

Children in care and the risk of violence

Findings from a review of the care system July 2026

Introduction



Why is this review important?

Research shows that too many children in care are involved with the youth justice system. There are lots of reasons for this.

The care system can make a big difference by offering stability and safety. But when support isn't right, children's risks can sometimes increase instead.

What does this research cover?

This research looked at children aged 11-18 who have lived in residential care or foster care, and their risk of being involved in violence.

We asked professionals who work with these children about what increases their risk of violence and how they are trying to make things better.

We also spoke to children and young people about their experiences.



Who are we?

The Youth Endowment Fund (YEF) is a charity working to stop children and young people from getting involved in violence.

The YEF funded Cordis Bright, a research organisation that works to improve public services, to do this research.



What leads to children in care getting involved in violence?

We found **two main ways** children in care may become involved in violence:

Challenges within care settings

- Arguments or incidents in homes sometimes lead to police being called.
- Behaviour linked to trauma or unmet needs can result in unfair punishment.
- Early incidents can get worse if not handled in a supportive way.

Harm or exploitation outside the home – the most common pathway

- Some children in care are at risk of exploitation because of past trauma.
- This can affect trust and lead them to unsafe relationships.
- Some may already be in risky situations before entering care.

The care system needs to be aware of the key moments where they can spot these risks and stop them getting worse.

Factors in the care system that put children at risk

We found 6 main things in the care system that make children more vulnerable to being drawn into violence...

1. Care system pressures

Not having enough good quality homes and foster carers make it harder to keep children safe.

Staff want to give support that meets children's needs.

But this is made difficult by some types of support and resources not being available.



2. Type of home

Some types of care can be very positive. But some, like some residential homes or homes that aren't registered by Ofsted, don't always offer enough support.



3. Frequent moves

Moving home often is common and can increase risk.

This often happens at short notice, without enough communication between the different homes or with the child.



4. Not having trusted, steady relationships with adults

Strong, steady relationships with carers and staff help keep children safe. But staff shortages and high turnover make this harder.

"I had a new social worker almost once a month. Some stayed even less time" – Ben, 20



5. Living far from home

Children who are moved outside their home areas can be more isolated and have less support. This makes them more at risk of harm.



6. Transition out of care

Moving out of the care system is an important and often difficult moment. Not having enough support to get through this time makes risks higher.



How services respond to children's needs and identity can affect their risk of involvement in violence. Four areas are seen as most important...

Responses to children's needs and identity

1. Race and ethnicity

Children in care from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds may face discrimination and inequalities that increase their risk.

Some may be treated as if they're older than they are (called **adultification bias**). This increases the chance of being criminalised.

"I was in year 11 when I first went into care. There was trouble with my social worker getting me a placement at that age." – Hassan, 17

3. Age

Risks can be higher when children come into care as teenagers.

There are fewer good homes for teenagers and staff or carers can respond to their behaviour more harshly. This means they may have to move home more often.

Unfair criminalisation



Children in care are more likely to be unfairly criminalised.

This means behaviour that should be met with support can instead lead to the police or justice system getting involved.

2. Gender

It can sometimes be harder to find placements for boys, especially when trauma or difficult experiences lead to behaviours that carers may find challenging.

But concern is growing about girls too, as their risk of being involved in violence is rising. Girls also face different risks that are sometimes missed, like domestic or sexual abuse.

4. Additional needs

Children can be at higher risk if they have needs that aren't met. For example, mental health, special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) or neurodivergence.

Staff and carers can focus too much on behaviour, and not understand children's needs.

"Every time I get angry or argue with staff they call the police." – Jack, 17





Support that children in care need, to help them thrive



When children are supported to thrive in care, they are less likely to become involved in violence.

They need...

Safe and supportive places to live

This means...

- Enough safe and local homes.
- Better foster care, especially for children who need more support. This includes long-term placements, and more Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic carers.
- Support to stop placements breaking down.

Positive local example

Some areas are partnering with charities to open more local children's homes, which focus on supporting children really well without needing to make a profit.



Their voices to be heard

This means children should be involved in decisions about their care. They should be told early about any changes.

The right support, at the right time

This means:

- Early support with mental health, education, and neurodivergence.
- Building trusted relationships with professionals.
- Meeting cultural needs.

Positive local example

Some areas have teams of wellbeing, health and substance misuse workers who support children in their accommodation. They meet children informally, take time to build trust and help with things like anxiety, low mood and substance use. They can also help children access other services when needed.

Support when leaving care

Care leavers need:

- Consistent, strong relationships beyond their care workers.
- Support to keep them safe from exploitation.
- Help to find housing and jobs.



How the care system can keep children in care safe from violence

For children in care who are at risk or already involved in violence, 3 connected things are needed to keep them safe...



Carers and staff who notice risk

Carers and staff need the right training and support to spot risks and respond in the right way.

This includes knowing when and how to have open, supportive conversations with children about their safety.



Early, targeted help

Funding needs to go into support for children at risk, before these risks increase. This support could include mentoring and other positive activities.

Support works best where adults build consistent, long-term relationships with clear boundaries. They must be committed and reliable, and the support should reflect children's backgrounds and cultures.



Joint support from different services

Children in care need support from different services, like health, education, youth services, and the police.

These services need to work closely together by sharing information, agreeing steps to keep children safe and putting plans into action.



Positive local example

Local areas are trying different ways to involve children in this kind of support, including:

- Going out to reach children in their communities, on the street, in schools or in A&E.
- Flexible relationship-based support without time limits.
- Activities based on children's interests, like sport and music.
- Working with trusted adults who aren't care workers.
- Designing support together.
- Not giving up if children don't want to get involved at first.



Avoiding unfair criminalisation

Lastly, we found that the system needs to reduce unfair criminalisation through...

Clear local guidance

Local services need clear guidance about when it's right to involve the police.

Guidance works best when all services have to follow it and use it in their day-to-day work.



Positive local example

Some areas have introduced dedicated roles to champion the use of local guidance to reduce criminalisation.

Alternatives to prosecution

Options that stop children going to court and give them the chance to talk things through and make things right can help reduce criminalisation.

This helps children address what happened and move forward without entering the justice system.

Support for care staff

When carers and staff are well trained and supported, they can understand children's behaviour and feel confident handling it without calling the police.

Training and support for all staff, including agency staff, can reduce police involvement.



Child-centred policing

Police officers need training to understand the experiences of children in care, and how trauma affects behaviour.

Having the right information about a child, including whether they are in care, can also help police to make better decisions.

Thank you!

We wanted to say a big thank you to everyone who helped with this project, in particular the six children and young people we interviewed.



The full report is available to read on [the YEF website](#)