

Children's involvement in the 2024 riots

January 2025

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Foreword from Dame Rachel de Souza



Last July, the country was rocked by the murders of three little girls in Southport. Bebe King, Alice da Silva Aguiar and Elsie Dot Stancombe who were killed while taking part in a dance class during their summer holiday; a scene of simple childhood innocence destroyed by terrifying violence.

The initial response from the community to their deaths brought out some of the best of humanity, as people shared their collective grief and shock. But within a day, violent unrest started to unfold across the country in an apparent response to claims made about the girls' attacker.

The incident is horrifying – it raises some serious issues about a darker side of society and about how society treats and addresses children. It poses questions about the attacker himself, and how he was able to hide in plain sight; how he was overlooked in spite of many warnings and the wider response in the aftermath of the incident.

Watching the riots play out was distressing for everyone – but for many, the involvement of children brought sorrow and a deep concern about the state of our society. As Children's Commissioner, I resolved to use my position and my statutory powers to understand what was really happening and the reasons behind it, in children's own words.

My role, created 20 years ago, was born out of the need to listen to children who are too often excluded and overlooked in a system designed for adults. It is my job to listen to children without prejudice and advocate for them – no matter the circumstances.

First and foremost, this means listening to young victims, and to children enduring complex or difficult challenges in their lives. But in cases like these, it is also my responsibility to go beyond public speculation and hear from the children accused of perpetrating violence against others.

When children as young as 11 are caught up in criminality, it is crucial we listen and implement necessary changes that are informed by their voices and experiences. My team and I worked to ensure that every child charged in connection to the riots, whether in custody, children's homes, youth clubs or online, had the opportunity to share their story.

What emerged from the conversations I had with the young people themselves was striking, and often unsettling. Many children described making a split-second decision, their involvement being largely spontaneous and unconsidered, driven by curiosity or the thrill of the moment to see what was going on in their community. Others described a deep distrust of the police and the opportunity to retaliate against a previous interaction.

What these conversations do not support is the prevailing narrative that emerged from the riots which was subsequently accepted: that online misinformation, racism or other right-wing influences were to blame for why young people were enticed to join in the aggression. While there is no doubt these issues all played a role, they did not drive the children's actions – they did not come up as the only significant factors in any of the conversations with the children who were charged.

Since the riots, headlines and commentators have confidently asserted the reasons why children got involved in the riots, rushing to make sweeping statements and assign blame. Too often, adults assume an understanding of children's actions, creating a narrative *about* children but never *with* them. Behind these headlines, children are left unheard and overlooked.

Children are naturally impulsive. They take risks, act before thinking, and cannot yet fully consider the consequences of their actions and the impact on others. That is one reason why we have built protections into our public services that take account of children's developmental stages: a compulsory school age, a legal voting age, a threshold for criminal responsibility.

Let me state clearly: this report, and indeed my role of listening to these children, does not excuse criminality. Enormous harm was caused by these children's actions – with physical violence towards victims, to properties and to livelihoods. Most of the children I spoke to acknowledged the need for accountability and consequences for their actions – but not all. A couple were unrepentant, and defiant. They told me they would do it again but try harder not to get caught.

As police continue to review thousands of hours of footage, more children will be charged. It's important that there are appropriate consequences to face for their actions – but children's developing brains are sponges for rehabilitation and positive change. This should be reflected in the ethos of our youth justice system and in our response to these events. Instead, evidence collected during this report indicates that the opposite was true: for many children involved in these riots, their backgrounds, extent of involvement and potential for reform seem to have been largely overlooked. The charges and sentences passed down to these children have been, in comparison to other young offenders facing similar circumstances, unusually severe and swift.

Many of the children we spoke to were finally engaging in education or employment after years of difficulties with attendance. The short custodial sentences some received profoundly disrupted their lives at a crucial moment, rather than supporting them to make better decisions. It calls into question the greater purpose of our youth justice system, which should offer not just punishment but also rehabilitation.

This report does not offer any simple answers. It paints a much more challenging picture than the one portrayed in media headlines. However, it is one everyone in a position of influence must grapple with if we are to create a more positive experience of childhood than the one this report sets out.

I will never forget visiting Spellow Library in Liverpool, a cherished community space reduced to ashes. The pain and loss felt by children and families who rely on services like this was undeniable. Yet so was their resilience. A few months later, I returned to see the library restored through the hard work and determination of the community.

Just as Spellow Library was rebuilt, we too must rebuild. As a nation, we must learn from these events, to prevent them from happening again. Healing takes time, but it begins with listening and learning from one another.

Every child deserves the chance to grow up in safety, with opportunities for an enriching education, skills that serve them into adulthood and surrounded by adults that care and advocate for them. This must include those who have committed a crime – who must be dealt with under our established child-centred principles, with every interaction with the justice system an opportunity for rehabilitation and improvement.

I hope this report serves as a foundation for constructive dialogue and, most importantly, for change. This would mean we have listened, learned, and acted for the benefit of all children – as Commissioner, that is my primary ambition.

Acknowledgements

We recognise the victims of the riots, including those from Islamic and minority ethnic communities.

This report was made possible due to the honesty of the children who shared their experiences. Their voices are at the heart of this work, and we are grateful for their trust and willingness to participate.

We express our sincere gratitude to the Association of YOT Managers (AYM) for facilitating outreach to Youth Justice Service (YJS) Teams, whose efforts in sharing insights and identifying children willing to participate was essential. We also deeply appreciate the parents and legal guardians, YJS staff, social care home managers, and the Governor of a HM Young Offenders Institution (YOI) who supported children to share their experience and helped to coordinate the interviews.

We hope this work honours those affected by the riots and serves as a catalyst for meaningful change.

Content warning

This report contains coarse language and descriptions of the events that occurred in the 2024 riots. This may be sensitive for readers who experienced these events and may not be appropriate for younger audiences.

Executive summary

"I think there's a difference between a protest and a riot. A protest can be peaceful... whereas a riot is trying to get your message out, but not in the right way, like trying to scare people into listening to your message." – Child, charged in the 2024 riots.

The Children's Commissioner's ambition is clear: every child must be prevented from becoming involved in violence and criminality and able to fulfil their full potential. Yet the events that unfolded between 30 July and 7 August 2024 underscored how much work is still needed to achieve this.

The murders of Bebe King, Elsie Dot Stancombe and Alice da Silva Aguiar in Southport on 29 July 2024, and the injury of 10 others, sparked mass public grief and anger. Demonstrations occurred across 26 areas of England, with some becoming violent, partly fuelled by false claims spread online that the perpetrator was a Muslim asylum seeker, intensifying existing anti-immigrant sentiments.¹

While the scale and nature of each instance of unrest varied, this report refers to them as "riots" to reflect the language used by the children involved, who overwhelmingly chose to describe their experience using that term.

This report presents the perspective of children charged in connection to the riots, as told to the Children's Commissioner and her team directly and does not draw on the full range of possible evidence from victims, police, parents, and others. It contains findings from:

- Qualitative interviews between November and December 2024 with 14 children who had been charged in connection to the unrest. This compares to the total of 73 children with a finalised outcome by 31 October, meaning the office spoke to around 20%. The ages and gender of these children have not been included in reporting to maintain anonymity.
- Previously unpublished quantitative data provided to the Children's Commissioner's office (CCo) by the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) and National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC);

- Notes from meetings between the CCo and Youth Justice Service (YJS) staff members; and
- A desktop review of articles on police and media websites of children charged in connection to the riots.

Key findings

1. **147 children were arrested by 4 September 2024, 84 were charged, and 73 had finalised outcomes**, as of 31 October 2024, according to information provided to the office by the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) and National Police Chiefs Council (NPCC). More arrests and charges are expected as police continue to review footage.
2. **Children's involvement was largely spontaneous and unconsidered.** Many children had no prior experience with the criminal justice system, and all made it clear that they did not get involved due to far right, anti-immigration or racist views. The reasons why the incident they attended was organised mostly did not matter for them. Instead, they were curious to see what was happening, thought it looked fun, felt animosity towards the police, or wanted free goods.
3. **Many children spoke strongly about their hatred of the police, describing previous bad experiences and community mistrust.** These children viewed the riots as an opportunity to retaliate against the police.
4. **The need for a definitive response to public disorder led to the rapid charging and sentencing of many children.** With some missing out on the rehabilitation that we know works best to ensure all children can grow up to become independent, productive adults
5. **Children's experience with the youth justice system and their outcomes depended on where they lived.** Children with similar circumstances and levels of involvement were treated differently and Heads of Youth Justice Service (YJS) areas shared that whether a child-first approach was adopted varied depending on the local police force and CPS. In most areas, the expertise of YJS was not drawn upon, and only a few YJS teams said that the police and the CPS worked with them to ensure a child-first approach.

6. **To improve the lives of children in England, these children wanted the government to address poverty and provide more opportunities.** This included more youth activities and employment. They explained that without addressing these issues, children are vulnerable to exploitation and crime.

Conclusion

The findings highlight the importance of upholding the child-first principles of the youth justice system, particularly in times of national crisis. Children are different to adults, and a child must be seen as such first and foremost, rather than as an offender, to keep communities safe by preventing and reducing offending behaviour.

Rehabilitation and addressing the underlying causes of children's involvement must be the primary objective of youth justice, with custodial sentences always the last resort. The widespread expression of hostility toward the police among these children also highlights an urgent need for child-centred policing that builds trust and fosters positive relationships.

Children's involvement in the 2024 riots

This infographic shares key findings from the Children's Commissioner's research into young people's involvement in the 2024 riots. Listening to children, without judgement, helps to understand their experience and create positive change to stop it from happening again for other children.

Key findings

Who were these children?



97% boys
3% girls

92% aged 14 – 17
8% aged 10 – 13

147 children arrested by 4 Sept 2024

73 children had finalised outcomes by 31 Oct 2024

More children may be arrested as police look at video footage

- Most children were in school, training or work
- Many had been diagnosed with ADHD
- Most were close to their family, friends and community
- Many had never been in trouble with the law before

Why did children get involved?

- Children got involved without much thought or planning
- Most said they were curious, thought it looked fun or didn't like the police
- None talked about seeing extreme social media content

What were children's experiences at the riots?

- Violence got out of control quickly and some children couldn't leave
- Some adults encouraged children to throw things at the police and children felt they didn't really think about what they were doing

What were children's experiences with the youth justice system?

- Children's experience with the youth justice system varied depending on where they lived.
- Most children received unusually severe charges and sentences.

Young people's voices

What would they tell the government?

To help children, the government should end poverty and create more fun activities and job opportunities

What would they tell other children?

- Think before getting involved
- Don't be tempted to see what's happening
- Learn from mistakes and focus on making better choices in the future

"Once you're there, you don't really think and if everyone else is doing it, it must be alright to do it too. If I was to go back now, I wouldn't do it."

– Child, charged in the 2024 riots.

Resources for young people


BITESIZE

- [Risk taking behaviour](#)
- [Peer pressure and choices](#)
- [Other Side of the Story](#) navigating fake news and misinformation

childline

- [Worrying about the riots](#)
Call: 0800 1111

The Children's Commissioner's ambition is clear: every child must be prevented from becoming involved in violence and criminality and able to fulfil their potential.

Who were the children involved?

As of 4 September 2024, 147 children had been arrested for participation in the riots. On 31 October 2024, 84 had been charged and 73 had a finalised outcome. Of the 73 children with a finalised outcome:

- 93% were boys, 7% were girls
- 92% were 14 to 17 years old, the remaining 8% were aged 10 to 13
- 78% were charged in northern England
- 81% were white, 8% were Asian, 1% were of mixed ethnicity, 1% were 'other', and 8% were not recorded or unknown.¹

Education, training and employment

"I have an ambition to join the army. I go to military college four days a week, Monday to Thursday. I've got a lot of friends and good relationships, we're out on the ground doing hands-on things." – Child, charged in the 2024 riots.

The children who spoke to the office had varying levels of educational engagement. Despite many children sharing that they had previously struggled with school and education, most said they had been engaging in college and/or working in a trade, such as roofing, barbering or plastering. These children shared that they had been enjoying this much more than mainstream education as it was hands-on and practical. A few children also shared their ambitions to join the army and were actively pursuing this career through their education choices.

¹ However, CPS notes that the ethnicity data they gave the Children's Commissioner's office is recorded by the police and is subject to varying levels of error and omission at local levels. The office was able to confirm the limitations of this data given that, although no children were recorded as black, one of the children interviewed by the office identified their ethnicity as black. Percentages do not add to 100 due to rounding

However, a few children who spoke to the office had missed education for a number of years, including one child who had been out of education for three years after their father passed away, and another who left school in Year 5 after struggling with mainstream education. Another child told us they had missed education for a year after being asked to leave for breaking their school's e-cigarette policy and not being offered an appropriate alternative placement by the local authority. These children who had spent time out of education had all been diagnosed with ADHD.

Special Educational Needs or Disabilities

Many children the office spoke to had been diagnosed with ADHD, the symptoms of which include impulsivity, difficulty in resisting temptation, and risk-taking behaviours.² This may or may not have been typical - the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) was not able to easily or reliably provide data on the overall Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) status of children with a final outcome. Additionally, a few other children also believed they had undiagnosed dyslexia and ADHD and shared their struggles with attending mainstream education prior to college or work.

One child with ADHD had been permanently excluded from an Alternative Provision (AP) college shortly before their interview with the office. Their YJS worker explained that the AP catered to a wide range of needs, including children with severe disabilities. Although the child initially enjoyed attending, over time they felt out of place and they did not believe the environment reflected their level of ability. After feeling unheard, the young person began to deliberately provoke an exclusion to avoid needing to attend.

Connections with family, friends and community

Most children had strong links with their family, friends and community, with many saying they enjoyed exercising and hanging out with friends in the city centre or at each other's houses, and spoke about the importance of their family, particularly their mums. They also all had a diverse range of interests including football, gym, playing videogames, fishing, boxing, cycling, fashion, and swimming.

However, many children also shared that they had a social worker at some point in their lives, with some describing a difficult home life growing up. This may or may not have been typical - the CPS was not able to easily or reliably provide data on the social care status of children with a final outcome.

One child said they had been failed by children's social services many times and experienced some "awful" social workers. They believed social workers should recognise when something is going to go wrong before it does and credited teachers for recognising this since they had daily contact and knew them the best. They shared that their school provided substantial support and were surprised that they had never been excluded. They also highlighted the positive experience of Army Cadets in giving support and the ability to realise their ambition to join the army. When asked about their future plans, they told the office they wanted to get married one day and have the 'happily ever after', determined to provide children a better childhood than their own.

Another child spoke about overworked social workers, explaining that they often struggled to contact their social worker for support as they were just one of 20 children in their caseload who would similarly be contacting them. This child had been voluntarily placed in care by their parent due to difficulties the parent found with managing their behaviour. Following a number of poor placements, they shared they were finally in a supportive children's home with a manager who had created a realistic and actionable plan to support them to return home to their family.

Previous offending background

Many children shared that they had never been in trouble with the law before the riots. This was also noted by YJS Managers, who told us that the majority of children charged in the riots had no prior criminal history, which was unusual in their experience. While some children had been arrested previously and had worked with YJS, only one child we spoke to had been previously sentenced to a youth secure setting.

What were children's experiences?

Reasons for involvement

"The media said 'far right thugs' – that was a bit extreme. Half the young men there don't even know what far right means. We're in such a deprived area... they don't even know what politics means. They were just there to have fun."
– Child, charged in the 2024 riots.

Children's involvement was largely spontaneous and unconsidered. Many children said they did not know about the riots beforehand. These children described stumbling across the riots on their way walking home, on a bike ride with friends, or hearing the noise from their house and making an impulsive decision to be involved as they thought it looked 'fun'. One child whose house was only a couple of streets away from the riots described it looking like a party with a lot of people drinking.

For another child, their YJS case manager said: *"[they are] someone people make speeches at school about. Mum was terrified – [child] doesn't get into trouble. This is very out of character for [them]"*. When asked why they got involved that day the young person said:

"I don't know, just the fact that there's loads of people there and everyone's on a team. Once you're there, you don't really think and if everyone else is doing it, it must be alright to do it too. If I was to go back now, I wouldn't do it." – Child, charged in the 2024 riots.

They also spoke about adults on the day encouraging them and other children to throw objects at the police.

Many other children described seeing a social media post that said *"peaceful protest"* written in big letters, the location of their hometown, and the planned date. One child said they had also seen the same post printed on posters across their town. Most children expressed curiosity to see what was happening in their hometown, and when asked why people were protesting, many said the post did not include further background information, or if it did, they did not read it. One child said *"I didn't really*

know what it was about. I just went to be nosey because it seemed like a big thing happening in my local area.”

None of the children described posts that might be considered extremist content. However, one child raised a concern about social media safety:

“People are always twisting things on social media... A prime example is the riots. It was described as a peaceful protest, but it turned out not to be.” – Child, charged in the 2024 riots.

They explained that social media can be used for the wrong reasons:

“Billions of people use social media, that’s just the risk of it and you can’t control the opinions people express or how they feel on things like racist views. There’s always going to be your stereotypical white English man who is only for white people. If someone is racist, no one can change how they feel... It might not be right but that’s the way of life.” – Child, charged in the 2024 riots.

When asked about the social media they consumed, children spoke about using it to keep up with friends and watching posts relating to their interests such as fishing or football.

Some children knew about the riots before becoming involved; one child said that they saw their friends with new possessions after stealing from shops at one of the riots and said that they wanted free things too. For another child, who is diagnosed with ADHD and living in a children’s home, a member of staff shared that an older child had encouraged the child to attend. They described the child as a thrill-seeker who would have been excited by the danger of going to the riots.

Many other children described getting involved due to their animosity towards the police. This was based on personal bad experiences or community distrust. For these children, it did not matter what the initial reason for the riots was; for them, it was about retaliating against the police, with one child stating:

“I was in the city centre with my friends and saw a social media post – there were going to be loads of police. We went down to see what it was. There’s a tradition in [my city] of people vs police. We had an opportunity.” – Child, charged in the 2024 riots.

Another child described the police in their area as corrupt and ineffective: *“I’ve never felt safe in this area. People are getting stabbed every day and the police are doing nothing about it... there’s people who have houses and grow weed and that. I’ve seen them pay officers to look the other way so they’re not getting caught.”* They described their decision-making to get involved in the riots in the following way:

“After all the stuff [my local] police force has done, I thought fuck it... there were Muslims with us [on the day], they were English and different nation people with us too who were English.” – Child, charged in the 2024 riots.

Many children the office spoke to described police as being rude, physically aggressive and condescending in their personal interactions with them. One child said the police will *“give you a couple of backhands when they arrest you.”* Another child described being arrested at a young age with such severe force that their friends filmed and posted it online, which had gained thousands of views.

When discussing their political views, one child noted that *“immigration is a big issue in [my town]”* and described perceptions of higher crime rates associated with recent migrants and asylum seekers. However, none of the children the office spoke to claimed that they were motivated by anti-immigration, racist or far right beliefs, with several expressing their dislike of these types of views.

Instead, these children shared that it was adults who attended the riots who held anti-immigration and racist views:

“There were definitely people there with intent to cause harm, not only to the police but to people of other races. And I do think it is more the adults.” – Child, charged in the 2024 riots.

They also felt that adults should be held more accountable for their actions:

“I do believe adults should have a bit more respect for other races because adults understand the world a bit more. Like they have their own house and do all sorts of responsible things so as an adult they should also have responsibility for the way they think and what they are doing.” – Child, charged in the 2024 riots.

Experiences at the riots

“I was just out with my mate on a bike ride and we could hear shouting so we went around the corner and I thought, hey, what’s happening here?... There was just loads of little kids and grown men egging the kids on to chuck stuff at the police.” – Child, charged in the 2024 riots.

Many children said they believed it would be peaceful and described it starting off peacefully. However, a couple of children said they knew it would not be peaceful, with one child saying: *“it said it was peaceful, but I knew it wouldn’t be – nothing’s peaceful in [my town].”*

Most children described seeing thousands of people, with one child saying they had never seen so many people in one place before. Many described seeing people they knew from school or in their community, people they did not expect would be there.

Many children described the violence escalating suddenly, with people at the riots throwing petrol bombs, destroying vehicles and shops, and taking batons off the police for use against police. Many children also described adults encouraging them and other children to throw objects at police, including giving them projectiles such as bricks to throw. Some said they saw parents encouraging their small children around eight or nine years old to be involved.

Many children described trying to leave when it escalated, but were unable to do so as the roads had been blocked off by police. One child said they asked the police if they could go home but police refused to let them past, so they sat and waited for hours. Another child described seeing a *“bloodbath”* between protesters and counter-protesters, with people taking out knives.

Children described police being understaffed for hours at the start of the riots. For some, this cemented their negative attitude towards the police, with one child saying:

“With the riots – everywhere else had already kicked off, why didn’t [the police] prepare? They had no dogs, no horses, nothing for four hours.” – Child, charged in the 2024 riots.

What were children's experiences with the youth justice system?

The youth justice system is the part of the criminal justice system that deals only with children³ and has a principal aim of preventing offending.² It is overseen by the Youth Justice Board (YJB) and delivered locally through multi-agency Youth Justice Service (YJS) Teams that are made up of representatives from the police, probation services, social services, education, and health.

England's youth justice system is underpinned by a 'Child First' approach⁴ which prioritises treating a child as a child first and foremost, rather than as an offender. It is the result of decades of evidence designed to keep communities safe by addressing the underlying needs of these children in order to prevent and reduce offending.⁵ The YJB lists four key tenets to a child-first approach:

1. **Seeing children as children:** Children are different to adults and should not be treated the same way.
2. **Developing a pro-social identity:** Children's positive behaviours should be encouraged to help children move forward rather than underlining an offender identity.
3. **Collaborating with children:** Children should be given a voice, feel invested in the process, and be part of the solution.
4. **Diverting from stigma:** Children should be diverted from the formal youth justice system to minimise stigma or labelling effects that can lead to further offending.⁶

The criminal justice system overall was significantly sped up as the riots were treated as a priority by the police and courts⁷, and the rapid pace of response was seen as a key deterrent to further unrest.⁸ While this is important, the youth justice response must always remain child first and children should not be treated the same way as adults.

² *Crime and Disorder Act (1988) section 37.*

Experiences with the police

“I don’t like seeing shit from that day but it’s hard... I was recognised from a news video. It’s on YouTube with millions of views. That’s a big digital footprint.” – Child, charged in the 2024 riots.

The majority of people were arrested after the riots rather than during,⁹ and this aligned with the office’s interviews in which very few children said they were arrested on the day. One child said a police officer told them to leave or they would be arrested for their involvement at the riots; they gave their details and went home as instructed. They told the office they were surprised when a week later, 10 officers came to their house to arrest them. Their YJS worker also shared that this was taken into consideration during sentencing.

Many of the arrests came from police reviewing footage from body-worn video cameras, social media footage, CCTV and video doorbells, as well as additional footage through drones, helicopters and evidence-gathering teams capturing video evidence on the ground.¹⁰

This was supported by children’s accounts, as most described seeing their image published online, either on their local police force’s website or social media account, or on television. For some, this was quite confronting, with one child saying that they ran away for a week after seeing their face on the news before handing themselves in. Some children said their image was taken down once they handed themselves into the police, while others said their image remained online for months. One child told the office that their mother requested the police remove her child’s photo after they had voluntarily turned themselves in, but this did not happen, leading to significant anxiety for the child who found themselves frequently checking online for months afterwards to see if their image had been removed.

Additionally, social media was used by many people to document and share what was occurring at the riots, at the time or afterwards. This was collected as evidence to arrest those involved in the riots.¹¹ One mother called her child to tell them to come home after spotting them on a social media livestream, a video which was later used as evidence by the police. Another child said that they were caught by police after speaking to a social media influencer who was documenting the riots. This video now has millions of views.

Arrest

A child-first approach avoids bringing children into the police station where possible.¹² This aims to minimise their exposure to formal criminal justice processes and prevent the development of a criminal identity. It can also create a more positive relationship with the police. Instead, pre-arranged interviews should always be considered before a child is arrested.¹³

Children involved in the riots shared that, when they were arrested, there were teams of around six to 10 police officers: *“Around six police officers arrested me when I was in JD Sports with my mates.”* Another child said the police needed two vans for the number of officers that came to their house. This was similar for children who voluntarily turned themselves in:

“I went to the police station and said ‘I’m on the news’, they told me to take a seat and then six police officers came to arrest me.” – Child, charged in the 2024 riots.

Many children also said that they felt scared as they had never been in trouble before.

YJS staff the office spoke to shared that whether a child-first response was adopted varied depending on their local police force. One YJS team gave the example of a meeting they had pre-emptively organised with the police about working together in the arrest of identified children involved in the riots. This included agreeing to specific dates that YJS would bring these children to the police station for their arrest and interview. However, YJS said that this agreement was later broken when police officers went to those children’s homes early in the morning to arrest them without informing the YJS team.

In contrast, another YJS team spoke about their local police force and CPS immediately working with them in their response to children involved in the riots. Some children were as young as eight or nine years old, which is below the age of criminal responsibility of 10 in England. Initially, the YJS said the police told them they were planning to visit these children’s homes to give them a ‘telling off and a scare,’ but the YJS team said that this approach would not be effective. Instead, they stressed the importance of building trust between these young children and the police, and consequently, they organised for the YJS team to bring these children into the police station to understand their involvement in the riots in child-appropriate language. YJS shared that these police officers developed

connections with these children who emphasised that they could go to the police for help if they had any concerns in the future.

Police interview and police custody

The law recognises that police cells are not a suitable place for children.¹⁴ The Home Office Concordat on Children in Custody states: *“A night in a cell is an intimidating experience as custody facilities are designed to detain adults suspected of criminal activity, and they offer little in the way of comfort or emotional reassurance. For a child, a prolonged stay in this environment can be harmful.”*¹⁵

However, many children told us they stayed for 48 hours, some up to 72 hours, in police custody. One child described their experience of spending 36 hours in police custody: *“It was awful. I was just in a room, with nothing to do and you don’t know how long you’re going to be there for.”* YJS staff also told the office that many children stayed at least overnight so that they could appear in court the next day.

Most children said that police behaviour during the interview and arrest was fine, but some said the interviewer was rude and condescending. One child with limited English proficiency was asked if they received any support with the language barrier during the police interview. They responded:

“I was trying not to show that I didn’t know the language well because when I was asking them questions, [the police interviewer] was either pushing me or getting angry.” – Child, charged in the 2024 riots.

Some children were advised by their solicitor to answer ‘no comment’ to questions in their police interviews, while others were advised to answer the questions. Every child who told the office they responded ‘no comment’ spent time in custody, either on remand or sentenced. One child said:

“My solicitor advised I should say no comment but the fact that I had said no comment went against me [in court]. I’d like to have said everything like today, but they wouldn’t let me.” – Child, charged in the 2024 riots.

Other children were told by their solicitor not to answer ‘no comment’. For these children, their honesty in the police interview was taken into account during their sentencing hearing. One child explained:

“My solicitor said don’t say no comment or they’ll make things up. He said the government was being very harsh.” – Child, charged in the 2024 riots.

Most children said their solicitor told them to plead guilty to the charge(s) and none said that their solicitor pushed for a lower charge. This was supported by CPS data given to the office that showed 71 out of the 73 children with a final outcome pled guilty, and the remaining 2 children had their case discontinued.

One child said they was frightened when their solicitor told them to pack a bag for prison and to plead guilty to violent disorder, despite their minor involvement on the day and lack of any previous criminal history. This child’s YJS worker said that they were concerned solicitors were encouraging children to plead guilty and felt they lost sight of the fact that they were dealing with children.

However, solicitors may advise children to plead guilty to an imprisonable offence so that children can receive a referral order which is only available upon a guilty plea.¹⁶ One YJS worker shared: *“If the child doesn’t plead guilty and is found guilty, the sentence would have been more serious... if [they] had been found guilty at trial, the lowest sentence would have been a year which would have included prison time. To get a referral order, [they] needed to plead guilty.”*

Another reason children said their solicitor encouraged them to plead guilty was to avoid remand, with one child sharing:

“The first time I went to court my solicitor said ‘If you don’t plead guilty, you’re going to [a Youth Offending Institution].’ I don’t know if they said that to make me plead guilty but if they didn’t say that I wouldn’t have pled guilty.” – Child, charged in the 2024 riots.

Bail

Many children who were granted conditional bail reported a significant negative impact on their mental health. Strict bail conditions posed significant challenges, such as a 6am to 6pm curfew and restrictions on being in groups of three or more people. One child shared how these conditions disrupted their ability to attend college. They explained that their college day ended at 5pm, making it impossible to reach home by the curfew time. Despite raising this issue with the police, they dismissed the child’s concerns, saying it was the child’s problem. They also said that their solicitor and YJS social worker, who

were also present during the conversation, did not intervene to support them. Although the college accommodated them by allowing early departures to meet the curfew, the experience took a toll on their mental health. They also expressed anxiety leaving the house, fearing they might inadvertently breach their bail conditions by bumping into people they knew: *"I can only be with me and someone else. That's it. I couldn't go to the town. I couldn't do anything. It's going to affect your mental state when you sit at home on your own doing nothing."*

Another child shared that their solicitor attempted to challenge their bail curfew due to its impact on their participation in sports and extracurricular activities. However, the police dismissed the concerns, stating the child was *"just lucky to be out."* Reflecting on the experience, the child also said, *"mentally, it was a hard period."*

Remand

"Some people might say it was only one month but those weeks in prison were really difficult... when I was told my bail wasn't approved. I was very upset and cried... then I cut my arms." – Child, charged in the 2024 riots.

A custodial remand must only be used where it is absolutely necessary and meets the legal tests.¹⁷ The office spoke to a couple of children who had been remanded in a youth offending institute (YOI). One child was an unaccompanied asylum-seeking child who was placed on remand. Their YJS caseworker also shared: *"As a court officer with 20 years' experience, [child] did not meet any criteria to not have [their] bail approved and given [their] additional vulnerabilities, it is shocking this happened."* A case study detailing their experience is on the next page.

Case study – M*

M is an unaccompanied asylum-seeking child living with a foster carer after being separated from their parents during their journey to England. They have limited English proficiency and spoke to the office through an interpreter. Below is their story.

I was training to be a barber and the owner told me that I should stay inside tomorrow for safety. I don't really use social media, so I didn't know about it before this.

I'm not a person who can stay at home all day, so I went on a walk to go to the gym. On my way, I saw a big crowd and wanted to see what was going on. When the demonstrations started, I tried to leave but the police had blocked all the roads and wouldn't let me pass. After waiting 2-3 hours I was getting restless, so I joined some other young people who also trying to leave.

'A man who looked around 35 years old started shouting and swearing bad words against my religion, Islam. He said he wanted to beat us up and then attacked one of us.'

The person he attacked wrestled him to the ground and everyone started beating him up. I must've lost my mind because I kicked his knee before running somewhere I thought was safer. After waiting two hours, I tried to go home again when the town was quieter. A police officer recognised me and called me over, they searched me and my bag and then handcuffed me. I was scared. My English is not good and I didn't understand what he was saying.

At the police station, they said I committed the entire attack on the man. I wanted to explain everything, but my solicitor stopped me and told me not to say anything. I stayed there for 48 hours, I was very scared. I'd never been arrested or hurt anyone before. They gave me a piece of paper I didn't understand and said I would be detained for another 15 hours. When I saw the judge, I realised I must have done something very serious and my whole body started shaking. I explained that I had kicked the man's knee and I know that it was wrong

but it's what I did but they didn't believe me because I didn't say anything at the police station. The judge said if he decided full force would apply, I would be sentenced to 5 years. I was shocked. I was taken to prison and told that my sentence would take one week but when I went back to court, the same judge said I would be detained for another 3 weeks.

Some people might say it was only one month but those weeks in prison were really difficult. I didn't know what was going to happen. I am alone here. I don't have my parents with me. At nighttime I kept thinking I am in this country to build my future and to find my parents. I shouldn't be in prison.

'The other kids made fun of me because my English isn't good and I felt really lonely. I didn't have any friends. I started praying day and night to get out of there, crying. I shouldn't cry.'

My Youth Justice Service (YJS) worker supported me to apply to be released on bail. When I was told my bail wasn't approved, I was very upset and cried and then I cut my arms.

When I went to court, I was praying it wouldn't be the same judge. When I saw it wasn't, I became calmer and more collected. My solicitor started talking but when it was the other solicitor's turn, the judge said that they didn't need to talk as she had already read the reports and that I would be freed. I couldn't believe it and I wanted to confirm many times. It was my YJS worker who managed to convey what was in my heart to the judge.

Another child the office spoke to had been granted bail with conditions. However, CPS appealed the judge's decision, and a different judge was scheduled to rule within 48 hours. During this time, the child was mistakenly remanded to custody, and their YJS worker consequently drove to collect the child at 3am after learning that they were in a Youth Offenders Institution (YOI) despite the judge's ruling. On their drive home, the child shared to their YJS worker that they now had a prison number which will remain the case for the rest of their life.

Experience with the courts/justice system

Some children felt the court process was fine, while others disliked their judge. One child said: *"The second judge was horrible... she basically called me a low life."* Another child prayed that another judge would preside over their final sentence hearing.

In many cases, judges acknowledged that children had no prior criminal history, voluntarily handed themselves in, and were honest about their actions. Despite these factors, YJS managers reported that when they argued for referral orders to be at the lower end of the 3 to 12-month legal range, in line with their prior experience, the judges said the minimum length for these children had to be at least 10 to 12-months.

Some children also spoke about the CPS attempting to uplift their sentence to include racial or religious aggravation but were unsuccessful. One child explained:

"Prosecution wanted to uplift the [sentence] to racially motivated violence. I'm not racist. All my carers were Nigerian, I learnt their culture and to speak their language... the judge agreed with me that I'm not a racist." – Child, charged in the 2024 riots.

Additionally, one YJS staff member told the office they observed media outlets attending every hearing as they had some of the first children arrested in connection to the riots. Another YJS manager believed the media published quotes from judges who wanted to portray themselves as being "tough". This YJS manager shared that the negative media attention and subsequent harassment from journalists led to the breakdown of a child's family, with the child entering care, a situation that they believed would not have occurred otherwise.

Sentencing

As of 31 October 2024, 73 children out of the 84 that had been charged had finalised outcomes. Of these, the principal offence for 62% was a public order offence; 15% offences against the person; 15% burglary; 5% criminal damage; 1% theft and handling; and 1% their principal offence was not finalised in the final hearing.

Most children said they needed to accept the consequences of their actions, outlining the mindset of “do the crime, do the time”. One child felt their sentence was fair in comparison to adults: *“I saw in the news, people were getting many years [in prison]... they said if I’d been 18 at the time, I’d get 3 years but I got 12 months.”* However, many children did not know what the sentences should be:

“I handed myself in and was given a 16-month sentence. I’ve never been in trouble before with the police or anything. I didn’t expect it from being [at the riots]. I didn’t know what the consequences were.” – Child, charged in the 2024 riots.

In contrast, experienced YJS staff believed the sentencing was unfair for most children. The data the office received from the CPS did not cover the type of sentences or length of sentences that children with a finalised outcome received.

Few YJS teams felt that the police and CPS recognised them as experts in youth justice and worked with them collaboratively. Most YJS staff noted that the police who dealt with the offences were part of the major investigation team and not accustomed to dealing with young offenders. The YJS teams who said they were recognised as experts shared that they reviewed all the footage, assessing each child’s level of involvement, including many instances where adults were seen placing objects into their hands to throw at police and pushing them forward. They also reviewed each child’s background, including social care records, underlying health needs, and education records, before giving a list of recommended charges and sentences.

The next page outlines the case study of two children with similar backgrounds and lower levels of involvement in the riots. These children live in different areas and had very different experiences of the youth justice system, reflecting the variation in decision making.

Case study – Two children with different outcomes

The below demonstrates how two children with similar backgrounds and lower levels of involvement in the riots experienced the youth justice system differently. For Child A, a collaborative child-first approach was developed between the police, Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) and Youth Justice Service (YJS) from the start.

Child A

Background

- No criminal history or involvement with police.
- Mainstream education 5 days a week.
- Lives at home, describing a close relationship with their mum.

Reasons for involvement

- On a bike ride with a friend and heard loud noises, went to see what was happening.

Involvement on the day

- Under the encouragement of adults at the riots, the child threw objects at police.

Arrest

- Incident was captured on video. Child handed themselves in after seeing an image of themselves online.

Charge

- Charged with violent disorder and the police and CPS consults YJS to review all the children charged in the riots.
- Using the child gravity matrix, YJS recommends an out of court disposal – youth conditional caution. This is authorised by CPS and issued by police.

Sentence

- The child is diverted from court.
- Child is required to sign a document admitting to details of offence and to agree to the conditions of the caution.
- The conditions are 12 weeks of interventions focused on supporting the child learn how to resist peer pressure and stop themselves from getting involved in similar situations again.

Criminal record

- It is not classed as a conviction. Charge becomes spent at the end of the 3 months.

Child B

Background

- No criminal history or involvement with police.
- Works 4 days and attends college 1 day a week.
- Lives at home, describing a close relationship with their mum.

Reasons for involvement

- Saw social media posts and physical posters about a “peaceful protest”. Attended alone, curious to see what was happening in their town.

Involvement on the day

- Stood far away from rioters and was observing what was going on. Started talking to someone they recognised.
- Without any prior command, a police officer pushed the child hard from behind and told them to move back.
- In reaction, the child turned around and threw two pebbles towards the officer before going home upset from the interaction.

Arrest

- Incident was captured on video. Child handed themselves in after seeing an image of themselves online.

Charge

- Charged with violent disorder and pled guilty on the advice of their solicitor.
- YJS were not given the opportunity to review the child’s case and give a recommendation.

Sentence

- CPS argued racial and religious aggravation which was dismissed by the magistrate. Child’s employer also provided a reference letter about the child working well with people from all backgrounds.
- Received 10-month referral order and required to attend a youth offender panel where the child, their parent/carer and victim (where appropriate) agree to a contract aimed at repairing the harm caused and addressing the causes of the offending behaviour.

Criminal record

- It is classed as a conviction. Charge becomes spent at the end of the 10 months.

Custodial sentences

Most children who received a custodial sentence described being actively engaged in education or employment before the riots. Many shared that they had previously struggled with attending education, but had since been engaging in more hands-on and practical studies. Despite pleading guilty to charges of violent disorder and burglary, the children who were placed on electronic tags were allowed to continue attending education or work up until their custodial sentence. These children said that their education provider or employer believed that their continued engagement was important for their development, and that they did not believe they posed a safety risk to others given they had never displayed any violent behaviours during their time there. Many of these children maintained their consistent attendance until the day before entering custody.

However, once placed in custody, the progress these children made in education and work was placed on hold. Despite many receiving custodial periods of less than a year, these children expressed uncertainty regarding the process to return, or whether they should return, given that their criminal records could prevent them from pursuing careers in their chosen fields. Additionally, every child the office spoke to in custody said that the education at their secure setting was poor and unrelated to their interests. One child shared that it took months to be moved to a better education pathway that had other children engaged in class.

Another key challenge these children spoke about was missing significant moments with their families, including Christmas, birthdays and even the birth of their own child. Preserving children's connections with their families and broader support networks is essential for their rehabilitation and positive youth justice outcomes. However, in 2023, the office identified structural barriers that prevented children from maintaining meaningful relationships while in custody. For further insights, see the Children's Commissioner's office's report *Family contact in youth custody*.¹⁸

Non-custodial sentences

"We're doing a project on victims of the riots and how they were affected, financially, physically, mentally. How they could be a displaced person and a victim to exploitation...It feels like I'm doing something for me, like I'm giving

myself that bit more knowledge, and maybe, if I'd had that bit more knowledge, I wouldn't make stupid mistakes." – Child, charged in the 2024 riots.

Children who received a referral order are required to attend a youth offender panel. The panel is made up of community volunteers and the child, their parents/carers, and the victim (where appropriate) create a contract aimed at repairing the harm that has been caused and to address the causes of the offending behaviour. YJS teams told the office that they had been making tailored learning packages for children to address the underlying reasons why they got involved on the day. For example, for children who decided impulsively to get involved in the riots after walking past, YJS had put together a packet of victim work and work addressing peer influences, thinking skills, and how behaviour impacts on the community and themselves. Another YJS team told the office they were organising a YJS worker, who was seconded as a police officer at the riots, to speak to these children about their experience on the day.

One child explained they were doing a YJS activity project about victims of the riots and how they were affected, financially, physically, and mentally, as well as how displaced people can be vulnerable to criminal and sexual exploitation. This child described the learning as helpful and something that could have prevented their involvement if they had learnt about it earlier.

However, a few children said they did not enjoy these projects and described wanting to "get it over and done with" so they could move on with their lives. One child said *"I'm learning about drug crimes, knife crime, stuff that happened in the riots... I do it because it's part of my sentence, I don't enjoy it but it's not like learning is enjoyable."*

One child was completing community service work at a charity shop two hours every week. This child said they were really enjoying the experience, particularly engaging with elderly people who came into the store. The child said that they might try to continue their volunteering even after they complete all their hours: *"It's brilliant. You literally go in there and it feels like you're only there for 10 minutes."*

What were children's reflections?

What do they think of the riots now?

"If I was walking home again, I would carry on walking and not get involved."

- Child, charged in the 2024 riots.

Most children expressed feelings of regret once the excitement and adrenaline had subsided, with one child sharing how they grappled with intense feelings of guilt after witnessing the damage they had caused to their own community:

"It was fun at the time, but the guilt afterwards was so bad. You're on the bus driving past windows that you've smashed. People have said what if there was a baby on the other side of the windows?" –

Child, charged in the 2024 riots.

Other children reflected on the experience, saying that they would no longer be tempted to go and observe similar incidents in the future:

"Now even if there are things happening, I will put my head down and move away from it as much as possible." – Child, charged in the 2024 riots.

For most children, the focus was on putting their mistake behind them and moving forward with their lives. However, those in custody voiced uncertainty about their ability to do this due to their criminal records.

Not every child the office spoke to was apologetic about their involvement. A few children, including those who received a custodial sentence, admitted that they did not regret their actions in retaliating against the police. One child shared that they would do it again, but would take better precautions to conceal their identity.

What would they change to make children's lives better?

"I didn't grow up with a lot of money, I feel like if you haven't got a lot of money, you get into crime and stuff like that... Everyone should be out of poverty." – Child, charged in the 2024 riots.

When asked for ideas for improving the lives of children in England, the key areas these children identified centred on providing more opportunities, such as access to youth activities and employment, as well as addressing poverty. One child emphasised the importance of pursuing ambitions freely and highlighted the difficulty of finding employment without connections:

"Kids should be able to do anything that suits them. I've been looking for a job but it's so hard if you haven't got connections. No one ever gets back to you." – Child, charged in the 2024 riots.

Children also suggested improvements to the education system, including changes to the curriculum to teach real-life skills, such as managing taxes, mortgages, and debts. These reflected many of the same issues raised by the general population of children in England who responded to the Children's Commissioner's *Big Ambition survey*.¹⁹ Some expressed concern about the long-term impact of criminal records, advocating for changes to prevent it from affecting their futures.

Another child also raised the concern of social media safety, and reflected on the dual nature of social media:

"I love [social media] and hate it at the same time – it can be used for so many [positive] things like education, but it can also be used for crime, selling drugs and exploitation." – Child, charged in the 2024 riots.

This child demonstrated to the interviewers how drug dealers can solicit children they do not know on Snapchat and recommended a photo ID requirement for setting up social media accounts, explaining *"there's age verification, but you can just lie."* The office has emphasised the urgent need for technology companies and the government to implement robust measures ensuring children's online safety. For further insights on children's views on what a safe online world should look like, see

the Children's Commissioner's office's report *"I've seen horrible things": children's experiences of the online world.*²⁰

Methodology

Quantitative data collection

The Children's Commissioner sent a statutory data request to the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS), asking for the number and characteristics of children charged, in the period 1 August to 31 October 2024, with offences linked to the disorder following the incident in Southport on the 29th of July 2024. Technically, these are children with a finalised decision to charge. The data, received November 2024, is CPS management information which comes from the police and is incomplete and should not be considered as robust as, for example, official statistics. Ethnicity data is as recorded by police using Home Office Self defined ethnicity (SDE) codes, and the CPS and the Children's Commissioner's office do not consider that full reliance can be placed on this information. The CPS reported the total number of charged children was 84 as of 31st October 2024, but provided details on the characteristics of 73 children, on whom the percentages in this report are based.

The Children's Commissioner also asked the National Police Chiefs Council for the number of children arrested 'during the recent violent disorder', and received back this information on 4 September 2024.

Qualitative work

For this report, the Children's Commissioner's office spoke with 14 children in November and December 2024. Of these, six were in custody at the time of the interview, while the remaining eight were in the community. These interviews took place at youth clubs, Youth Justice Service (YJS), children's social care homes, and online Teams meetings in five locations in England.

Two interviewers from the office were present for every interview. Children were given the choice of having a trusted adult in the room with them too. Seven children took up this option and these adults included an interpreter and/or youth justice service staff member. One child who took up this option asked the YJS staff member to leave for a part of the interview. Some of the children had special educational needs or disabilities and used fidget toys during the interviews provided by the office or YJS.

The interviews lasted for about an hour each and followed a semi structured interview guide, asking children about their experiences leading up to the day of the riots, how the riots unfolded, and support they had received since. Children could share as much or as little as they liked of their experiences. The information sheet provided to children was reviewed by the Association of YOT Managers (AYM) and children with lived experience of the youth justice system prior to the organisation of interviews.

The interviews with children present their own accounts of their experiences, they were not triangulated against other notes relating to their case, though separate interactions with case managers provided additional detail. Similarly, the office carried out conversations with youth justice team managers, which included discussions about the police, child's solicitor and magistrate's actions and behaviours, but the office did not speak with these people directly.

Alongside handwritten notes, 10 of the conversations were audio recorded and transcribed using an online transcription tool and one conversation was transcribed through Microsoft Teams Meeting tool. Three interviews only had handwritten notes because the interviewee did not want to be audio recorded. Interviewees could leave the interview at any point and were informed about their right to withdraw from the research. All 14 interviewees gave their informed consent to take part in the research.

Children were made aware that this report would not refer to the area they are from, their gender, or age. This is because the office wanted to ensure the anonymity of the small number of children who were involved in the riots.

The interviews were organised by reaching out to individual YJS Managers and teams using information from a desktop review of news and articles on police websites of children arrested in relation to the riots, as well as AYM who disseminated the information about this research to YJS teams.

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