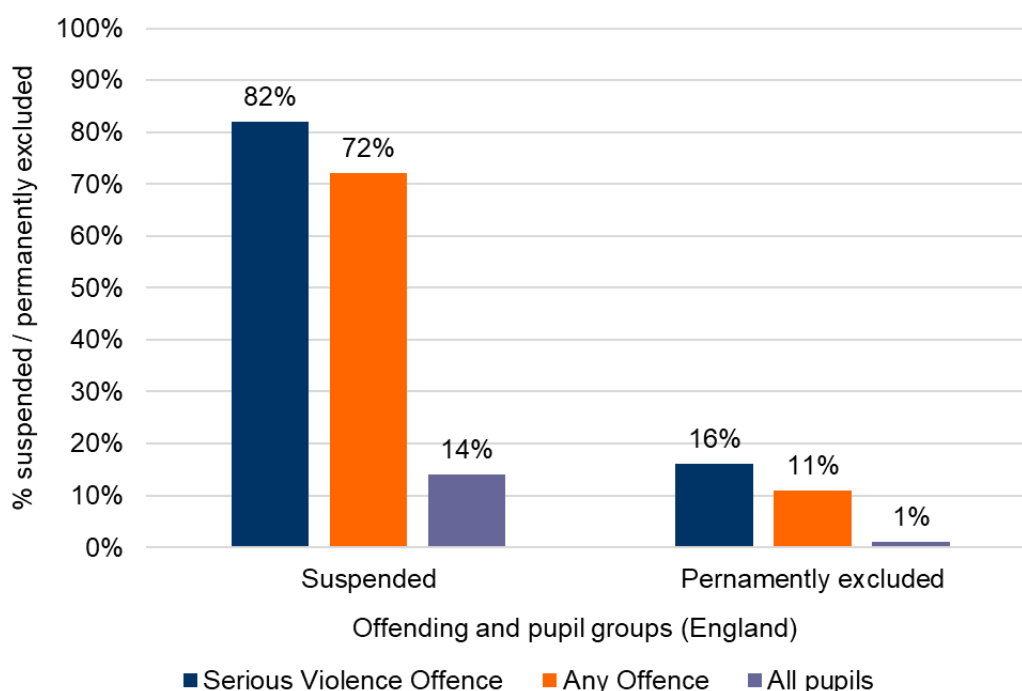
A relatively wide range of evidence suggests that school exclusion correlates with involvement in the criminal justice system and wider adverse life experiences. For example:

- The Government's Serious Violence Strategy (2018), the Timpson Review of School Exclusion (2019) and the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Knife Crime (2019) cite research and testimonial evidence indicating a **higher incidence of exclusion amongst those involved in offending, gangs and violence**.
- In research into risk factors for involvement in crime, the Youth Endowment Fund (2020) identified **high rates of school exclusion and overall poor school performance as community-level risk factors** for involvement in crime, and **low engagement with school as an individual-level risk factor**.
- Some studies indicate that **a relatively high proportion of those who are excluded from education later become involved in the criminal justice system**. For example, a large-scale longitudinal study in the United States found that those who had previously been excluded were 38% more likely to be arrested than those who had not been excluded (Rosenbaum, 2020). In the UK, a smaller-scale review by the Croydon Safeguarding Children Board (2019) found that 19 out of 60 vulnerable adolescent students who received a fixed-term exclusion in primary school later acquired a criminal conviction.

<sup>1</sup> Up to three reasons could be given, which were recorded without weighting or prioritisation. As multiple reasons could be recorded, the data refers to a total of 12,900 reasons given for the 9,400 permanent exclusions in 2022/23. 12,900 is used as the base for the percentage calculations in Figure 1.

- Equally, research by the Department for Education and Ministry of Justice (2022) found a **higher likelihood of both suspension and permanent exclusion** among children and young people in England who had been cautioned or convicted of an offence, compared to all other school pupils in the same academic years (Figure 2). This included that **82% of pupils cautioned or convicted for serious youth violence had been suspended at some point** (vs 14% of all pupils).

Figure 2: Suspension and permanent exclusion rates for pupils with cautions and convictions and all pupils in the KS4 cohorts of 2012/13 - 2014/15



Source: Department for Education and Ministry of Justice (2022)

### 1.3.2 Limited evidence on causation between school exclusion and offending

Despite the correlational evidence, however, there is **limited evidence on whether school exclusion is a causal factor** in involvement in offending or violence (Gaffney, Farrington & White, 2021a; Timpson, 2019).

Some studies do suggest that the association is causal (Valdebenito et al., 2019; Rosenbaum 2020; Hemphill et al. 2006). For example, Rosenbaum (2020) found that **school suspension predicted an increased likelihood of involvement with the criminal justice system**, and Hemphill et al. (2006) argued that **school suspensions significantly increased antisocial behaviour 12 months later after holding established risk and protective factors constant**.

**More research into this is needed** though, as argued by Cathro, Tagliaferri and Sutherland (2023), whose report for the Nuffield Foundation found evidence of a small but significant increased risk of custody for pupils excluded in Year 10.

Other studies highlight **potential explanatory causal mechanisms**, such as the lack of access to support and negative peer influences following exclusion from school (Just for Kids, 2020; House of Commons Education Committee, 2018).

## 1.4 Disproportionality in school exclusion

When understanding the relationship between school exclusion and offending it is also important to consider factors linked to exclusion. This includes evidence that **young people from racially minoritised backgrounds are disproportionately at risk of disengagement and exclusion from school** (Graham et al., 2019; Timpson, 2019; DfE, 2024a):

In 2021/22 the rate of suspension was 7% for all pupils in England (DfE, 2024a)<sup>2</sup>. Compared to this, the suspension rate was much higher for pupils of particular ethnicities:

- 26% for Gypsy/Roma pupils.
- 19% for Irish Travellers.
- 14% for Mixed White and Black Caribbean pupils.
- 12% for Black Caribbean pupils.

Studies emphasise that **the causes of this disproportionality are complex and often rooted in both historical and contemporary structural racism and institutionalised discrimination** (Wallace and Joseph-Salisbury, 2022; Demie 2019). For example, Wallace and Joseph-Salisbury (2022) concluded that institutional racism, lack of diversity in the school workforce, and lack of effective training persist, resulting in Black Caribbean boys being disproportionately targeted by disciplinary intervention. The authors highlighted the urgent need to transform the structure and culture of English schools to address this imbalance.

Similarly, the Timpson (2019) report found that the gap between permanent exclusion rates for Gypsy, Roma and Irish Traveller and white British children decreased when controlling for other factors like poverty, special educational needs and absence. They suggest that the **causes of higher exclusion rates are likely to be multifaceted and**

---

<sup>2</sup> Rates are calculated using the number of pupils in January each year and the number of suspensions in the whole academic year, i.e., a suspension rate of 8% is equivalent to 800 per 10,000 pupils.

**encompass wider issues than just ethnicity**, with more understanding and support needed for Gypsy and Roma and Irish Traveller pupils facing exclusion.

Reflecting this, other factors that have been linked to high rates of school exclusion should be considered in research and the design of interventions (DfE, 2024b), such **household income** (e.g. 2021/22 suspension rate of 22% for free school meal eligible pupils vs 5% for non-FSM eligible); **special educational needs** (e.g. suspension rate of 22% for pupils with an EHC plan vs 6.38 for pupils with no SEN); and **gender** (e.g. suspension rates of 12% for males vs 7% for females).

## 1.5 Overview of interventions to prevent school exclusion

### 1.5.1 Types of interventions

Interventions that aim to prevent school exclusion look to mitigate its detrimental effects on progression and attainment within education, such as poor academic performance, lack of motivation for academic goals, and dropping out of school altogether (Valdebenito et al., 2019).

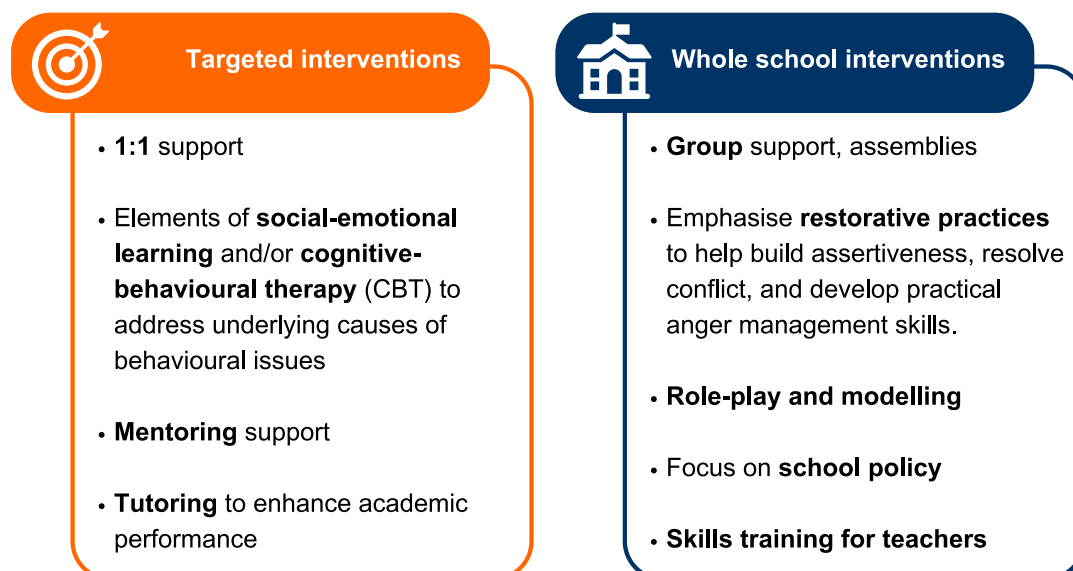
These interventions come in two forms: **targeted** and **universal/whole school** programmes (Gaffney, Farrington and White, 2021a):

- **Targeted interventions** focus on children and young people at risk of exclusion who are exhibiting problematic behaviours. They target the root causes of problem behaviours that may result in school exclusion.
- **Universal/whole school interventions** take a universal prevention approach by aiming to reach the entire population of students, without regard to individual risk factors. They seek to improve the school climate, modify staff behaviour, and refine rules and disciplinary procedures.

### 1.5.2 Components and activities of interventions

Interventions to prevent school exclusion may use a variety of activities and resources, depending on their objectives. Figure 3 below shows some common elements of each type of intervention (Gaffney, Farrington and White, 2021a):

Figure 3: Common elements of targeted and whole school (/universal) interventions



There can be **crossover in the types of support provided**, for example whole-school interventions may still include some 1:1 support. A **mix of professionals are involved** in programme delivery, depending on the organisation and programme structure, for example teachers, social workers, police, and people with lived experience.

### 1.5.3 Risk and protective factors targeted by interventions

Underlying the design of the interventions is evidence of the risk and protective factors linked with school disengagement and exclusion. Some interventions target one or more of these risk or protective factors, though not all interventions explicitly outline the factors they target or the theory on which their interventions draw. Individual level risk factors include **social-emotional factors** such as (Bowman-Perrott et al., 2013; Hawkins et al., 2000; Timpson, 2019):

- Poor communication skills.
- Difficulty managing emotions.
- Conflict with peers and/or teachers.
- Association with deviant peer-groups.

For example, using data from a UK population-based birth-cohort study, Paget et al. (2018) found that **social communication difficulties and behavioural difficulties were significantly associated with exclusion** for both eight- and sixteen-year-olds.

Conversely, protective factors included the related behaviours such as improved relationships with peers and adults, conflict resolution and communication skills, and self-awareness and self-regulation.

#### 1.5.4 Theory of impact on offending

Due to the correlations found between exclusion and offending or violence, it is **theorised that interventions aimed at preventing school exclusions could lead to a reduction in offending or violence.**

Figure 4 below outlines this relationship, showing the theorised causal mechanisms discussed in YEF's toolkit on interventions to prevent school exclusion (Gaffney, Farrington and White, 2021a).

*Figure 4: Theorised causal mechanisms linking interventions to prevent school exclusion and offending/violence reduction*



*Source: Diagram developed by Cordis Bright based on discussion in Gaffney, Farrington and White (2021a)*

However, most literature in this area discusses only the components of these interventions, rather than the theories in which they are grounded, the causal mechanisms on which they rely, or the evidence of their impact (Valdebenito et al., 2019). This is discussed more below.

## 1.6 Impact of interventions to prevent school exclusion

### 1.6.1 Evidence of positive impact on exclusion rates

Multiple studies have shown promising improvements in school exclusion rates. YEF's toolkit includes a focused review of interventions and their impact on exclusion rates (Gaffney, Farrington and White, 2021a), drawing primarily on two systematic reviews: Mielke and Farrington (2021), which reviewed evaluations of 14 different interventions, and Valdebenito et al. (2019), which reviewed 37 evaluations.

Overall, YEF's review found a **high efficacy of interventions in reducing school exclusion**, including an estimate by Valdebenito et al. (2019) of a 35% reduction in all suspensions and exclusions, falling to 19% after 12 months or more.

The quality of evidence for the impact on exclusion outcomes was rated four out of five, signifying a relatively high level of confidence.

Reflecting the risk and protective factors for school exclusion, Valdebenito et al. (2019) found that **the most effective interventions were those which included** (Figure 5):



Figure 5: Features of the most effective interventions (Valdebenito et al., 2019)



### 1.6.2 Limited evidence of impact on offending

In contrast to the positive impact on exclusion rates, **evidence is currently limited about the direct impact of these interventions on offending**, and existing evidence suggests the impact is relatively low (Gaffney, Farrington and White, 2021a).

For example, the systematic review by Mielke and Farrington (2021) estimated that interventions to prevent school exclusion led to a modest 2% reduction in arrests. The evidence quality for this impact was rated as moderate, with a three out of five evidence rating.

More evidence is therefore needed to demonstrate the theorised positive impact of these types of interventions on offending and related behaviour.

### 1.7 Disadvantages of relying on risk factors for exclusion to address reduced offending

A final consideration when working to reduce offending is that relying on risk factors for exclusion to identify children and young people at risk of offending also has some limitations (YEF, 2020; Timpson, 2019).

This is because **interventions targeting children and young people at risk of exclusion may not necessarily be reaching all those at risk of offending or serious violence** (because other risk factors may better predict or contribute more significantly to involvement in serious violence).

Additionally, **these interventions may inadvertently include children and young people who were never in fact at risk of future involvement** in offending or violent behaviour (because risk of exclusion does not necessarily equate to risk of involvement in offending or violence).

Particular consideration should be given to this when designing referral pathways and criteria for targeted interventions, and when drawing conclusions about the effectiveness of the interventions.

## 1.8 Conclusion

The theoretical argument supporting interventions to prevent school exclusion as an offending and violence prevention strategy is not yet won. While there is **some evidence that these interventions are effective in reducing school exclusion**, their **impact on reducing and/or preventing involvement in offending remains inconclusive** and warrants further exploration.

The continued investment by the YEF and VRUs into these types of intervention provides an excellent opportunity to further develop this evidence base.

**Those looking to develop future interventions should ensure they articulate the theory underpinning their approach**, and how young people would be identified for the intervention. This theory could then be tested and refined during implementation, with the support of robust evaluation.

Various evaluation designs could support commissioners and providers to evaluate these interventions. To set themselves up well for internal or external evaluation, **commissioners and providers should invest time early on in setting up robust data collection processes** that would enable them to understand:

- The characteristics, needs and experiences of young people receiving the intervention.
- The nature and amount of the intervention they receive.
- The impact of the intervention for the young people involved, with a particular focus on whether it makes them less likely to offend, or become / remain involved in violence.

Setting up interventions in this way would offer the best chance of contributing to the future evidence base for interventions to prevent exclusion, and therefore of supporting offending and violence reduction initiatives, and improved outcomes for children and young people and communities experiencing violence.

## 1.9 Bibliography

- All-Party Parliamentary Group on Knife Crime. 2019. Back to School? Breaking the link between school exclusions and knife crime. Available at: <http://www.preventknifecrime.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/APPG-on-Knife-Crime-Back-to-School-exclusions-report-FINAL.pdf> [Accessed 16 September 2024].
- Bowman-Perrott, L., Benz, M.R., Hsu, H.Y., Kwok, O.M., Eisterhold, L.A. and Zhang, D. 2013. Patterns and predictors of disciplinary exclusion over time: An analysis of the SEELS national data set. *Journal of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders*, 21(2), pp. 83-96.
- Cathro, Tagliaferri and Sutherland. 2023. School exclusions and youth custody. Available at: <https://www.bi.team/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Nuffield-Foundation-Exclusions-and-Youth-Custody-Report-vFinal-2023-01-17.pdf> [Accessed 16 September 2024].

- Demie, F. 2021. The experience of Black Caribbean pupils in school exclusion in England. *Educational Review*, 73(1), pp. 55-70. Available at: <https://durham-repository.worktribe.com/preview/1305651/27733.pdf> [Accessed 16 September 2024].
- Department for Education and Ministry of Justice. 2022. Education, children's social care and offending: Descriptive Statistics. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/education-childrens-social-care-and-offending> [Accessed 16 September 2024].
- Department for Education. 2024a. Suspensions. Ethnicity facts and figures. Available at: <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/education-skills-and-training/absence-and-exclusions/pupil-exclusions/latest/> [Accessed 16 September 2024].
- Department for Education. 2024b. Suspensions and permanent exclusions in England. Academic year 2022/23. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/suspensions-and-permanent-exclusions-in-england> [Accessed 16 September 2024].
- Department for Education. 2024c. Working together to improve school attendance. Statutory guidance for maintained schools, academies, independent schools and local authorities. Available at: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/66bf300da44f1c4c23e5bd1b/Working\\_together\\_to\\_improve\\_school\\_attendance\\_-\\_August\\_2024.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/66bf300da44f1c4c23e5bd1b/Working_together_to_improve_school_attendance_-_August_2024.pdf) [Accessed 16 September 2024].
- Department for Education. No date. Behaviour in schools: sanctions and exclusions. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/school-behaviour-exclusions/exclusions> [Accessed 16 September 2024]
- Gaffney, H., Farrington, D. & White, H. 2021a. Interventions to prevent school exclusion: Toolkit technical report. Youth Endowment Fund. Available at: <https://youthendowmentfund.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/School-exclusions-technical-report-june.pdf> [Accessed 16 September 2024].
- Gaffney, H., Farrington, D. and White, H. 2021b. Pre-court Diversion: Toolkit technical report. Youth Endowment Fund. Available at: <https://youthendowmentfund.org.uk/toolkit/pre-court-diversion/> [Accessed 16 September 2024].
- Gaffney, H., Jolliffe, D. and White, H. 2021c. Emergency department violence interventions. Toolkit technical report. Youth Endowment Fund. Available at: <https://youthendowmentfund.org.uk/toolkit/ae-navigators/> [Accessed 16 September 2024].
- Graham, B., White, C., Edwards, A., Potter, S., and Street, C. 2019. School exclusion: a literature review on the continued disproportionate exclusion of certain children. Available at: <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachme>

[nt\\_data/file/800028/Timpson\\_review\\_of\\_school\\_exclusion\\_literature\\_review.pdf](#)  
[Accessed 16 September 2024]

- Hawkins, J.D., Herrenkohl, T.I., Farrington, D.P., Brewer, D., Catalano, R.F., Harachi, T.W. and Cothorn, L. (2000) Predictors of Youth Violence. *Juvenile Justice Bulletin*. Available at: <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED440196.pdf> [Accessed 16 September 2024]
- Hemphill, S.A., Toumbourou, J.W., Herrenkohl, T.I., McMorris, B.J. and Catalano, R.F. 2006. The effect of school suspensions and arrests on subsequent adolescent antisocial behavior in Australia and the United States. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 39(5), pp. 736-744. Available at: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/17046511/> [Accessed 16 September 2024].
- HM Government. 2018. Serious Violence Strategy. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/serious-violence-strategy> [Accessed 16 September 2024].
- House of Commons Education Committee. 2018. Forgotten children: alternative provision and the scandal of ever increasing exclusions. Fifth Report of Session 2017–19. Available at: <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmeduc/342/342.pdf> [Accessed 16 September 2024].
- Just for Kids. 2020. Excluded, exploited, forgotten: Childhood criminal exploitation and school exclusions. Available at: <https://crae.org.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/JfKL-school-exclusion-and-CCE.pdf> [Accessed 16 September 2024].
- London's Violence Reduction Unit. Inclusion, belonging and safety in London Schools. Research key information. Available at: <https://www.london.gov.uk/programmes-strategies/communities-and-social-justice/londons-violence-reduction-unit-vru/our-research/vru-evidence-hub/inclusion-belonging-and-safety-london-schools> [Accessed 16 September 2024].
- Mielke, M., & Farrington, D.P. 2021. School-based interventions to reduce suspension and arrest: A meta-analysis. *Aggression and Violent Behaviour*, 56. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2020.101518> [Accessed 16 September 2024].
- Rosenbaum, J. 2020. Educational and criminal justice outcomes 12 years after school suspension. *Youth & Society*, 52(4), 515-547. Available at: doi: [10.1177/0044118X17752208](https://doi.org/10.1177/0044118X17752208) [Accessed 16 September 2024].
- Stevens, A, Partridge, B., Coleman, C., Stiell, B., Demack, S. & Wilcox, A. 2023. Reach Programme Feasibility study report. Available at: <https://youthendowmentfund.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Reach.-YEF-Feasibility-Study-Report.-March-2023.-1.pdf> [Accessed 16 September 2024].

- Timpson, E. 2019. Timpson Review of School Exclusion. Available at: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/807862/Timpson\\_review.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/807862/Timpson_review.pdf) [Accessed 16 September 2024].
- Valdebenito, S., Eisner, M., Farrington, D.P., Ttofi, M. M., & Sutherland, A. 2019. What can we do to reduce disciplinary school exclusion? A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Journal of Experimental Criminology*, 15(3), 253-287. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11292-018-09351-0> [Accessed 16 September 2024].
- Wallace, D. and Joseph-Salisbury, R (2022) How, still, is the Black Caribbean child made educationally subnormal in the English school system?. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 45(8), pp. 1426-1452. Available at: [https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Remi-Joseph-Salisbury/publication/355074131\\_How\\_still\\_is\\_the\\_Black\\_Caribbean\\_child\\_made\\_educationally\\_subnormal\\_in\\_the\\_English\\_school\\_system/links/63f6004f0cf1030a56437dfd/How-still-is-the-Black-Caribbean-child-made-educationally-subnormal-in-the-English-school-system.pdf](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Remi-Joseph-Salisbury/publication/355074131_How_still_is_the_Black_Caribbean_child_made_educationally_subnormal_in_the_English_school_system/links/63f6004f0cf1030a56437dfd/How-still-is-the-Black-Caribbean-child-made-educationally-subnormal-in-the-English-school-system.pdf) [Accessed 16 September 2024].
- Youth Endowment Fund. 2020. What works. Preventing children and young people from becoming involved in violence. Available at: [https://youthendowmentfund.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/YEF\\_What\\_Works\\_Report\\_FINAL.pdf](https://youthendowmentfund.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/YEF_What_Works_Report_FINAL.pdf) [Accessed 16 September 2024].