HM Inspectorate of Probation



The quality of youth justice delivery in knife crime cases: 2021 – 2025 inspections

HM Inspectorate of Probation

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HM Inspectorate of Probation is committed to reviewing, developing and promoting the evidence base for high-quality probation and youth justice services. Our *Research & Analysis Bulletins* are aimed at all those with an interest in the quality of these services, presenting key findings to assist with informed debate and help drive improvement where it is required. The findings are used within HM Inspectorate of Probation to develop our inspection programmes, guidance and position statements.

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We would like to thank all those who participated in any way in our inspections. Without their help and cooperation, the collation of inspection data would not have been possible.

Executive summary

Context

'Knife crime' has become shorthand for serious youth violence using bladed articles as weapons. Although such bladed articles are the most common weapon used in homicide among all age groups, the term 'knife crime' is often associated with teenagers. In 2024/2025, the Youth Justice Board (2026) reports that there were just under 3,700 knife or offensive weapon offences committed by children in England and Wales resulting in a caution or sentence, two per cent higher than the previous year and 23 per cent higher than a decade ago.

While 95 per cent of the knife or offensive weapon offences committed by children are for possession (Youth Justice Board, 2026), the consequences of committing a violent offence with a knife can be very serious or fatal for the victim. Knife crime is thus always towards the top of the political agenda. HM Government's *Safer Streets Mission* aims to halve knife crime in England and Wales by 2035 (HM Government, 2024). In England, the *Youth Matters* (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2025) strategy for young people has a specific knife crime strand, promising enhanced neighbourhood policing, better support for young people in crisis, and a renewed focus within relationships, sex and health education school lessons on avoiding risky situations. Most recently, on 12 February 2026, HM Government instituted a more prescriptive approach across England and Wales for responding to knife crime. Every child arrested in possession of a knife must now be referred by the police to the local youth justice service (YJS) for assessment and consideration of necessary interventions. This policy change reinforces the crucial role for YJSs in tackling knife crime.

Knife crime can be seen as an example of a 'wicked issue', a complex issue that cannot be solved by any single agency. As with most social problems, partnership working and collaboration between services is critical for leading children away from harm and violence. However, partnership working is never straightforward, with agencies bringing different and sometimes conflicting philosophies, priorities, and resources. The task of senior leaders is to understand, reconcile, or at least mitigate these divisions and focus the diverse professionals on the vital task of reducing risks and harms to all and supporting children's positive development.

Approach

The findings presented in this bulletin are based upon case assessment data from YJS inspection reports published between 2021 and 2025. Two YJS inspection datasets were used:

- Court disposals (n=1,043 cases)
  - 30 per cent had knife crime as an aspect of the current offence.
  - 20 per cent had knife crime as an aspect of a previous offence.
  - 5 per cent had knife crime as an aspect of both current and previous offences.
- Out-of-court resolutions (n=1,433)
  - 17 per cent had knife crime as an aspect of the current offence.
  - 10 per cent had knife crime as an aspect of a previous offence.
  - 1 per cent had knife crime as an aspect of both current and previous offences.

In each case, our inspectors considered key questions relating to the work undertaken to achieve positive change for the child and to keep children and communities safe. Inspectors recorded the grounds for their judgements, noting examples of good or poor practice. Alongside analysis of these cases, the wider academic and policy literature on knife crime has been reviewed, in addition to the evidence from published inspection reports.

Key findings and implications

- The quality of work with children involved in knife crime was found to be sufficient in the majority of cases. After other measured personal and case characteristics were taken into account, inspectors' judgements on the quality of delivery were most consistently associated with previous sanctions and the recorded safety classifications. YJSs generally responded well where children presented higher levels of vulnerability or risk, focusing attention and resources on those with the greatest safety concerns.
- However, in out-of-court resolution cases, previous knife-related offending was also associated with poorer judgements about planning and implementation to keep other people safe, particularly among cases classified as presenting a low or medium risk of serious harm, indicating room for improvement in these cases.
- The risk of serious harm classification deemed appropriate by the inspector differed from that recorded by the case manager in many of those cases classified as low risk where knife crime was recorded (linked to the current offence or previous offences). This warrants attention; getting the classification correct is vitally important for both the children involved and the community, facilitating access to wider resources to bolster safety while providing the platform for constructive activities.
- Areas of support were more likely to be recorded for those children where their offending involved knife crime, particularly in those cases where it was linked to previous offences. In these latter court disposal cases, lifestyle was highlighted in 80 per cent of cases, learning and education, training and employment (ETE) in 75 per cent of cases, and substance misuse in 76 per cent of cases. The corresponding figures for the out-of-court resolution cases (with knife crime linked to previous offending) were 66, 68 and 61 per cent respectively.
- The inspector commentaries in the court disposal cases with knife crime involvement revealed numerous adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), creating significant challenges and safeguarding concerns for the children involved. In line with the wider research literature, the following common themes – which were often overlapping and cumulative – were identified across the commentaries:
    - family instability, adversity and trauma
    - deprivation and poor or insecure housing
    - negative peer influences, gangs and criminal exploitation
    - fear and self-protection
    - learning needs, disrupted education, and educational exclusion
    - mental and emotional health needs.
- These themes illustrate that children who become involved in knife crime often carry a heavy load of personal, familial, and social adversities. Family breakdown, neighbourhood poverty, peer pressure, gang presence and intimidation, exclusion from school, and unmet health needs create a bounded rationality in which carrying a weapon might seem necessary, inevitable or attractive. Understanding these drivers is essential

for effective responses and intervention planning, and it is essential for practitioners to exercise professional curiosity, looking beyond the visible evidence and questioning why a young person is behaving in concerning ways.

- Inspectors highlighted numerous examples of good practice where youth justice practitioners effectively supported the child and addressed problematic behaviours. High-quality work in knife crime cases was characterised by the following interrelated components:
    - practitioners building a strong trusting relationship with the child; success was more likely where the practitioner showed persistence, care, and consistency
    - successful approaches were holistic and child-centred, addressing not just the offence but the child's broader needs, their developing identity, and any past trauma
    - multi-agency collaboration was essential; effective cases involved close coordination between YJS professionals and other agencies (e.g. children's services, schools, the police, mental health services), providing wraparound support and consistent messaging from all professionals
    - inspectors praised creative and inclusive interventions that stimulated the child into positive activities or addressed specific issues in engaging ways
    - practitioners frequently acted as *advocates* for the child, pursuing referrals to services and breaking down barriers.
- While many cases were managed well, some recurring problems were also identified by inspectors. Paying attention to the following could support more consistent high-quality practice:
    - in some cases, initial assessments lacked sufficient depth and breadth; critical information was sometimes not sought or, if so, not analysed fully, leading to gaps in understanding the child's situation and consequently deficiencies in helping them
    - not all intervention plans were adequately focused, and contingency planning was sometimes patchy or even entirely absent
    - proactive risk management and enforcement needed strengthening in some cases; there were examples where practitioners were slow to respond to escalating non-compliance or increasing risks
    - more attention also needed to be given in some cases to the exit strategy; some terminating or transferring cases had no formal plan for sustaining progress post-order or for the handover to the new agency.

In summary, the findings illustrate how high-quality work with children involved in knife crime depends on looking beyond the offence to understand each child's circumstances, needs, strengths and motivations. While inspectors found much positive practice, more consistent attention needs to be given to the assessment and classification of risk, particularly where previous knife-related offending is present in cases which have been classified as presenting a low or medium risk of serious harm. Effective responses combine trusted relationships and individualised, trauma-informed support with thorough assessment, robust planning, proactive management and coordinated multi-agency action. YJSs have a vital role, but sustainable reductions in knife crime require wider, community-based public health approaches that address the conditions in which violence develops and persists.

1. Introduction

This bulletin focuses upon the quality of youth justice service (YJS) delivery in knife crime cases, with the term 'knife crime' used to mean knife-enabled violence or threats, or the unlawful possession of a bladed article, by children.

Knife crime in the popular imagination is associated with teenagers and it is consistently one of the most emotive issues in youth justice. However, it should be noted that children make up a minority of all knife possession and usage offences; 17 per cent in 2023/2024 (Youth Justice Board, 2025). Moreover, the great majority (95 per cent, ibid) of knife or offensive weapon offences by children are for possession, not for use in violence or for making threats (Youth Justice Board, 2026). Further data on knife crime is incomplete as the three available sources all have their limitations:

- the police recorded data is necessarily partial as it reflects incidents reported to the police, operational activities and priorities, and the evidence gathered regarding the offence and the offender
- the NHS hospital episodes data reflects only those knife injuries serious enough to warrant medical attention
- the homicide data is limited to crimes of murder and manslaughter which are thankfully rare; the small numbers make trend analysis difficult.

Nevertheless, the message from across these sources is that knife crime in the 21st century was relatively low up to the mid-2010s, peaked in 2017 to 2019, fell markedly during the Covid-19 pandemic, and gradually rose again following the lifting of the lockdowns (Farrell and Davies, 2024; Youth Endowment Fund, 2025).

Knife crime facts and trends

- 262 people were killed with knives in 2023/2024. Of those, 57 were aged under 25 and 17 were children aged under 16.
- Teenage homicide victims were far more likely to be killed by a knife or a sharp instrument (83 per cent) than were victims of all ages (46 per cent).
- From July 2025 to June 2026, there were 1,086 hospital admissions in NHS hospitals in England and Wales for those aged under 25 in relation to an assault with a sharp object.
- In 2024/2025, there were 3,698 proven knife or offensive weapon offences committed by children (aged 10-17 years) resulting in a caution or sentence. This is a two per cent increase on 2023/2024, but 23 per cent greater than a decade ago.
- The vast majority (95 per cent) of proven knife or offensive weapon offences committed by children were possession offences. Only five per cent of these proven offences concerned threats with a knife or other offensive weapon.
- Six per cent of children sentenced for a knife or offensive weapon offence received immediate custody in 2024/2025, around half the proportion a decade earlier.

Sources: Ben Kinsella Trust (2025), Office for National Statistics (2025, 2026), Youth Justice Board (2025, 2026)

Moving forward, HM Government has committed to halving knife crime within a decade, with early positive progress: there was a 10 per cent fall in serious offences involving a knife between 2023/2024 and 2025/2026, driven by falls in knife-enabled robbery and serious violent assaults, including murder and manslaughter (Institute for Government, 2026). Recent policy initiatives applying across England and Wales include restrictions on the online sale of knives, the prohibition of 'zombie' and other large combat-style knives, and a ban on ninja swords under Ronan's Law. The *Serious Violence Duty*, introduced in January 2023, also applies across England and Wales and requires local agencies to work together, share relevant information and identify the causes of serious violence locally. In England, the *Youth Matters* strategy for young people (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2025) emphasises action on policing, education and support services for young people at risk of involvement in knife crime. The government has also invested in Young Futures Hubs across England; these are multi-agency services designed to support young people at risk of involvement in knife crime, exploitation and other harms by providing access to services including mental health support and careers advice (HM Government, 2025).

In Wales, the policy context is shaped by the Youth Justice Blueprint for Wales (Ministry of Justice and Welsh Government, 2019) and its associated prevention framework (Welsh Government, 2025). These promote a rights-based, trauma-informed and Child First approach, with an emphasis on prevention, early intervention, diversion and integrated partnership working. The prevention framework recognises the distinctive Welsh context, including the important contribution of devolved education, health, children's services and other partners to preventing offending and supporting children involved in the youth justice system.

In February 2026, HM Government issued new guidance applying across England and Wales, setting out a more prescriptive response by the police and YJSs following a child's arrest for unlawful possession of a knife or bladed article.

- the police must, within one working day, inform the local YJS of the arrest
- the YJS must make an initial judgement on the case and make appropriate referrals
- the YJS must determine the appropriate outcome for the child, based on their assessed needs and the risk to public safety
- where support for the child is deemed necessary, their engagement is mandatory; if refused, the child can be prosecuted for the original offence
- the YJS should ensure a prompt start to interventions, and where delivered through an out-of-court resolution, there must be a mandatory plan for the child.

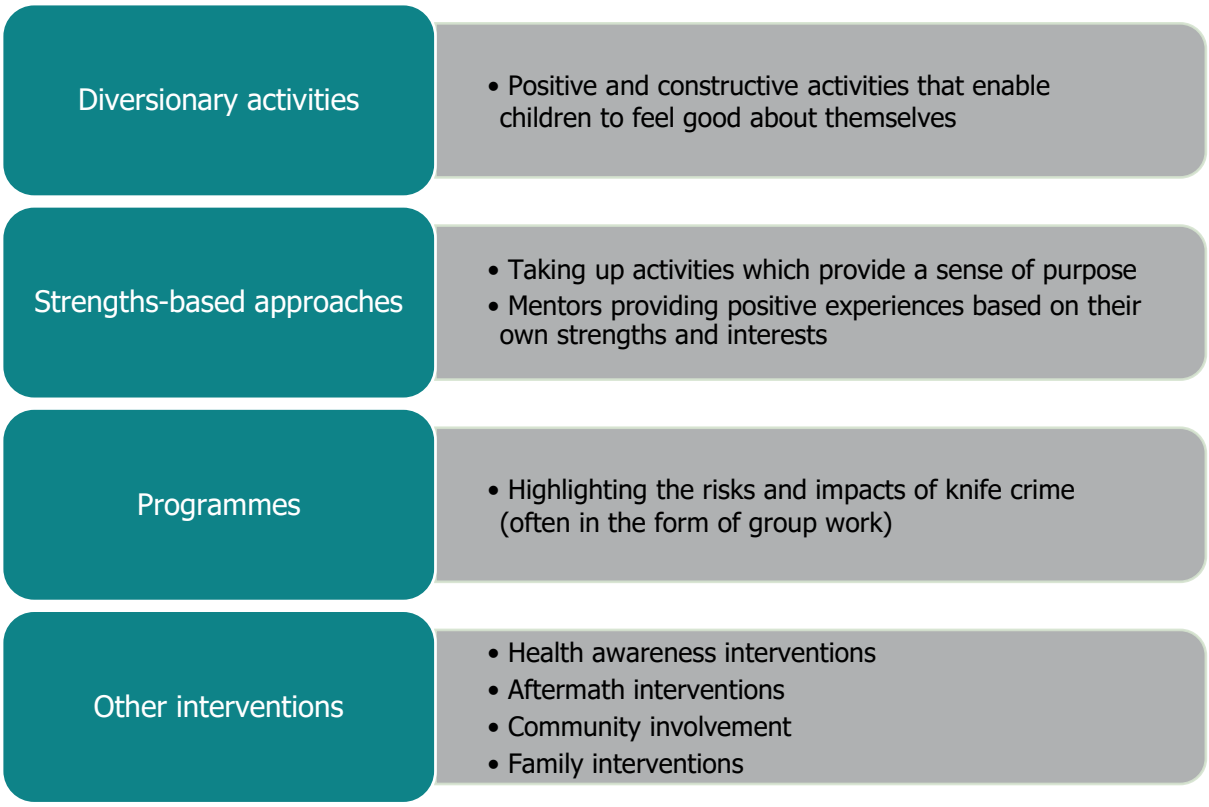
While the intention to provide greater clarity on the necessary processes is welcome, it is important that the increased prescription does not inadvertently undermine personalised practice. The Youth Endowment Fund (2026) emphasises that knife crime interventions should consist of 'targeted programmes for children with behavioural difficulties, such as social and emotional skills development, mentoring, or sports programmes.' An overly rigid approach risks failing those children who struggle to engage with standardised, off-the-shelf, interventions, and subsequent non-compliance has the potential to unnecessarily widen the criminal justice net, rather than providing the appropriate support to improve behaviour and protect the public (Gilmour, 2026).

Approaches to tackling knife crime

Knife crime should be seen as a priority area for YJSs given their close contact with the children most at risk of involvement and the accompanying safeguarding and public protection risks. To fulfil their potential impact, YJSs and other agencies need to be armed with high-quality evidence on what works in tackling knife crime at the individual and community levels.

In our 2022 report on promising approaches to tackling knife crime, we reported evidence of innovative practice, especially those YJSs deploying a multi-agency public health approach to tackling violence. As with most social problems, partnership working between agencies is critical. Figure 1 outlines the more specific approaches which were best supported by the research evidence and practitioner experience at the time of the report publication.

Figure 1: Promising approaches to tackling knife crime (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2022)

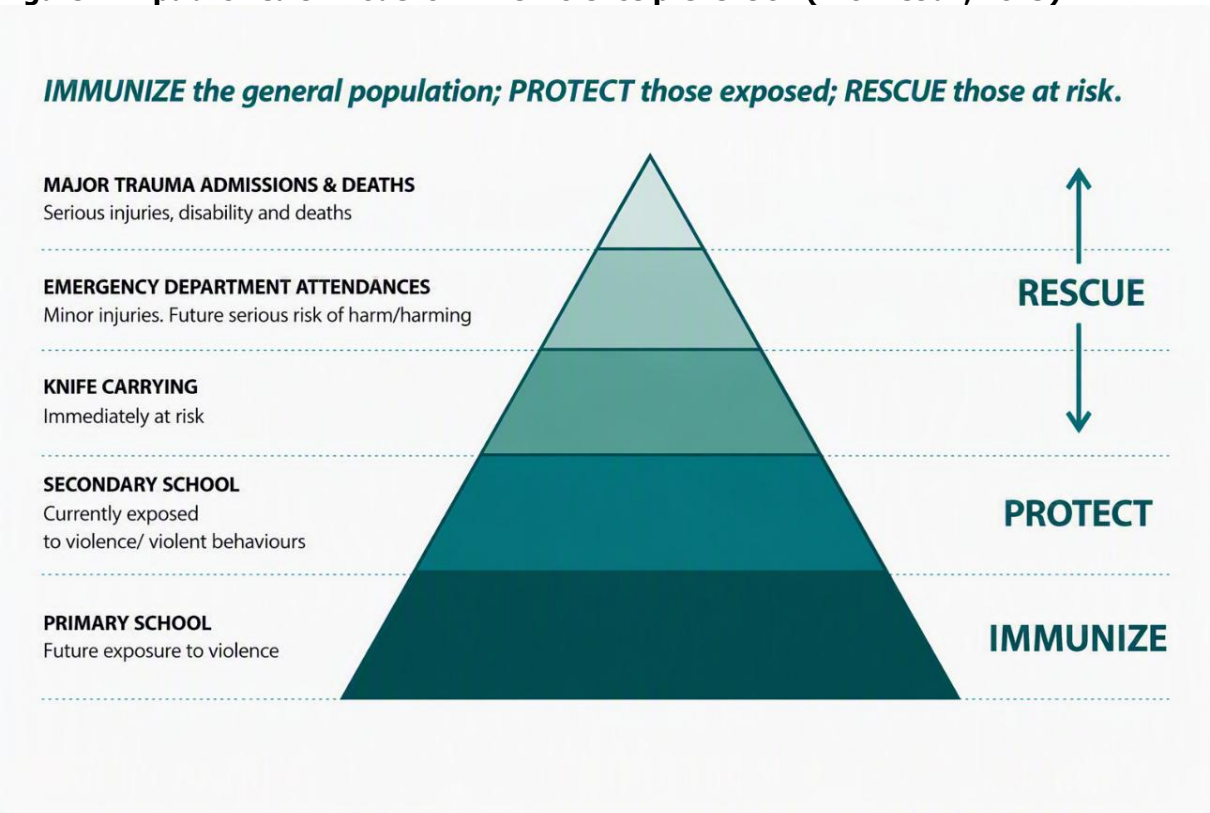


A systematic review, which was published in the same year (Browne et al., 2022), examined the evidence for six individual interventions to reduce knife crime; these initiatives had been evaluated to varying degrees of rigour and the authors concluded that the overall evidence base for knife crime interventions was poor, with high-quality evaluations urgently required for those interventions being deployed. The only promising intervention identified by this review was from the Scotland Violence Reduction Unit. This was a 'tertiary' intervention, targeted at known offenders and involving tailored support in housing, ETE, and other constructive activity opportunities, such as sports. The follow-up study found that knife carrying had halved. However, the intervention was self-referred, so participants may have been more motivated to change in the first place. Moreover, the intervention was targeted at gang members and thus may not be generalisable to other groups in the community.

The public health approach to tackling violence

The public health approach to violence prevention, which does require stronger evidence in different contexts, highlights that violence prevention needs to be addressed at multiple levels (Powell et al., 1999; see also Figure 2), with agencies working together through a shared language, an understanding of each other's roles and responsibilities, and systems that enable collaborative working and the sharing of critical data.

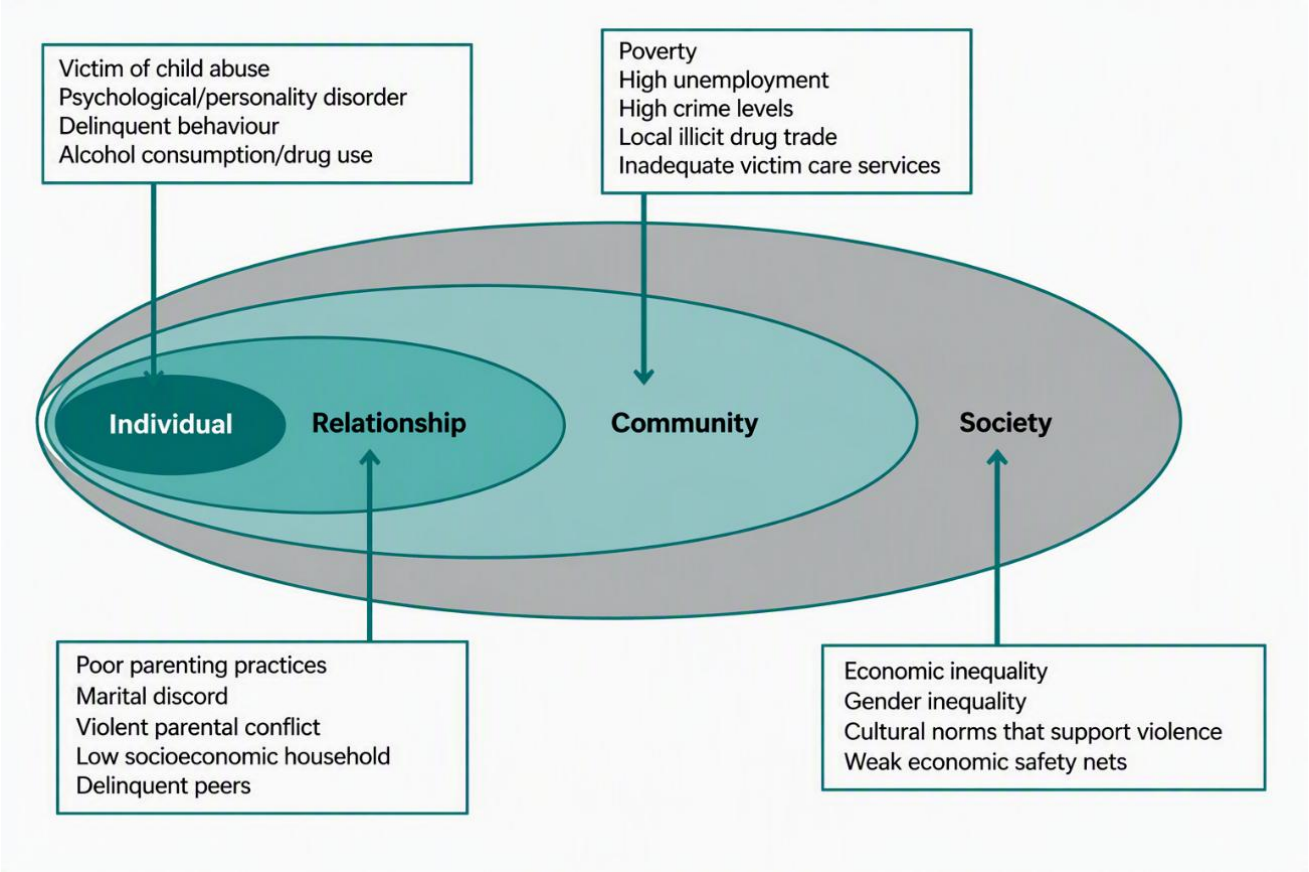
Figure 2: A public health model of knife violence prevention (Brohi et al., 2019)



The approach is the 'foundation for violence prevention initiatives that target early intervention, multi-agency working, and prevention, drawing on principles drawn from epidemiology and health' (Fraser et al., 2026, p.4). It is underpinned by the social-ecological model (see also Figure 3) which identifies four levels which interact to produce violence in the community (Batchelor and Gormley, 2023):

- **individual**: personal risk factors, whether static/non-modifiable (e.g. age, gender or criminal history) or dynamic (e.g. education, income or substance use) strongly influence the probability of becoming a victim or perpetrator
- **relationships**: dysfunctional family and/or antisocial peer relationships greatly influence offending attitudes and behaviour; however, relationships can also be a powerful source of social capital and positive pathways out of offending
- **community**: people live through social institutions, such as schools, workplaces, and neighbourhoods; the nature of these environments shapes our chances of being affected by violence
- **society**: the highest level is the societal and general social policy sphere; national health, economic, education, and criminal justice policies interact to inhibit or facilitate violence in society.

Figure 3: The social-ecological framework (World Health Organization, 2025)



A successful public health approach needs to operate simultaneously across the multiple levels of the socio-ecological framework. This necessitates meaningful partnership working at all levels of the state, in conjunction with the community and voluntary sectors. For example, evidence from Brennan (2019) suggests that individual or family interventions are unlikely to succeed without a wider community safety strategy that improves socio-economic conditions in distressed neighbourhoods. A public health strategy to stabilise communities in the medium term, followed up by a transformational and durable urban policy bringing sustained investment can be seen as the strongest strategy for sustainable violence reduction (Sharkey, 2017).

Place-based approaches also draw from socio-ecological theory, recognising the vital importance of understanding local context, issues and needs for an effective approach to serious youth violence (Pitts, 2021). Within joint targeted area inspections (JTAIs), more effective multi-agency and partnership working has been found when serious youth violence has become an established strategic priority, enabling a shared understanding of local need. These areas have used consultations with communities, families and children to inform their work, alongside analysis of relevant information (Ofsted et al., 2024).

As indicated by Figure 2, schools are one of the key partners for violence reduction. In England, Department for Education guidance (2025) now specifies that knife crime is an area to be covered in relationships, sex and health education lessons. The guidance includes the following personal safety provisions:

> *'4. Understanding which trusted adults they can talk to if pupils are worried about violence and/or knife crime.*
>
> *5. The law as it relates to knives and violence. Content and examples should relate to the local context and avoid using fear as an educational tool. Children should be taught that carrying weapons is uncommon and should not be scared into the perception that many young people are carrying knives (which can lead to the misconception that they need to carry a knife too).'*

Recognising and responding to safeguarding issues

While serious youth violence poses obvious risks from perpetrators to others (the latter often being other children), there are also significant risks to the children who display violent behaviour. The 2024 JTAI (Ofsted et al., 2024) found that too often the risk of violence was not identified as a safeguarding issue, leaving the child in question at risk. The wider research literature has stressed that effective adolescent safeguarding systems require effective relationships and collaborations within and between multi-agency and multi-disciplinary partnerships (Ball and McManus, 2024). It has been argued that, at its best, adolescent safeguarding involves the adoption of a relational approach at every level of the local system. There must be continual and active investment in these relationships, and it should not be assumed that it will be an 'automatic by-product' from the legal mandation of safeguarding as 'everyone's responsibility' (Ball and McManus, 2024, p.9). Furthermore, attention needs to be given to contextual safeguarding, recognising the contextual dynamics of extra-familial harm (Firmin et al., 2023), and to transitional safeguarding, focused upon those who will be soon turning 18 years old and moving from youth to adult probation services (Cocker et al., 2025).

Evidence on knife carrying and knife usage

The Millennium Cohort Study (Villadsen and Fitzsimons, 2021) reported that, by the age of 17, 6.4 per cent of young people carried or used a weapon in the preceding year; 8.8 per cent of boys and 3.9 per cent of girls. Those children who had carried or used weapons also reported they were more likely to have offended in other ways, including assaults, shop theft, vandalism, and online crime and bullying.

The study found that experiencing or witnessing domestic abuse, substance misuse, and mental illness (termed at the time as a 'toxic trio') were all associated with greater weapon carrying or use. As set out in Figure 4, school exclusion, peers who used drugs or alcohol, and self-harm were also drivers of carrying or using weapons. There was some association of excessive time on computer games with carrying or using weapons; this association most likely reflects lack of constructive time use and friendships rather than the content of the games.

Figure 4: Predictors of carrying/using a weapon aged 17 (UK Millennium Cohort Study, 2021)

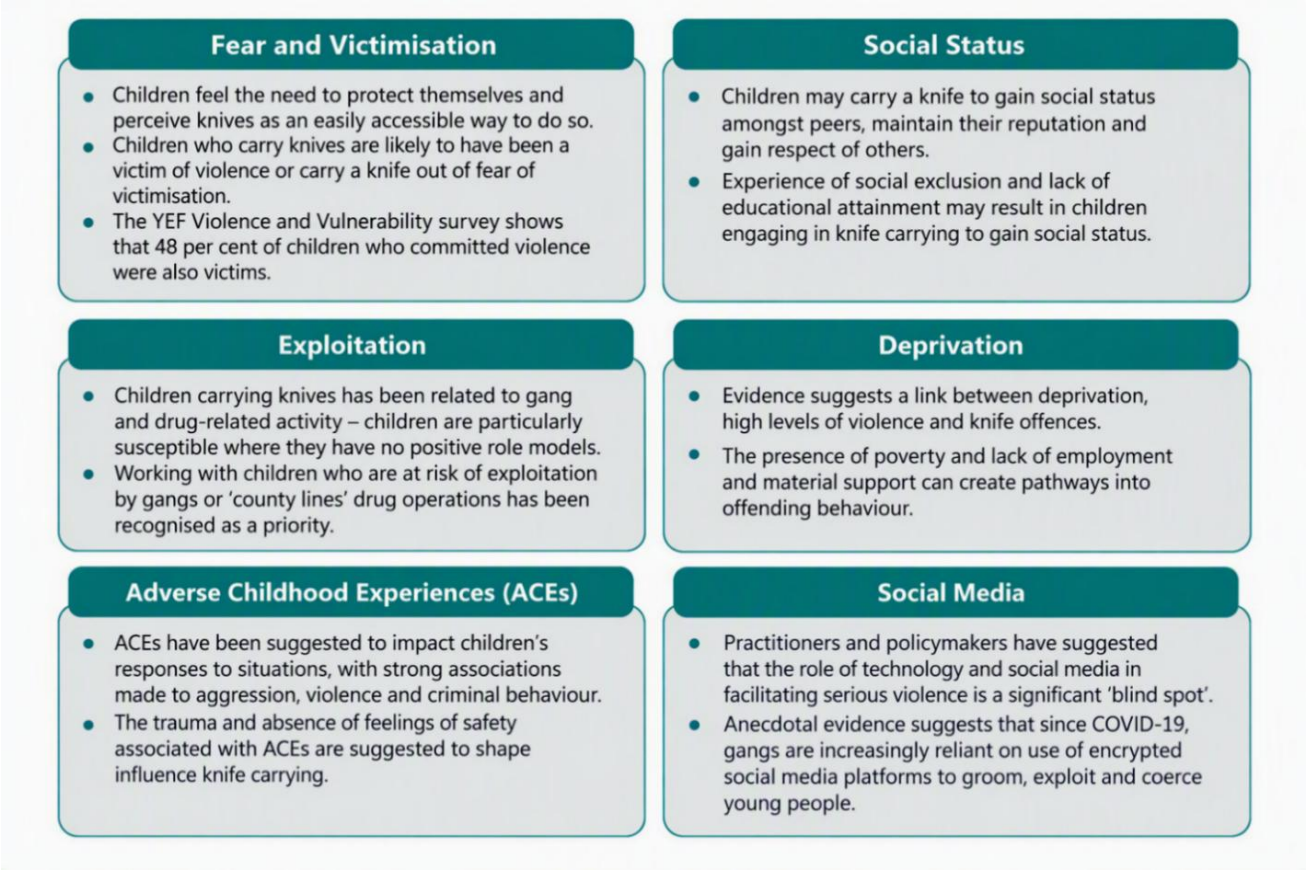


The Youth Justice Board (2025) has also summarised the research evidence on why some children carry knives, concluding that the evidence points to children carrying knives not with the specific intention to cause serious injury or death to any other person, but instead because of the following factors (see also Figure 5):

- rationalisations and other false narratives around self-protection and safety
- enhancing status
- the influence of negative peers and other associations
- histories of victimisation, abuse and trauma.

The 'bounded rationality' of those committing offences is a familiar theme in criminology (Cornish and Clarke, 1986). Although people who offend may make a cost/benefit calculation and believe they are acting in their own best interests, their perceptions are often based upon limited knowledge and circumstances. This is especially relevant to children, whose cognitive functioning and moral reasoning are still developing. It has also been highlighted how many boys within the youth justice system have internalised damaging ideals that equate masculinity with control, aggression and emotional suppression (King-Hill, 2026).

Figure 5: Drivers of knife carrying by children (Youth Justice Board, 2025)



In a more recent study (Farooq et al., 2026), children who were bullied between the ages of eight and 12 were found on average to be one and a half times more likely to carry a weapon at the age of 15 than children who were not involved in bullying. More generally, research consistently associates knife carrying and related offending with childhood adversity, victimisation and unmet needs, thus highlighting the importance of early identification, assessment, intervention and holistic support to divert these children from harmful behaviours and situations.

Applying an intersectional lens can be particularly helpful, exploring the potential impacts from race/ethnicity, sexuality, class, gender, dis/abilities, and wider lived experiences (Davis, 2022). Understanding all relevant factors and how they interact can help to build a more holistic view of safety (encompassing physical, relational and psychological safety) and the full range of safeguarding issues, identifying which children are most likely to require assistance and improving the targeting of interventions. The higher the number of risks and the lower the number of strengths and protective factors, the more likely that a broad package of holistic and collaborative intervention will be required.

The evidence on what works in tackling serious youth violence

Promising results have emerged from the Violence Reduction Units (VRUs), which were set up in 20 police force areas in England and Wales in 2019. The VRUs are partnerships between the police, local authorities, education, NHS, and the voluntary and community sector, adopting a whole systems approach with a variety of data and information sources used to identify the root causes of local violence and develop coordinated interventions.

Despite their supervision of many at-risk children and their experience of intervention delivery, YJSs are not always viewed as core VRU partners because their work is perceived as sitting 'downstream' of wider community- and societal-level violence prevention.

VRUs had commissioned or funded 369 interventions by 2024, most commonly targeting young people who were most at risk of becoming involved in violence. Interventions have included sports programmes, after-school groups, mentoring, and psychological programmes including cognitive-behavioural therapy. A Home Office evaluation (2025) indicated that there were modest reductions in homicides and hospitalisations from knife crime in the VRU areas compared to a statistical control group. The evaluation also recommended strengthening the VRU Theory of Change formulation to clearly identify how interventions and activities related to strategic risk and needs assessments.

Looking across the entirety of the evidence base, the Youth Endowment Fund (YEF) provides a toolkit of evidence-informed interventions to tackle youth violence. Each intervention type is rated for quality of evidence, cost, and level of impact. The following interventions relevant to knife crime are reported to have stronger evidence of impact:

- **focused deterrence**: involving attempts by police and partner agencies to identify the people most likely to be involved in violence, warn them of the legal consequences of offending, and make an offer of supporting them to desist
- **social skills training**: focused upon improving the ability of children to think before they act, understand other people's perspectives, communicate effectively, and use strategies for managing impulsiveness or aggression
- **cognitive behavioural therapy**: focused upon reducing the negative and impulsive thoughts and behaviours associated with aggression
- **restorative justice**: a process supporting the victim of a crime and the person responsible to communicate, repair the harm, and find a positive way forward
- **mentoring**: matching a child with a positive role model and facilitating regular meetings to help the child's social skills development
- **multisystemic therapy (MST)**: a holistic, psychologically-informed, family therapy intervention lasting up to six months with a focus upon identifying and tackling barriers to positive development for the child
- **police stop and search**: tactics used in specific 'hotspots' of crime and disorder to reduce violence and fear in the community.

The evidence on school-based interventions to reduce exclusions and after-school programmes is that they have low impacts on violent crime. However, interventions to reduce exclusions, while having no discernible impact on crime, can help to keep children in school, which is an individual and social good in itself. Knife crime education programmes are also a popular intervention in the UK. They are usually delivered in secondary schools but have a very poor evidence base. The YEF Toolkit found that none of the six evaluations (four in the UK, two in the USA) measured impact on violence reduction despite this being the primary objective of the intervention. YEF advises agencies against knife crime education programmes; it is better instead to focus resources upon support for children with behavioural challenges.

Overall, it is clear that targeted work with at-risk children can help many move towards a safe and positive future, although better evidence for what works at the universal level is required. Looking across inspection findings and commissioned/published research and

insights, the following key themes have been identified for the provision of high-quality services and delivery (Kenton et al., 2026):

- understand the scale of serious youth violence, knife crime, and CCE
- understand the local context
- understand the contexts and needs of individual children
- recognise the full range of safeguarding issues
- implement relational, child-centred and trauma-informed approaches
- optimise collaborative/partnership working
- focus upon young adults as well as children
- use and develop the evidence base.

2. Findings

The findings presented in this bulletin are based upon the aggregated youth inspection data for 94 YJSs published between 2021 and 2025. Our inspectors assessed the work of YJSs with children subject to court disposals (n=1,043 cases) and those children undertaking out-of-court resolutions (n=1,433 cases). Knife crime was recorded as an aspect of the current offence or previous offences in 45 per cent of the court disposal cases and 26 per cent of the out-of-court resolution cases. There were marked differences by sex and ethnicity, with knife crime less likely to be recorded as an aspect of the offending for girls and for those of White ethnicity.

In each case, our inspectors considered key questions within the inspection standards framework. As set out below, our 2021 – 2025 youth justice standards were structured around the ASPIRE case supervision framework[1]. Inspectors examined case records and met with case managers to help answer a series of questions across the ASPIRE framework relating to the work with children to desist from offending, to keep them safe, and to keep other people safe.

Inspection standards

Our inspections of YJSs are underpinned by standards which are grounded in evidence, learning and experience. In developing and reviewing the standards framework, we have worked constructively with providers and others to build a common view of high-quality services and what should be expected. At the time of the inspections included in the analysis in this report, the following standards and key questions were in place (supported by a number of underpinning prompt questions) – the reviewing standard and key questions applied to court disposals only while the others applied to both court disposals and out-of-court resolutions:[2]

- **Assessment**: Assessment is well-informed, analytical and personalised, actively involving the child and their parents or carers.
  - Does assessment sufficiently analyse how to support the child's desistance?
  - Does assessment sufficiently analyse how to keep the child safe?
  - Does assessment sufficiently analyse how to keep other people safe?
- **Planning**: Planning is well-informed, holistic and personalised, actively involving the child and their parents or carers.
  - Does planning focus sufficiently on supporting the child's desistance?
  - Does planning focus sufficiently on keeping the child safe?
  - Does planning focus sufficiently on keeping other people safe?
- **Implementation and delivery:** High-quality, well-focused, personalised and coordinated services are delivered, engaging and assisting the child.
  - Does the implementation and delivery of services effectively support the child's desistance?
  - Does the implementation and delivery of services effectively support the safety of the child?

[1] **A**ssessment, **S**entence **P**lanning, **I**mplementation, **R**eview, **E**valuate
https://hmiprobation.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/case-supervision/
[2] The current full standards framework can be found here:
https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmiprobation/about-our-work/our-standards-and-ratings/.

- Does the implementation and delivery of services effectively support the safety of other people?

- **Reviewing:** Reviewing of progress is well-informed, analytical and personalised, actively involving the child and their parents or carers.
  - Does reviewing focus sufficiently on supporting the child's desistance?
  - Does reviewing focus sufficiently on keeping the child safe?
  - Does reviewing focus sufficiently on keeping other people safe?

Key quantitative findings from the case assessments are set out in section 2.1. Logistic regression was used to examine which differences were significant when accounting for the relationships between the individual/case characteristic variables; these differences are highlighted in the report. The accompanying inspector case commentaries are then analysed thematically in section 2.2, examining the lives of children involved in knife crime, and in sections 2.3 and 2.4, further examining the quality of the work undertaken with these children. The key themes are illustrated with anonymised extracts from the inspectors' case notes. This thematic analysis was restricted to the court disposal cases, bearing in mind that knife crime was more commonly recorded in these cases, and that these cases tend to involve more serious and complex offending, or repeat offending.

Further information on our inspection data and the analyses undertaken can be found in Annex A and the accompanying Excel workbook.

2.1 The quality of work with children involved in knife crime

The analysis examined whether there were differences in the quality of service delivery to children involved in knife crime, whether linked to the current offence or previous offences, and other children.

The quality of work with children involved in knife crime was found to be sufficient in the majority of cases. It is important to recognise that these cases were more likely to be classified as high/very high in terms of safety and wellbeing concerns and in terms of risk of serious harm. For the out-of-court resolution cases, the high/very high classifications were even more likely in those cases where knife crime was linked to previous offending.

The logistic regression models, which were used to account for the relationships between personal and case characteristic variables, revealed that in the court disposal cases, previous sanctions and the safety and wellbeing classification were most commonly associated with the inspectors' judgements on the quality of the work undertaken. In terms of keeping other people safe, the analysis indicated that there was room for improvement in those cases with previous sanctions across the planning/implementation/reviewing stages.

In the out-of-court resolution cases, the safety and wellbeing classification and the risk of serious harm classification were most commonly associated with the inspectors' judgements. In terms of keeping other people safe, there was also an association between knife crime being a feature of previous offences and the inspectors' judgements at the planning and implementation stages. As set out in Figures 6 and 7, there was notable room for improvement in the low and medium risk of serious harm cases where knife crime was an aspect of previous offending.

Figure 6: Planning to keep other people safe, by risk of serious harm classification and indication of knife crime (out-of-court resolution cases)

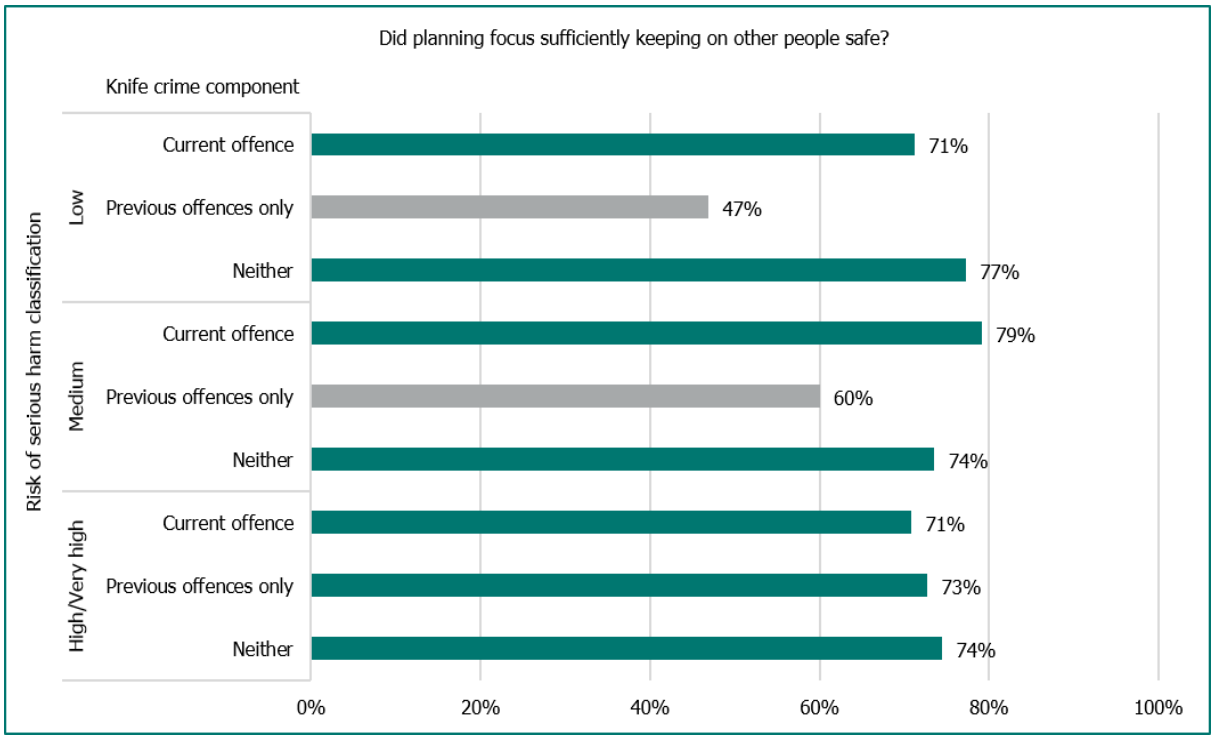
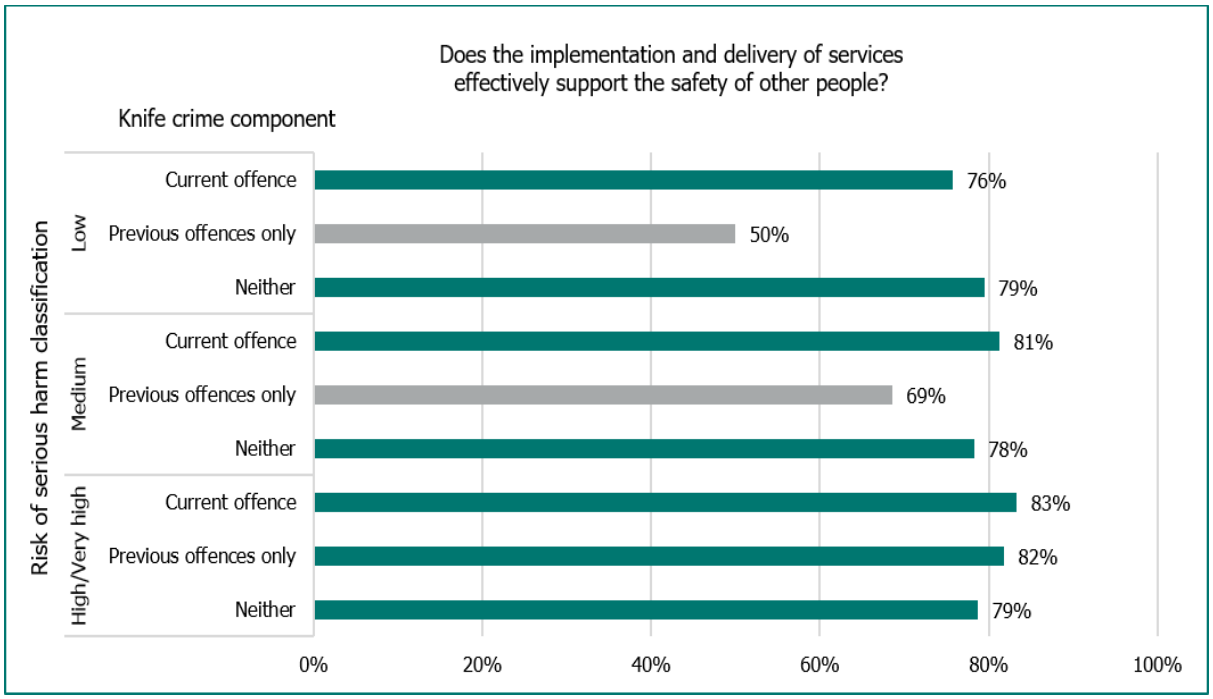


Figure 7: Implementation and delivery to keep other people safe, by risk of serious harm classification and indication of knife crime (out-of-court resolution cases)



In a previous bulletin we highlighted cases where our inspectors deemed the risk of serious harm classification to be inaccurate, with the carrying of weapons sometimes underplayed as a safety factor (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2022). In the current analysis, we found that among cases recorded as presenting a low risk of serious harm and involving current or previous knife-related offending, the inspector did not consider the recorded classification reasonable in 39 of 52 court disposal cases (75 per cent) and 47 of 97 out-of-court resolution cases (48 per cent). This warrants attention: accurate classification is important for children and communities, helping to ensure that appropriate resources and constructive activities are mobilised. The reality is that a large proportion of children on YJS caseloads present significant vulnerability and risk of harm concerns. In our 2022 analysis of safety concerns, all of the following were identified (linked to concerns to the children themselves and to other people – often 'two sides of the same coin'):

- carrying knives or other weapons
- illegal drug possession
- drug and alcohol misuse
- adversity and trauma
- care experience
- criminal exploitation including county lines
- negative peer influences
- mental illness
- domestic abuse
- family issues

It is notable that in the inspection data used for the current analysis, desistance-related factors were more likely to be recorded in the knife crime flagged cases, and particularly in those cases where knife crime was linked to previous offences. In these latter cases, the highest levels of need were as follows:

- Court disposal cases:
  - lifestyle – 80 per cent
  - substance misuse – 76 per cent
  - learning and ETE – 75 per cent
- Out-of-court resolution cases:
  - learning and ETE – 68 per cent
  - lifestyle – 66 per cent
  - living arrangements – 63 per cent
  - substance misuse – 61 per cent

Further consideration is given in the next section to the lives of the children involved in knife crime.

2.2 The lives of children involved in knife crime

Analysis of the inspector commentaries in the court disposal cases with knife crime involvement revealed numerous adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), which were often overlapping and cumulative, making the lives of the children both difficult and concerning. The key themes set out below align closely with the wider research literature.

Family instability, adversity and trauma

Many children had lived in unstable or traumatic family environments. The case commentaries frequently referenced domestic violence and abuse, parental and sibling criminality, and neglect and lack of caregiving.

> *'There is a history of domestic abuse from father to mother, criminal activity involving his father … resulting in him going to prison, and abuse in the family home by older brother. His mother has specific needs in relation to physical and mental health.'*

Another case described a boy who had been taken into care due to neglect and traumatic experiences, including witnessing a murder and intra-familial violence. Being a Looked After Child or subject to a Child Protection Plan was common across the inspected cases, reflecting the significant safeguarding needs and adverse circumstances experienced by many of these children.

> *'This was a challenging and complex case to manage. J was a Looked After Child who moved out of area immediately following the first order being imposed and continued to go missing for days at a time. He was considered a high risk to others and was also extremely vulnerable and at high risk of child exploitation.'*

Levell (2026) has similarly noted how childhood experience of domestic abuse features in the lives of many young men convicted of violent crimes and can form part of cumulative and overlapping experiences of adversity. Recognising these experiences, she highlights the importance of using a trauma-informed approach, as well applying a masculinity-aware and gender-transformative lens and understanding the victim/perpetrator overlap.

Deprivation and poor or insecure housing

Poverty, unstable or poor-quality accommodation, even homelessness, were often part of these children's lives. Such instability exacerbates vulnerability towards negative peer groups or survival behaviours.

> *'There were complex safeguarding issues within H's case. This includes risk of criminal exploitation, his mother's imprisonment for conspiracy to murder, risk of homelessness, NEET[3] status and unmet speech, language and communication needs. There were concerns about organised crime groups surrounding the family.'*

Billingham and Irwin-Rogers (2022) summarise the evidence that poverty, low income, and poor or insecure housing create an atmosphere of familial stress and conflict that can act to undermine a child's longer-term ability to form successful relationships, to feel valued, and to flourish in later life. Such relational and self-esteem problems can contribute to offending behaviour and anti-social attitudes and behaviours.

Negative peer influences, gangs and criminal exploitation

For many children, a pattern of negative peer associations, including urban street gang involvement, was evident. Some children were being exploited by older criminals and had links to county lines drugs networks.

> *'J is 17 years old, his father is currently in custody, however, he looks up to his father. He appears to lack a positive self-identity, and he has been drawn to criminal gangs and there are concerns that he is at risk of criminal exploitation. He is NEET and has moderate learning difficulties.'*
>
> *'Concerns in relation to CCE escalated. Z has a number of outstanding court matters awaiting trial or sentence, there are also a number of matters for which he is released under police investigation. Z's risky behaviours have continued to escalate, and he is now believed to be a perpetrator or recruiter to county lines activity. He is currently in breach.'*

[3] Not in Education, Employment, or Training

The Children's Commissioner (Clarke, 2019) reported that, based upon their risk and needs assessments, around 12 per cent of children being supervised by YJSs were affiliated with urban street gangs. That was 2,420 children (mostly boys) in 2018; an update would be most welcome.

Harding (2014) undertook an ethnographic study of South London gang life, finding that joining a gang was part of a risk management strategy for young people with constrained life choices. Gang participation provided a certain amount of personal security in the neighbourhood, while also creating new dangers of violence and offending. The gang also offered significant rewards and incentives, including money and gifts, friendship, and 'career' recognition. There can be an element of forced affiliation, involving threats of violence to the child or family members if an approach is refused. Based upon the findings, Harding (2014) urged agencies to map out the realities of street gangs in their area, analysing the specific pull and push factors for the young people in their care. Moreover, the authorities should treat gang membership as a multi-agency child safeguarding issue, rather than primarily as a law enforcement problem.

Figueira and Alleyne (2025) found in their study of a London YJS that children involved in knife crime had higher levels of gang association, victimisation, and trauma compared to other children being supervised. Becoming a crime victim increased the likelihood of committing a violent offence. The researchers reported that gang-related knife crime was more instrumental, motivated by monetary reward and status, than non-gang knife crime – which was more expressive, driven by emotional instability and personal animosity. They argue that this distinction should be integrated into the AssetPlus assessment and planning system[4].

Fear and self-protection

In some cases, knife carrying was driven by the (erroneous) belief that it afforded greater safety from peers (see also Gray, Smithson and Jump, 2021). Such peer dynamics frequently escalated risk, with some young people even becoming recruiters of others into crime.

> *'T, a 17-year-old boy, was sentenced to a six-month Referral Order for two offences of possession of a machete on two separate occasions a few days apart. In the first incident, T was at college, learning of a gathering of other boys with weapons outside, and in fear that he would be attacked, equipped himself with a machete accessed from another pupil. In the second incident, he was with a friend in a local park when police officers found him in possession of a machete which he claims he found.'*

The drivers of victimisation and self-protection are covered in the Youth Justice Board (2025) review of the research evidence on why some children carry knives (see Section 1 above). However, in his analysis of the Offending, Crime and Justice Survey, Brennan (2019) found that experience of victimisation and fears about personal safety were weakly associated with carrying illegal weapons. A recent history of violence perpetration (see also Brennan, 2020), neighbourhood disorder, and lack of trust in the police were found in this study to be the strongest drivers of weapon possession.

[4] *AssetPlus* is the Youth Justice Board's assessment and intervention planning platform used for statutory cases in the youth justice system in England and Wales. It aims to provide a holistic assessment of a child's strengths, needs, safety concerns, and factors linked to offending and desistance, supporting tailored planning and interventions.

Learning needs, disrupted education, and educational exclusion

Many children were NEET or had been excluded from school, sometimes for long periods. A range of special educational needs and neurodevelopmental differences were common, including autism, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), dyslexia, and speech and language difficulties. These factors often contributed to school failure or refusal, and unmet learning needs and lack of engagement in education left many children without constructive activity and vulnerable to negative influences.

> *'Y is an 18-year-old male who received a six-month referral order for possession of a knife. This was his first conviction, having previously had an out-of-court resolution. Y was diagnosed with autism and anxiety and also suffers from physical health concerns which limit mobility. His needs have had a significant impact on his socialisation, and he is vulnerable to exploitation.'*

Mental and emotional health needs

Unaddressed emotional or psychological needs stemming from bereavement, abuse, or other trauma were common for children involved in knife crime. Some experienced difficulties including conduct disorder and anxiety, while others reported hearing voices or displayed other indicators of serious mental illness. However, access to mental health services was inconsistent; some children engaged with Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) or psychologists, while others refused to engage, or did not receive needed counselling. Unmanaged trauma and mental health issues in the background often correlated with continuing risky behaviour.

> *'C was on a child protection plan under the category of neglect due to domestic abuse to his mother, who had mental health problems, and his father's substance misuse and intermittent contact. C also had mental health needs and previous concerns around child sexual exploitation. C's younger siblings are also subject to the plan due to their concerning behaviour and lack of boundaries. C has been diagnosed with ADHD and states that he hears voices.'*

There is a known perpetrator/victim overlap, and in an analysis of child deaths by knife injury, Roberts and Levell (2026) discovered that 78 per cent of the victims had possible neurodivergence, learning, or mental health problems. However, only 29 per cent of the children had been referred to CAMHS. Their cases were characterised by high thresholds for CAMHS referral, insufficient assessment, and long waiting times for treatment.

Overall profiles

These themes illustrate that children who become involved in knife crime often carry a heavy load of personal, familial, and social adversities. Family breakdown, neighbourhood poverty, peer pressure, gang presence and intimidation, exclusion from school, and unmet health needs create a bounded rationality (Simon, 2008) in which carrying a weapon might seem necessary, inevitable or attractive. Understanding these drivers is essential for effective responses and intervention planning, and it is essential for practitioners to exercise professional curiosity (Phillips et al., 2022), looking beyond the visible evidence and questioning why a young person is behaving in concerning ways.

2.3 Working with children involved in knife crime

Across the commentaries in the court disposal cases where knife crime was recorded, inspectors highlighted numerous examples of good practice where youth justice practitioners successfully addressed harmful behaviours while promoting children's positive development. This section sets out the main successful practice themes emerging from the commentaries.

Engagement within trusted relationships

Building a consistent, trusting relationship with the child was a cornerstone of good practice. Many case managers showed persistence and genuine care, which improved the child's engagement with supervision. YJS case managers were often the one consistent professional through the child's care and justice journey, with their steady support helping the child to engage with services and cope with complex and difficult experiences.

> *'L was moved to three different residential placements during the order, and the case manager did well in joint work with different social workers, liaison with different YJSs and residential staff and remain focussed on delivering the contract and supporting L through these changes. The practitioner was the one consistent professional with him at this time, and he began to be more open with her and engage in the work set.'*

Inspectors highlighted where practitioners had gone the extra mile to foster engagement and build trust with children who had often felt disappointed about the professionals working with them.

> *'The case manager has shown particular commitment in the work with R, which has included attending appointments at 8pm on a regular basis to ensure engagement. This has allowed a strong trusting relationship to be built which will hopefully be the foundation for ongoing change.'*

A holistic and child-centred approach

Effective delivery was grounded in a holistic view of the child and did not simply focus upon the offence. Practitioners who addressed the child's broader needs and identity recorded positive outcomes. In many cases, there was evidence of trauma-informed practice, where the worker understood and then accounted for the child's past trauma or ACEs. Diversity and identity were considered in some exemplary cases: for instance, one practitioner explored a boy's mixed cultural identity with him, reflecting on what it meant and how it might impact his future.

> *'There was positive engagement with child to explore his racial and religious identity. This assists R to explore his family relationships, sense of belonging, peers and his past experiences and motivations to build his own identity.'*

Several children with learning difficulties benefited from adjusted communication methods. In one case, the practitioner utilised speech and language therapy (SALT) assessments and tailored sessions (shorter meetings, visual aids, even going for walks with a staff member's dog to put the child at ease) to accommodate a girl's autism, ADHD and anxiety.

> *'There is a holistic approach to case management, with excellent co-ordination of the professional network allowing for specialists to complete work that is meaningful to the child, addressing desistance, safety and wellbeing, and risk of*

> *serious harm effectively. Work with SALT results in an understanding of ways in which to work within the scope of the child's learning and communication needs.'*

Multi-agency collaboration and information sharing

Effective partnership working was a prominent feature of successful cases. Inspectors praised cases displaying close coordination between youth justice staff and other agencies, including children's social care, police, schools and colleges, mental health services, and/or substance misuse teams. Such wraparound support was a recurring feature in successful cases.

> *'Strong multi-agency team, all plans aligned and professionals worked together to support L and his mother.'*
>
> *'A key area of strength in this case is the multi-agency approach and clear evidence of professionals working together to achieve positive outcomes …The consistency of having the same specialist workers and also limiting the number of services who had direct contact with J in order to secure some positive relationships and begin work on internal controls has been effective whilst external controls were delivered by specialist services.'*

Information-sharing forums, such as risk management panels, multi-agency child exploitation arrangements, or youth to adult transition meetings, were used well in certain cases to clarify roles and ensure continuity of care. When agencies presented a united, coordinated front, the child benefited from consistent messaging and more comprehensive support. This was especially important for those children leaving care or when transitioning to adult probation (Cocker et al., 2025). Joint working helped manage risks through shared intelligence and planning, thus promoting desistance through the force multiplier effect of diverse opportunities for pro-social change.

Targeted, creative and engaging interventions and activities

Inspectors praised creative and inclusive interventions that stimulated the child into positive activities or addressed specific issues in engaging ways.

> *'The child was identified as a visual learner at assessment stage, and the case manager used appropriate approaches to engage him. There was an outstanding piece of work drawing on the incident with Will Smith at The Oscars. The case manager had sourced three separate clips of the incident and played them to the child, looking at different perspectives and how situations can be escalated.'*

There were also instances of creative reparation work tailored to the child's interests. A boy completed a project researching positive Black role models, creating work to be displayed at the YJS for Black History Month; this reinforced his own positive identity as a young Black person.

YJS education officers and case managers helped several NEET children return to school or start college/apprenticeships. Others facilitated diversionary activities (e.g. sports and leisure, and mentoring programmes) to occupy the young person in pro-social ways.

> *'To support E's resettlement, with E's consent, the case manager prepares/sends a letter to a series of sports academies providing some details of E's struggles and aspirations urging them to consider him as a candidate.'*

Advocacy and practical support

Many practitioners went above and beyond their formal role to advocate for the child's needs and remove barriers.

> *'The child is desperate to return to mainstream education, and his practitioner is persistent and advocates on his behalf. Despite the child refusing CAMHS when in the presence of his mother, the practitioner continued to revisit this and explore his mother's concerns. As a result, he requested to be referred, and this is seen as a really positive outcome.'*

Practitioners also provided very practical forms of support, for example, a seconded nurse not only ensured a boy saw a dentist (for the first time in many years) but even drove him to appointments.

Overview of themes

The inspectors' commentaries illustrate YJSs at their best: forming positive relationships, coordinating with partners, addressing risks and needs, developing strengths, and seizing opportunities to guide children away from harm and into better lives. This very much aligns with the evidence base for working with children in conflict with the law, as summarised on HM Inspectorate of Probation's website. The thread running through the evidence is the need to establish a positive, secure, consistent and trusting relationship with the child and the need for an individualised approach and intervention plan, often following collaborative multi-agency assessment. As with all high-harm behaviours, involvement in knife crime places an additional urgency to make progress on risk and need factors, but an overemphasis on the offence is likely to be counterproductive. The focus must be on the individual child in their social environment and understanding the full context of their life, recognising that each child's strengths and challenges will be different, shaped by their own characteristics, experiences, and circumstances.

2.4 Considerations for consistent high-quality practice

While the commentaries in the court disposal cases where knife crime was recorded revealed many examples of good practice, some recurring problems were also identified by inspectors. Key themes are set out in this section; addressing these issues could support more consistent high-quality practice, helping children to get back on track.

Holistic risk assessments which cover all relevant factors

In some cases, initial assessments lacked depth or omitted critical information. Practitioners sometimes failed to thoroughly analyse the reasons behind the offending or the risks present, with insufficient use of partner information and insufficient use of professional curiosity.

> *'The risk assessment does not consider cumulative risks associated with potential exploitation in the case and fails to draw upon police intelligence and [out of area] information meaning the risk assessment is not well-developed or informed. In our interview, the case manager advised that she would not pro-actively seek this information, despite knowing another area would likely hold significant information, based on there being no known process or link in place to do this.'*

Some assessments underestimated risk of harm to others (as set out in Section 2.1), missed essential contextual factors, and needed more analytical effort. Inspectors pointed out instances where important context, such as peer influences, family pressures, or poor role models, should have been examined as potential drivers of offending.

> *'There are threads of important information throughout the AssetPlus assessment but too little sense that these have been analysed in a meaningful way. The record leaves the question about whether C would use a weapon, the impact on the victim, if the police had any further intelligence that would help with resettlement, whom he shouldn't mix with in custody, and the best place for him to live on release from custody. There is no joint assessment with probation about Dad and the continued links between the two.'*

In some cases, cultural or identity factors were noted but not explored.

> *'The assessment could have been strengthened significantly through assessing his experience of discrimination, intersectionality and being a young Black male. Whilst the pre-sentence report makes some reference of this, it doesn't capture his lived experience through his own words and views. There were no specific interventions delivered around his cultural identity.'*

Overall, where assessments focused narrowly on the offence and omitted analysis of the child's circumstances, needs, and motivations, the resulting plans tended to be less tailored and holistic.

Planning to control risk, achieve success, and handle contingencies

Another common theme was that of intervention plans lacking rigour. More contingency planning was often required to anticipate and prepare for potential setbacks or emerging risks – indeed, sometimes contingency planning was entirely absent.

> *'The contingency plan does not identify any factors that would indicate that the child's risk is increasing; and the plan to manage any changes in risk are too generic (speak to a manager, liaise with partner agencies, review Asset Plus) to effectively manage escalating risk and keep people safe in this case.'*

In other instances, plans failed to match the assessed level of risk or complexity of the case.

> *'There are omissions within planning to keep others safe; whilst the offences were committed twelve months prior, there is no safety planning to protect actual or potential victims, other than an objective to complete victim awareness. There is some suggestion that knives were a feature of current or previous behaviour and this has not been addressed. The plan provided to probation would have been insufficient for them to manage any and all risks.'*

More attention was sometimes needed for the exit strategy; some terminating or transferring cases had no formal plan for sustaining progress post-order or for the handover to the new agency.

> *'Given the complex nature of this case and classified high risk of potential harm, I would have expected to see a much more detailed multi-agency plan to protect the child. It does mention CAMHS, and Looked After Child placement, however, the plan lacked a structure going forward. For example, what the placement aims to achieve and the eventual exit strategy to create long-term safety.'*

Proactive management and follow-through

Safety concerns can of course escalate over time and poorer practice examples also involved a failure to respond decisively to escalating risks or non-compliance. In some cases, practitioners waited too long to enforce breaches or involve managers.

> *'Assessment and planning adequately supported desistance. The key areas to keep the child safe were also identified. However, insufficient work was delivered and engagement was inconsistent. Information shared by the child's parent was not reviewed. The necessary enforcement actions were not taken.'*

Management oversight was sometimes minimal or ineffective.

> *'Given the concerns there needed to be planned management oversight to support the practitioner and hold other agencies to account.'*

In a few cases, practitioners appeared to grow fatalistic or disengaged from the case.

> *'There was very little work completed with C to improve his engagement and compliance and break his escalating offending behaviour … The case manager described C as a 'career criminal', whom he supposed is unlikely to change. C advised the YJS that he didn't want to work with them but would rather transfer to probation. There is no evidence that the case manager explained why he would benefit from staying with the YJS, of a proper handover to probation.'*

3. Conclusion

Knife crime among children, while representing a relatively small proportion of overall youth offending, attracts significant public and policy attention due to the potentially devastating consequences of carrying or using a knife. In this context, an examination of YJS delivery for children involved in knife crime was the focus of this bulletin, with the aim of identifying learning to enhance practice.

Many positives have been identified, with services and practitioners acutely aware of the gravity of knife crime and largely rising to the challenge. The quality of work with children involved in knife crime was found to be sufficient in the majority of cases and appeared to be driven by the level of safety concerns rather than by the offence alone. This suggests that YJSs generally focused attention and resources on those children presenting the greatest levels of vulnerability and risk. However, in the out-of-court resolution cases, previous knife-related offending was associated with poorer inspector judgements on planning and implementation to keep other people safe, with notable room for improvement when there was a low or medium risk of serious harm classification.

It was particularly striking that the risk classification deemed appropriate by the inspector differed from that recorded by the case manager in many of those cases classified as low risk and where knife crime was recorded (linked to the current offence or previous offences). This warrants attention; getting the classification correct is vitally important for both the children involved and the community, facilitating access to wider resources to bolster safety while providing the platform for constructive activities.

As has been highlighted, children who become involved in knife crime usually do so in a context of profound vulnerability, deprivation, and trauma. Their lives frequently encompass abuse, victimisation, familial instability, exploitation, and insufficient community support and education. Understanding and mitigating these drivers is essential; effective approaches and interventions cannot focus solely on the symptom (knife carrying) without addressing the underlying needs and factors that influence a child to believe a weapon is necessary for their protection or status among peers.

The qualitative insights which have been set out demonstrate how tailored, child-centred approaches can make a critical difference. When practitioners build trust, show cultural and emotional understanding, and coordinate closely with other services, they create a supportive environment which encourages children to engage in positive change. It has been shown how good practice – characterised by enduring engagement, holistic support, advocacy, and multi-agency teamwork – can help the reintegration of these children who have frequently experienced profound trauma and adversity.

Areas for delivering more consistent high-quality practice have also been identified in relation to assessing, planning, and management oversight, facilitating improved understanding of each child and the options for support and intervention. Investing time in assessing and planning, including careful contingency and exit plans, better prepares practitioners to tackle the complexities that children often present. Increased focus upon these areas could help even more children to get back on track, building upon the positive work already taking place.

Recent statutory guidance from HM Government (2026) places renewed emphasis on YJSs as the first point of referral for all arrests of children for unlawful knife possession. This

creates opportunities for earlier assessment and support, potentially addressing some of the issues identified above, although success will also depend upon the use of evidence-led interventions and the quality and tailoring of implementation. The more prescriptive approach must be implemented proportionately and without unnecessarily widening the criminal justice net through subsequent non-compliance. A personalised response remains vital, and the initial assessments and plans completed by YJS practitioners will now largely determine which partner agencies and services are mobilised to support these children towards safer lives. With their knowledge, expertise and experience, YJS managers and practitioners are a vital resource for children's services, education providers, community safety partnerships, and violence reduction partnerships. Notably, while YJS practitioners' work with children and families is vital, these services cannot by themselves reduce knife crime and serious violence. Sustained progress depends on coordinated, multi-agency, community-based public health approaches that address the conditions in which violence develops and persists, maximising positive outcomes for individual children and for wider society.

Implications for policy and practice

- **Look beyond the immediate offence.** Assessment should consider knife-related offending alongside the child's circumstances, motivations, strengths, vulnerabilities, and wider contextual risks.
- **Give appropriate weight to previous knife involvement.** Previous knife use should not automatically lead to a higher risk classification or a more intensive response, but full consideration should be given to the history, context, motivations, and implications of this behaviour.
- **Combine relational practice with robust case management.** Trusted relationships and individualised support should be underpinned by thorough assessment, focused planning, clear contingency arrangements, and timely responses to changing risks.
- **Apply proportionate and tailored child-centred approaches.** Earlier referral can improve access to assessment and support, but intervention should remain personalised and avoid unnecessary escalation into more formal criminal justice processes.
- **Sustain coordinated multi-agency working.** Youth justice services need timely information, aligned plans and sustained engagement from children's social care, education, health, police, and community partners.
- **Invest in wider prevention.** Youth justice services cannot address all the social and contextual conditions associated with knife crime. Effective policy should combine targeted support with place-based and public-health approaches addressing exploitation, exclusion, deprivation, and community safety.

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Annex A: Methodology

The findings presented in this bulletin are based upon data from 94 YJS inspections conducted between 2021 and 2025. This represents about three in five of all YJSs across England and Wales, covering every region and areas varying widely in size and levels of deprivation.

Youth Justice Service	Publication date
Barnet	31 May 2022
Barnsley	19 July 2023
Bath and North East Somerset	02 February 2025
Bedfordshire	09 December 2021
Bexley	12 July 2024
Birmingham	21 March 2023
Blackburn with Darwen	17 January 2023
Blaenau Gwent and Caerphilly	22 September 2022
Bolton	06 July 2022
Bracknell Forest	05 March 2024
Bridgend	14 June 2022
Bromley	07 January 2025
Buckinghamshire	10 January 2023
Calderdale	17 May 2022
Cambridgeshire	03 October 2023
Cardiff	02 August 2022
Carmarthenshire	19 March 2024
Ceredigion	12 November 2024
Conwy and Denbighshire	08 May 2024
Coventry	21 February 2023
Cumberland	29 October 2024
Cwm Taf	19 August 2024
Derbyshire	28 September 2022
Devon	22 November 2022
Doncaster	10 October 2024
Dorset Combined YOS	17 January 2023
Durham	03 November 2022
Ealing	26 September 2023
East Sussex	17 September 2024
Enfield	27 February 2024
Flintshire	11 July 2024
Gateshead	23 May 2023
Greenwich	20 June 2023
Gwynedd Mon	12 March 2024

Youth Justice Service	Publication date
Hackney	10 May 2023
Hammersmith and Fulham	20 October 2022
Haringey	04 March 2025
Harrow	10 December 2021
Havering	01 November 2022
Hillingdon	10 May 2022
Isle of Wight	14 November 2023
Islington	20 August 2024
Knowsley	11 May 2023
Leicestershire	02 December 2021
Lewisham	17 September 2024
Lincolnshire	04 April 2023
Monmouthshire and Torfaen	20 October 2022
Neath Port Talbot	12 May 2022
Newcastle-upon-Tyne	18 February 2025
Newport	11 July 2024
Norfolk	28 January 2025
North East Lincolnshire	27 September 2022
North Lincolnshire	05 September 2023
Northamptonshire	13 October 2023
Northumberland	19 July 2023
Nottinghamshire	23 January 2024
Pembrokeshire	11 March 2025
Plymouth	04 February 2022
Portsmouth	21 June 2022
Powys	30 October 2025
Reading	03 December 2024
Redbridge	10 May 2024
Salford	09 May 2024
Slough	14 January 2025
Solihull	19 December 2023
Somerset	18 March 2025
Southend on Sea	24 September 2024
Southwark	17 October 2023
St Helens	21 February 2023
Staffordshire	19 December 2023
Stockport	01 November 2022
Stoke on Trent	28 September 2022
Suffolk	16 May 2024
Sunderland	13 December 2022

Youth Justice Service	Publication date
Surrey	15 March 2022
Sutton	06 September 2022
Swansea	15 February 2022
Swindon	24 January 2023
Tameside	25 May 2023
Thurrock	23 August 2022
Tower Hamlets and City of London	26 July 2022
Vale of Glamorgan	16 August 2022
Wakefield	09 September 2025
Waltham Forest	08 May 2024
West Berkshire	28 March 2023
West Mercia	19 May 2022
West Sussex	11 May 2022
Westminster	17 September 2024
Westmorland and Furness	04 March 2025
Wiltshire	14 May 2024
Wirral	29 July 2025
Wokingham	17 September 2024
Wolverhampton	08 February 2022
York	14 December 2022

A total of 1,043 court disposal cases and 1,433 out-of-court resolutions were examined across these inspections. Each inspection case sample was based upon a long list of all children supervised by the YJS within a specific two-month timeframe before the start of inspection fieldwork. The court disposal cases included community sentences and post-custody cases, whilst the out-of-court resolution cases included youth cautions, youth conditional cautions, and community resolutions. Work with children in custody was thus out of scope.

All cases were allocated to individual inspectors, who examined the relevant records and interviewed the case manager for the respective case. To support the reliability and validity of their judgements against our standards framework, all cases were examined using standard case assessment forms, underpinned by rules and guidance, and further reinforced through training and quality assurance activities.

Analysis

The percentages presented in the tables and charts within this report and accompanying Excel workbook relate to the inspectors' case assessment judgements. Binary logistic regression was used to examine which individual/case characteristic variables were associated with inspectors' judgements on the quality of the work undertaken. Within all the regression models, a forced entry method was used, entering all relevant independent variables in the same step. This method identifies the unique association between each independent variable and the dependent variable while controlling for the effects of all other variables included in the model. The statistical significance threshold was set at five per cent

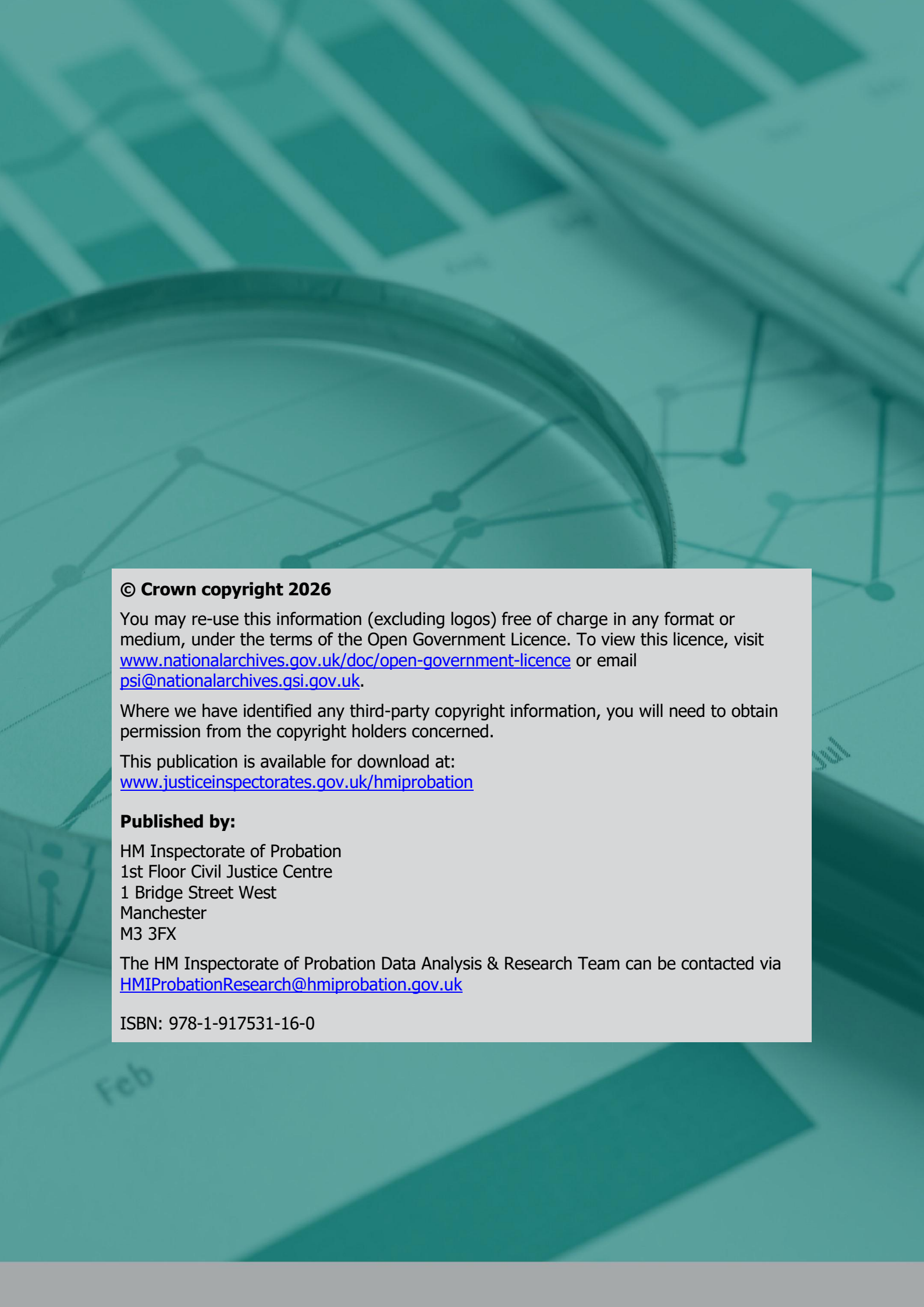
($p<0.05$). This indicates that the result would be unlikely to arise by chance alone, but it does not prove causality or show that the finding is necessarily of practical or policy importance.

Inspector commentaries in the court disposal cases where knife crime was recorded were analysed using a human-led, AI-assisted thematic analysis approach. A random sample of 20 per cent of case commentaries was initially reviewed and coded by a researcher to identify emerging patterns and develop a preliminary coding framework. Microsoft Copilot Researcher was used to support the coding and thematic analysis of all the cases. AI-generated outputs were reviewed critically and refined by the researcher, with codes, themes, and reporting iteratively developed through human interpretation and judgement. Responsibility for the analysis, interpretation and reporting of findings remained with the lead researcher throughout the process.

Limitations

The findings set out in this report should be interpreted in light of the following limitations:

- the inspection datasets covered 94 YJSs and therefore did not include every service across England and Wales; although they covered every region and areas with widely varying characteristics, the findings should not be assumed to be fully representative of all YJSs
- the statistical analysis identifies associations between case characteristics and inspectors' judgements but cannot establish causal relationships
- the qualitative analysis was restricted to court disposal cases in which knife crime was recorded and did not include out-of-court resolution cases, so the themes identified may not reflect the circumstances or practice associated with those cases
- finally, the data relate to inspections conducted between 2021 and 2025; policy, guidance and inspection arrangements have continued to develop since these inspections took place, so the findings may not fully reflect current policy or practice.



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