

HOLDING OUR OWN



A GUIDE TO NON-POLICING SOLUTIONS TO SERIOUS YOUTH VIOLENCE

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TO SERIOUS YOUTH VIOLENCE

THIS GUIDE WAS
COLLABORATIVELY PRODUCED BY:



NO MORE EXCLUSIONS



INQUEST
Truth Justice Accountability

JENGBA
JOINT ENTERPRISE NOT GUILTY BY ASSOCIATION

maslaha

Release
Drugs, The Law & Your Rights

nsun National Survival
User Network

LIBERTY

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FOREWORD

When I first got involved in community-based work as a young person, I was feeling very aggrieved at the state of the world. Especially at the way I saw my peers being punished disproportionately in the education system for being Black and brown and working class, as well as the violence inflicted upon my communities at the hands of the police.

I felt I had few places to turn to where my experiences were validated and where I could receive emotional support that was relevant to my lived experiences as a young woman of colour. Fast forward to today and I work at Kids of Colour – a Manchester-based project for young people of colour to explore race, identity and culture. Whether through facilitating weekly youth spaces for young people in the area to share and celebrate their culture, or campaigning with local people to end policing in schools, my biggest hope is to provide the kind of support to young people of colour that I know would have made a difference to me and my peers growing up.

Having the opportunity to provide this support to young people has given me the chance to learn and reflect on what I would like to see change as a young adult, but also on how the needs of those younger than me are constantly changing, as policing in our communities grows and evolves.

Even now, my anger at the state of the world still runs deep. I feel I have been adultified by the trauma the state puts our communities through, unable to live my youth as I should have been. But despite our fight being painful at times, being involved in this work has also allowed me to be hopeful, as I see a community that genuinely cares enough to make a change.

It only takes a read through the Holding Our Own guide to get a grasp of the power of our movement fighting every day for our communities to be safer. Take the Northern Police Monitoring Project in chapter 4, which

consistently holds the police accountable for the criminalisation and over-policing of our communities; or Maslaha in chapter 9, who are revolutionising our thinking around critical and radical alternatives to traditional safeguarding practices.

Seeing the work all these organisations do makes me want to harness my anger and use it to help build something for our communities. I feel honoured to work alongside all these people, and to encounter so many young people who inspire me with their vision, their passion for life, and their ability to love and care for their communities in ways that those in power may never truly understand.

There is so much more to be done. This Guide is an invitation to imagine and invest in the solutions that truly grapple with the needs of and challenges facing young people. Solutions that prioritise care,

healing and support over punishment, discipline, and harm. The collective of groups and organisations that have come together to combine their determination, lived experience and expertise to develop this Guide demonstrate that, by harnessing our collective power, we can make something beautiful happen to create safe, flourishing communities.



MEA AITKEN
KIDS OF COLOUR



ALL OUR COMMUNITIES

BUILDING SOLUTIONS TO SERIOUS YOUTH VIOLENCE TOGETHER

British policing is in crisis. In fact, as many of our communities know, it always has been. But since 2020, a series of shameful scandals has brought the police deeper into public disrepute and highlighted the violent racism running through it: the deaths of [Oladeji Omishore](#)¹ and [Chris Kaba](#);² the strip search of [Child Q](#),³ a Black schoolchild, while on her period; the revelation that two officers guarding the bodies of murdered sisters [Bibaa Henry](#) and [Nicole Smallman](#)⁴ had circulated photos of the deceased women on WhatsApp, alongside offensive comments. This is only a few of the most

high-profile cases. The vast majority of the harm done to communities of colour by policing in this country goes unreported in the mainstream media.

At the same time, the national conversation about the role of the police has been amplified by shocking cases of misogyny and violence against women and girls, from the murder of [Sarah Everard](#)⁵ by a serving police officer, to the unmasking of [David Carrick](#),⁶ a Metropolitan Police officer, as one of the UK's most prolific sex offenders.

Yet, in response to this avalanche of scandal and challenge, far from seeing powers stripped from the police, we are seeing further powers granted. New anti-protest legislation threatens to expand the use of suspicionless stop and search, which we know is particularly racially disproportionate. And although the case of Child Q made headlines, closely followed by other disturbing accounts of police encounters with children, the presence of police in schools is rapidly growing.

RACIST POLICING IN BRITAIN – A SHAMEFUL HISTORY

A true reckoning with racism in policing is long overdue. From the failure of police to properly investigate the murder of Steven Lawrence⁷ in 1993, prompting the enquiry which first labelled the police “institutionally racist”, to the shooting of Jean Charles de Menezes in 2005⁸ by Metropolitan Police officers, racist violence and neglect by police forces in the UK has long been the focus of grief and rage from anti-racism campaigners and the loved ones of its victims.

Official government figures on the use of policing tools confirm that high-profile deaths are only the sharpest end of a continuum of racist policing. This policing disproportionately targets Black people for stop and search,⁹ singling out young Black men and boys, in particular, for degrading and traumatic searches; subjects Black schoolchildren to violent and traumatic treatment; surveils people

of colour¹⁰ based on where they live, who their friends are and what music they listen to; and convicts large groups of young, often Black, boys merely for witnessing crimes, via racist joint enterprise prosecutions.

This shameful history – and present day reality – has come into the spotlight in recent years not only as a result of scandals here on British soil, but in response to the global reckoning with racism sparked by the murder of George Floyd¹¹ by police in Minneapolis in May 2020.

His was by no means the first high-profile death of a person of colour at the hands of police in America, even in recent years: in 2014, Eric Garner’s killing¹² triggered nationwide protests, as did Michael Brown’s¹³ and Tamir Rice’s¹⁴ in the same year, Philando Castile’s¹⁵ in 2016, and Breonna Taylor’s¹⁶ in March 2020, to name just a few. But George Floyd’s death sparked a recognition of racial injustice, led by the Black Lives Matter movement, which reached the UK’s shores not just in ripples but in waves. Here, as in many countries across the world, those waves prompted a period of national soul-searching about this country’s colonial history, the racism that people of colour face daily as a result of that legacy, and the violence that is visited on people of colour, particularly Black people, by our policing and prison system.

As a result, this violence has been scrutinised and challenged on an unprecedented scale, from the mainstream media to the longstanding movement against violent

WE ARE SEEKING TO DE-CENTRE THE POLICE FROM CONVERSATIONS ABOUT THE SOLUTIONS TO SOCIAL ISSUES

policing. Across the country, communities are standing up against police brutality and racism in ever greater numbers, while daily headlines question what is to be done about the catastrophe of policing in Britain. At the same time, however, we are seeing the abject failure of mainstream politics and the media to grapple with this issue with the urgency and gravity that is needed – and ultimately, a failure to properly imagine an alternative.

The moment, then, at which we launch this guide, is a moment crying out for intervention: against the harms that policing does to communities of colour, against the expansion of police powers in the name of ‘security’, and against the insistence on policing as the solution to society’s ills that has seen the real needs of our communities neglected for decades.

WHAT DO WE TALK ABOUT WHEN WE TALK ABOUT ‘SERIOUS YOUTH VIOLENCE’?

At Liberty, we come from a position of seeking to de-centre the police from conversations about the solutions to social issues. We believe the power of the police is so broad that it will always be open to abuse, and that only by stripping back those powers can we stop people and communities being harmed by policing.

Instead, we look to non-policing solutions to the challenges we face in society: solutions which put power and resources back in the hands of communities, and which have fairness, participation and social justice at their heart.

The social issue we focus on in this guide is ‘serious youth violence’. Serious youth violence is a term that broadly refers to harm inflicted on young people by other young people, resulting in serious injury or death. In this guide, we are dealing with serious youth violence both as a real issue, and an imagined issue.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY THAT?

Serious youth violence is an imagined issue insofar as it is constructed by politicians and the mainstream press as a justification for the continued over-policing of Black communities and as a lever to call for ever more police powers. It won’t take very long, glancing at recent back-copies of England’s daily newspapers, to find headlines proclaiming that ‘knife crime’ is out of control in London, that our streets are no longer safe, and that something must be done to crack down on an ‘epidemic’ of youth violence. In response, those in power are more than happy to wheel out their ‘tough on crime’ rhetoric and unveil new policing practices that disproportionately target Black communities. In recent years, these approaches have included the surveillance and monitoring of children’s social media accounts,¹⁷ the creeping criminalisation of Drill music,¹⁸ and the introduction of new stop and search powers.¹⁹ Serious youth violence is a problem laid at the feet of young Black and working-class men and boys – and in doing so, it generates a racist, classist and ignorant response.

At the same time, serious youth violence is a real issue, in that government neglect, runaway inequality, poverty, and a myriad of other factors have created a situation in which violence is occurring, and young people are experiencing serious harm – including death – as a result. This is a human rights issue. And yet the policies being introduced in response to this situation fail both to respect human rights and to tackle the root causes of the issue, thereby exacerbating the very problems they claim to solve.

As such, serious youth violence sits at the heart of racist British policing. As an imagined issue, it fuels the expansion of police powers that are so often used to inflict harm on communities of colour in the UK. And, in turn, racist policing alienates young people of colour. It funnels them into the criminal justice system and diverts resources from the real interventions that our communities need, putting young people in the way of real violence and harm.

HOW WE WROTE THIS GUIDE

In order to make a bold and impactful intervention on harmful policing and serious youth violence in the UK, our first guiding principle was to work in collaboration with groups that have been working on these issues for decades. We know that no single group, organisation or community holds all the answers. Instead, it’s by recognising our shared struggles and connecting our diverse wisdom that we can produce real solutions to the challenges our communities face.

BY RECOGNISING OUR SHARED STRUGGLES AND CONNECTING OUR DIVERSE WISDOM, WE CAN PRODUCE REAL SOLUTIONS TO THE CHALLENGES OUR COMMUNITIES FACE

Producing this guide collaboratively, based on that principle, has been a learning process for all involved – a complex and meaningful learning process, which we hope is reflected in the richness of the guide we have produced together. We have had to grapple with the power dynamics that come into play when established and well-funded charities and NGOs share a space with grassroots campaigns and community groups, and the tensions that can arise when one colleague’s policy area is another’s lived experience. Particularly in this moment, when so many communities are grieving from fresh harms done to loved ones by the police, it has been crucial for us to hold space for pain, loss, anger, uncertainty and fatigue. It has also taken careful work to hold both the need to reckon with those harms and the drive to call for something better.

The result has been a slow, intentional and constantly unfolding process of collaborative work. It has been an exercise in building trust, building community, and building power – the power to stand together and demand the solutions we know our communities need.

Of course, this guide is not the final word on non-policing solutions to serious youth violence. There are many groups, in addition to those who contributed to this guide, who are doing vital work on the ground and producing deep knowledge on this issue. As well as others working on related issues who have inspired the work described in this guide. We stand on the shoulders of giants, and owe a huge debt of gratitude to the people and communities who have been fighting for justice, challenging racist policing, and building sites of care for young people for decades.

As serious youth violence as an imagined issue is both constructed by politicians and the media, and informs government policy, we knew our response had to be two-pronged: both putting forward radical policy demands, and changing the narrative.

Alongside this guide, we have conducted extensive message testing to understand how the public see these issues, and how we can challenge people’s ingrained assumptions about serious youth violence, policing, and the alternatives.

YOUNG PEOPLE TO THE FRONT

Our second guiding principle in producing this guide was to highlight the voices and experiences of young people. It has been our privilege to work with brilliant, thoughtful and generous young people – from co-creating a chapter with young people accessing the Art Against Knives youth space, to youth organisers in No More Exclusions – who have challenged us, taught us, and worked with us to make this guide as powerful as it can be.

We have learnt so much about the ways harmful policing can shape a young person’s life. In their chapter, young people at No More Exclusions write incisively about how a school exclusion can alienate a schoolchild, unmooring them from their networks of support and care. Their work chimes with the contribution of the Northern Police Monitoring Project, who describe the harm the presence of police in schools is causing schoolchildren and outline the alternatives that communities want.

JENGBA, led by a group of women who have seen loved ones convicted under the joint enterprise doctrine, describe the deep and searing injustice experienced by hundreds of young people convicted of murder or manslaughter simply for being present at the scene of a crime, often on the basis of spurious evidence that they were in a ‘gang’ – in other words, jailed simply because of where they lived or who their friends were.

In chapter 6, Release outline the experiences of young people harassed by police under the guise of drugs policing, and point to the worst harms of the criminalisation of drugs: the deaths of young men like Rashan Charles and Edson da Costa, both of whom died in custody having swallowed packaged substances. INQUEST, too, direct our attention to the fatal end of police violence, detailing not only the tragedies of deaths in custody – disproportionately of Black people – but also the failure of the inquest system to deliver truth, accountability or justice, even after lives have been taken.

While these contributions bring home the lived reality of those facing daily police racism, and the tragedy of racist policing’s most final consequence, other chapters point to the alternatives, both already in practise and what we would like to see. They show what is possible when young people are given the freedom, support and care they need to flourish.

Young people at Art Against Knives, whose voices form a central part of their organisation’s chapter, speak

of the transformative power of their youth space, providing them with a place of safety, guidance and opportunity. This is echoed by the contribution from Kids of Colour, which lays out the importance of trauma-informed spaces for young people to process and heal from racism.

As the demands for non-policing solutions to social issues grow, we must continue to be wary of the ways in which these solutions can be co-opted and re-packaged in harmful ways, and for their radical roots to be tempered by the very systems we critique in this guide.

In the case of responses to serious youth violence, we have witnessed the embrace of so-called public health alternatives, which all too often have seen policing initiatives funded and supported under the guise of social justice. Maslaha’s contribution critiques the introduction of the ‘serious violence duty’ and likens it to other models of safeguarding practices like Prevent, noting the ways in which both introduce a dangerous lens of pre-emptive risk in the name of care and security. And in NSUN’s chapter, we hear a powerful call for us to question the ease with which we demand interventions in good faith – such as mental health care – without being critical of the ways these interventions themselves may uphold violence through their proximity to, and negotiation with, the police and other coercive practices. Both remind us that the work of visioning is ongoing, that we must stay thoughtful, reflective and critical, even when it comes to the alternatives.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Before we begin, we have a few practical notes for the reader of this guide.

1. Across the chapters, we touch on a vast range of issues, from drugs policing and mental health, to police in schools and racist prosecutions. We have done so because these issues are all linked. It's not necessary to read the guide cover to cover, although we hope that doing so will take you on a valuable journey. Instead, you can start wherever you are most interested and follow the relevant links we have provided in each chapter to read more on related topics or find a more in-depth exploration of something that is mentioned.
2. Each group has roughly structured their chapter into three sections: **what to dismantle**, **what to build**, and **existing good practice**. The **what to dismantle** sections focus on the harmful practices communities are experiencing today, from school exclusions to drugs policing. The **what to build** sections talk about what we want to see instead, encompassing both shorter-term aims and longer-term visions for communities that are empowered, supported and free. And the **existing good practice** sections set out what is going on right now in communities across the country, from life-changing youth spaces to radical safeguarding practices.
3. At the end of this guide, we have also included **demands for today** and **demands for tomorrow**. These are intended to demonstrate that we have a vision for the kind of society we want to build, and that we know it will take concrete steps to get there. These demands should help you gain a better understanding of both the vision and the journey.
4. We have tried to ensure this guide is written clearly and accessibly. It is not intended to be an academic text, or understandable only by people already familiar with the issues we discuss. Nevertheless, there will inevitably be some words and phrases that not everyone will know, so we have included a glossary at the end to explain their meaning.
5. And finally, this guide is for everyone. Whether you are a school pupil, an activist, a youth worker, a journalist, a parent, an MP - or any combination of those - we believe you will find something valuable in these pages. It is our hope that you will read the contributions, be inspired by them (and saddened, enraged and moved), and share them with those around you – your friends, teachers, colleagues, parents, loved ones. We hope you will get involved with the groups whose struggles resonate with you; that you will write to your MP; that you will report on these issues in a thoughtful way; that you will raise the injustices we describe in Parliament.



When we spoke to members of the public about this project as part of our research, a sentiment we heard again and again was despair: ‘we are failing our young people.’ It is hard to look at the harm being inflicted on so many young people, from police harassment in school to the decimation of youth services – cut by 70% in the last decade²⁰ – and conclude anything different. But the voices in this guide speak to the very real possibility – and of the absolute necessity – of reversing this failure and writing a new story of success.

Investing in youth services, building spaces that support young people, reversing criminalisation and giving communities the resources they need to flourish – these are policies that could be enacted tomorrow if the political will were there. Together, as communities, it is our job to push these demands to the very top of the political agenda and fight to make sure that every child in our society grows up safe, thriving and free.



YOUNG PEOPLE SETTING THE SCENE

CO-CREATING YOUTH SPACES TO RESPOND TO ROOT CAUSES OF SERIOUS YOUTH VIOLENCE

Art Against Knives (AAK) was founded in 2011 in response to the unprovoked stabbing of art student Oliver Hemsley, leaving him paralysed. AAK is now an award-winning charity collaborating with excluded young people, their communities, and the creative industry to create social change. AAK's vision is a city where every young person can build the life they want through creativity, free from violence.

AAK's creative spaces are co-designed with young people and embedded in the community, providing training and specialist support, establishing trusted relationships, amplifying voices, and effecting change in the systems around them.

We build on existing skills and interests, empowering young people to make positive choices and putting them in control of their own futures, while breaking down barriers and inequalities that lead to violence.

Our work is underpinned by a trauma- and psychologically-informed approach, led by a diverse, representative and specialist multidisciplinary team. We draw on creative and culturally appropriate tools and opportunities to connect with young people in a way some statutory organisations are unable. We collaborate with industry partners including Apple and Gucci, and pioneers in the sector, such as mental health charity, MAC-UK.

AAK engages with vulnerable young people between 10-25 years old in Barnet's deprived areas. Violence is part of everyday life. Severe funding cuts have resulted in reduced youth provision and services being at capacity, with limited access to informal creative, social, and learning opportunities. Poverty and inequality are rising. Areas where AAK operates are among the 12% most deprived in England – socially isolated with poor transport links and low-quality built environments.

Young people face barriers to feeling safe and reaching their potential. Their situations are characterised by poverty, complex home lives, a discriminatory education system, and a risk of exploitation. In the absence of positive role models, they are exposed to violent networks. Barnet adolescents demonstrate major vulnerabilities, including child poverty, criminal activity, missing episodes, substance misuse, presentation at multi-agency sexual exploitation panel, poor school attendance or not in education, employment or training, and being in care.^{1,2,3} Around 88% of AAK's young people are from minority backgrounds, with these communities disproportionately affected by systemic risk factors.

Most of the young people engaging with AAK do not access statutory services, yet they respond to AAK's opportunities, and to being taken seriously as creatives and youth advocates. Despite the challenges they face, they demonstrate exceptional talent.

AAK is co-produced by young people. Co-production underpins all we do, from the programmes we deliver, the funding we apply for and the people we employ. We centre their experiences and voices at every turn. We could never have predicted where we are today; young people have led the way, we've followed. The success of our work is down to their incredible ideas and commitment.

We've learnt that co-production is a process; one that takes time and money if you want to do it genuinely. It's easy to ask young people what they want, but it's harder to put them in the lead from start to finish and be comfortable not knowing where you will end up.

ART AGAINST KNIVES X LIBERTY

In July 2022, Liberty visited AAK to discuss safety in the community, for young people's perspectives on how we can build communities that are not living in trauma or fear. This chapter presents a summary of that discussion, which centred on four questions:

1. What is safety?
2. What structures and challenges are we trying to dismantle through our work?
3. What do we want to build in their place?
4. What are we doing at the moment that is working?

SECURITY
AUTHORITY
FACILITIES
EDUICATION

SPACES
PRESENCE
ACCESSIBILITY
COMMUNITY
EQUITY

These are some of the things we have in the community, but also what we need as well to go towards the right direction. These are good core things we need to follow if we are going to make change.

THINGS TO DISMANTLE

The young people we work with at AAK come face to face with danger on a regular basis, in a way that may be hard for many of us to imagine. There aren't many places they deem to be 'safe'. Those that do get to feel safe feel it is something to treasure: "in my opinion, safety is when you're walking down the road and you don't have to look over your shoulder and that, to make sure, you get me?"

For many, home is a vital safe space. "When you get home, you take that deep breath innit," one young person told us. "You get through your day unscathed and that. It's just a feeling innit."

Another group member agreed. "When I get yard, I feel safe. Making it home every single day. When you get yard don't you get gassed? We're living in the trenches bro, you're not guaranteed getting home every single day."

For many in the group, safety isn't just found in spaces, but also in people, with one young person telling us, "when I have the mandem with me I feel safe, I don't worry about nothing."

These are perspectives rarely heard in mainstream conversations about safety, which focusses on young people like those in our group as a threat – rather than as young people experiencing fear and danger as part of their daily existence. This narrative plays out in very real ways in these young people's lives, leaving them sidelined or excluded at school and making them a target for over-policing on the streets.

1. POLICING

It's clear that although our young people see the police and other figures of authority as having a responsibility to keep them safe, the state is failing them in this regard – and causing harm to their communities at the same time. "The responsibility, the actual duty of people's safety in the community is the police innit, of authority, social services or whatever," said one young person.

The question is, who does the state keep safe from whom? For our young people, they are not the ones being protected. When asked who the police keep safe, more than one young person responded "IC1s" – in other words, white people.

We know the levels of drug possession, for example, are equal between working class Black communities and middle-class white communities,⁴ but the levels of stop and search and convictions for drug possession are wildly disproportionate between the two.⁵ It's clear that the levels of deprivation in an area – particularly looked at along race and class lines – are used as a marker of 'criminality.'

The result is young people being harassed by police and therefore having a deep understanding of the racism embedded in policing. In Barnet, for example, we have witnessed several incidents of the police harassing and stopping the young people we work with. At best, this reinforces young people's perceptions of their place in society, as those who are destined to be targeted, stereotyped and rejected by society.

“

**WHEN I HAVE THE
MANDEM WITH ME
I FEEL SAFE -
I DON'T WORRY
ABOUT NOTHING**

At worst, it causes severe harm, increases potentially dangerous decision-making and unjustly criminalises young people.

Policing the young people we work with, and their communities, does not tackle serious youth violence, nor does it keep their communities safe. Levels of violence are still extremely high, and increased stop and searches have not solved the problem. It is a tool for politicians to say they are tackling the issues facing these communities, without doing anything to deal with the well-established root causes.

"We can't actually blame the police for how they police," one group member said, pointing instead to the social context of racist policing. "It's years, it's centuries of policing."

Another group member pointed to the abuse of power by the police, and the impact this

has, saying "I know there are good ones, but there are so many bad ones. I think they just recruit any and everyone innit. People just join the police force so they can have some power, and they go and bully kids on the High Road."

It is not just bad policing that negatively affects the young people we work with, but policing policy overall. The use of stop and search only solidifies the position of young people as 'outside the law' and in turn creates a separation between these young people and mainstream society. To create a flourishing society, free from violence, we have to deal with the violence at its root: social deprivation, poverty, inequality and a lack of opportunity to achieve the lives they aspire to. Instead, we have a society that uses the violent arm of the state to punish young people for being in the positions we put them in. It is time for a different concept of how we structure society and envisage safety for us all.

SOCIETY USES THE VIOLENT ARM OF THE STATE TO PUNISH YOUNG PEOPLE FOR BEING IN THE POSITIONS WE PUT THEM IN

2. EDUCATION

There are so many ways in which the communities we work with are excluded from society, from the criminal justice system, to the racism embedded in the schooling system.

Our participants, recognising the importance of a good education, were quick to criticise the flaws in the existing system.

“The education system; don’t even get me started on that,” one said. “Why aren’t we getting taught money management, taxes, where my money actually goes.”

Another young person had a different view. “I actually think the education system is actually good in the UK,” he told us. “But, however, they separate it between the private education system and the mainstream education system. They do it on purpose, they know what they’re doing. They separate it between the ‘one percenters’ and the common working-class people.”

Young people want a good education to get a good start in life, but from racism in schooling to inequality of opportunity based on where they live and the schools they go to, for many this isn’t available – with schools instead contributing to the challenges they face.



WHAT TO BUILD

WHAT IS IMPORTANT TO YOUNG PEOPLE IN BUILDING SAFETY?

The young people we work with at AAK did not shy away from acknowledging the impact of societal issues that make their environments unsafe – and thinking about ways to change that. They identified three key strands to creating change:

1. Change from above
2. Leadership in the community
3. Safe spaces in the community

CHANGE FROM ABOVE

Firstly, they recognised that change could come from forcing those in power to make the right decisions, and from changing who is in power and the decisions they make. However, it was recognised that the odds are stacked against them because of the way in which power operates in our society, and the doors that are open to certain people and not others.

Some young people stressed the power of protest as a driver for Government change. However, they wanted to see change based on greater understanding of the issues – not just because the Government are forced to make last-minute and short-term changes in response to popular protest.

“I feel like the only reason things are changed is because the Government are literally powerless,” they said. “Or there is so much disruption on the streets that they have to make the change. But I would rather that a change was made because they actually understood what the problem was.”

Another put representation at the heart of making positive change. “I think the only way we get some change is if we start maybe getting people like us in Parliament or something, I don’t know. Cah, a guy that’s been nice you know, who’s never had to worry, what does he understand about coming out of an estate block you know...”

LEADERSHIP IN THE COMMUNITY

Looking away from political solutions, the young people also said they believed change could come from within culture, and from within their communities themselves.

“In order for us to feel safe,” one said, “it has to come from within whatever community is trying to be safe. I don’t think you can look from an outside source to put the safety within us. Because they don’t even care. It’s not even bothering them that much, they don’t have that inner feeling of pain that whoever’s going through the danger has. You know what I mean?”

It’s clear, too, that figures of leadership within the community are central to this.

When discussing the police, some thought that police officers are ineffective in keeping communities safe because they don’t have real influence within those communities.

“I think it’s more effective to put that power in people who are actually influential, you know what I’m saying? The people who actually have more of a social impact on whatever community that is.”

Instead of force, young people want to see leadership. “But the one thing I would do personally?” one said, “I think who we look up to. Not all races but especially Black people. They think rappers are leaders of Black people, therefore we are bad influences. We gotta look up to Malcom X bro.”

They said who they looked up to was significant, not just with regard to the education system, but in cultural and family relationships as well. There was an alienation from their parents if they are first generation migrants to the country. It was as if they felt they don’t fit in with their parents, and they aren’t accepted by their country, so they exist in a kind of limbo where only other people who understand what it’s like will get them. One of the young men wrote the poem on the next page in response to that idea.

my father is an immigrant
but my mother is my community

my father taught me hardship
but my mother taught me fellowship

my father told me the streets aren't safe
but my mother just told me where i have no place

my father told me if i didn't go uni i'm a disgrace
but my mother believes in me as she has faith

my father never says he loves me

but i feel my mother's love
around me tight as a glove

when push came to shove and i was kicked out of
school my father turned his back on me and said i
was a let down as usual

but my beautiful mother said trust her because life
without my father could still be meaningful
i let go of my father and my life became peaceful

my father is from Nigeria and my mother is

my community

SAFE SPACES IN THE COMMUNITY

We asked the young people we work with how we could improve the safety of the community from within, and they told us unequivocally that we need to invest in them. There was no point, they said, in even trying to think about how we could transform society away from the carceral, alienating and violent society in which they live, if they are not given the space to understand their potential.

“So just talking about community and the struggles our community goes through, the biggest way to employ safety in our specific community, is to change what is celebrated” one told us.

It was moving to see just how much the young people we work with valued the space we have created – and how vital they saw spaces like this for creating safety in communities.

One asked, “if it’s the community’s responsibility to stop those things from happening, how do they do that, how do we do that, how do we stop bad things from happening as a community?”

“Places like this”, responded another.

One young person spoke of the material change AAK had made in his life: “like I wasn’t in college, we applied for college and now I’m in college. The fact that these people care is the main thing.”

It wasn’t just the physical space and having somewhere to go, or the things that take place in the space that made a difference, they told us that accessing the AAK space enabled change that they could take out into the rest of their lives.

“I think the things we learn, get told or experience here, the positive things, we take back outside of here ... that is really where it’s being most effective, like the fact that we can learn the things here and take them back and apply them to our personal lives, that’s the game changer innit.”

However, while the young people recognised the huge difference spaces like this can make, they also worried that not enough services were available to reach all those who would benefit from them early enough.

“Do you think that violence has been prevented from occurring because this space has been open?” We asked.

“I think if we get them soon enough,” one young person responded. They went on, “before the other gang members start grooming them and before their heads are filled up, singing these songs thinking it’s cool and that.”

One reflected on the changes they had noticed over time in the services available. “Before the totty riots happened when there were a lot more youth clubs open, there were a lot more youts off the streets innit.”

EXISTING GOOD PRACTICE

WHAT WE DO AT ART AGAINST KNIVES – AND WHY IT WORKS

At AAK, creativity runs through everything we do. Through our creative spaces and programmes co-produced with young people, we use creativity as a tool for building long-term trusted relationships with young people and amplifying their voice.

We teach creative skills, working alongside creative professionals to provide industry-standard, accredited training. We take a therapeutic approach; creativity provides young people with the freedom to express themselves, the skills to nurture their talent and the tools to create their own positive futures. This could be exploring consent through lyric writing, painting nails, or chatting about sexual health while braiding hair. We celebrate young talent at every given opportunity; we could be releasing a mixtape one week and hosting an exhibition the next. This ensures their work is seen and heard outside the walls of our spaces.

Our spaces engage with 300 young people, offering personal development, strengthened social skills and foundations for employability.

Last year, 100% received one-to-one support, 94% participated in creative skills training, 86% demonstrated significant increases in personal capabilities, 43% received specialist mentoring which reduced their risk of exploitation, and 26% accessed specialist employment, education and training support (100% of whom showed progression into further education, employment, or training). Young people always say it best:

“I love the atmosphere, the vibe. The support and the trust and bond I have with the staff is unmatched. It’s unique because the youth workers can relate to us from past experiences, so it’s relatable for young people and easy to talk to them without feeling judged. People should know about the experiences and help that’s been delivered from AAK to young people, the times where the help has been needed and worked.”

Young person involved in our In Our Hands Programme.

“I’m involved with AAK because I love the vibe and the people there. Everything is unique. People should know that AAK is the safest place.”

Young person involved in our In Our Hands Programme.

“

PEOPLE SHOULD KNOW THAT AAK IS THE SAFEST PLACE

In tackling the root causes of serious violence, spaces like the ones we create at Art Against Knives play a number of vital roles: they give young people somewhere to go, help them see their potential, and make them feel they are being cared for and invested in. But with limited resources, the number of young people services like this can reach is limited.

One of our projects is our podcast, One Mic Real Talk. This has been devised by the young people at Art Against Knives to explore some of the challenges they face, think about current affairs, and interview people from popular culture and politics. Our podcast has often centred on the criminal justice system, policing, drill and so-called ‘gang’ culture.

We have had many conversations about safety, and what it means for them in their community. We’ve discussed the ways society operates to maintain its social structure, how class operates, how education contributes to how society is formed, and the influence of British colonial history on our society today.

It is our responsibility, as a society, not only to identify where harm is caused (through things like over-policing, stop and search, school exclusions, inequality) but to create communities that are able to resist these things while lifting others up. Investing more resource in spaces like ours is absolutely vital to achieving this.



NO MORE EXCLUSIONS

BUILDING INCLUSIVE EDUCATION FOR ALL

‘Serious youth violence’ is a socially constructed framework that sees young people as the central, most serious and malicious actors in that violence.¹ The perception of violence is what fuels the reality of violence. In London, the borough with the highest level of reported crime is not a more deprived borough like Lambeth, Hackney, Haringey, or Newham. It is Westminster, the home of the Houses of Parliament – the place where serious youth violence is born.

While the media tries to present youth violence as endemic to young people, it often ignores the violence that is inflicted on young people themselves, such as lack of funding, Islamophobic safeguarding policies like Prevent, a racist educational curriculum, and the violence of language. There is also the violence of school exclusions. Children are at school more than they’re at home. Their classmates are their community. If they’re removed from school, they’re essentially being broken down into a shell, especially if they are in an isolation booth and forced to stare at a wall in silence for hours on end. Is that not violent?

“
**ANY VIOLENCE THE
 YOUTH PRODUCES
 COMES FROM THE
 VIOLENCE THE
 STATE INFLICTS
 ON MARGINALISED
 COMMUNITIES**

EMMANUEL

Britain’s education system is very, very outdated. It’s limited in all senses of the word, not just in terms of the curriculum, but in behavioural approaches as well. It’s no longer fit for purpose. The only real option we have is to create a whole new approach that is rooted in care, not punishment. We need a system that is created to intervene in the causes of harm, rather than one that upholds the harm and punishes its victims. Exclusion is just one element of a hostile environment that’s created in the classroom. It doesn’t work and it never has. Recognising this is only the start of undoing the web of harm that’s been created.

SCHOOL DISCIPLINE IN THE UK

School discipline in the UK is rooted in punishment and is becoming ever more carceral, with an increasing dependence on policing, surveillance, and criminalisation. In the past 10 years, there has been a sharp increase in all forms of exclusion, including internal exclusion to ‘isolation booths’. Unsurprisingly, research shows that banishing students to solitary confinement to stare at a wall for sometimes days at a time can be psychologically damaging. Students and teachers alike have described the use of internal exclusions as preparing students for prison.

How is it that even during the pandemic when schools were shut most of the time, the total number of permanent exclusions was only 25 lower than the number 10 years previously? (5,082 in 2010/11, compared to 5,057 in 2020/21).

In schools, it’s become clearer that policing schools doesn’t extend to just police officers,² but to anyone who upholds this harmful notion of school discipline. The structures of British schooling maximise harm, with little to no accountability measures for its victims: children, families and communities alike.

These disciplinary powers extend beyond the school grounds. Young people studying in Hackney reported³ teachers patrolling the main high roads near their schools until 6pm, seeking out children with their mobile phones out or not wearing their school blazers, to punish them with an after-school detention. Hackney is the most academised borough in London, and not surprisingly, it also has one of the highest school exclusion rates in the country. It’s difficult to hold academies to account, especially when it seems that they’re rewarded for ruining so many lives.⁴

PRISONS FOR KIDS

The Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022 introduces the idea of ‘secure schools’ as a wonderful way of rehabilitating children while keeping them in education. But we see them for what they really are: **prisons for kids.**

US academic and political activist Angela Davis says, “When children attend schools that place a greater value on discipline and security than on knowledge and intellectual development, they are attending prep schools for prison”.⁵ But in the case of secure schools, it could be argued that

children are already attending a mini-prison, rather than a prep school. Secure schools are one of the most significant ways in which the state is expanding the UK's prison system, and extending the UK's school-to-prison pipeline.

It also explains why academy trusts like Oasis are being asked to run secure schools, because their high exclusion rates amplify the unforgiving approach they take when dealing with young people.

Exclusions communicate to children that it's "acceptable to try to 'pass on' or 'disappear' an issue, instead of working to address the behaviour."⁶ Nationally, the most common cause of exclusion is 'persistent disruptive behaviour'. Senior management and teachers are deeply invested in these very broad and vague zero tolerance policies that target and attack Black, global majority, disabled people and other marginalised groups. It's clear these are racist policies, and if keeping children in education is so important, why are children being removed from school for the most trivial things?

PUPIL REFERRAL UNIT (PRU) TO PRISON PIPELINE

The well-documented school-pupil referral unit (PRU)-prison pipeline explains why the majority of both adult and youth prisoners in England and Wales have been excluded from school at some point. Exclusion to a PRU enables the criminalisation of children, particularly Black boys. Placing them in over-policed environments, stripping them of life chances by providing them with a

second-rate segregated education, and placing them into contexts where they are more at risk of criminal exploitation. Exclusions feed this pipeline.⁷ A 2022 report found that 63% of people in UK prisons had been temporarily excluded while at school and 42% had been permanently excluded.⁸ The school-to-prison pipeline is the clearest it's ever been. We've literally got educators within PRUs recognising their roles as prison guards.⁹

We can also extend this pipeline further, to show how the criminalisation of Black, brown, and migrant children in particular feeds into state violence, such as deportations and death. This is evidenced in the cases of Tashaun Aird, who was murdered after being permanently excluded and sent to an alternative provision (AP) unit,¹⁰ and Osime Brown who, through the use of joint enterprise, was wrongly incarcerated for five years and threatened with deportation after being excluded from school at age 16, having not received the support he needed as an autistic and neurodiverse child.¹¹

Seeing exclusion within a framework of structural violence also helps to reframe the question 'what about the other 29 students in a class?' The harm of exclusion doesn't only impact the excluded student, but also the other children and teacher in the classroom. When we witness our peers being violently removed from their community, it creates a state of fear: 'what if I'm next?'. Isn't this what the Home Office is doing when they're removing already displaced people from the communities they've made and deporting them?

UNMET EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

These particular cases also highlight how race and disability intersect to make some children and young people more likely to be targeted by exclusion than others. For example, Black Caribbean boys who are eligible for free school meals and have special educational needs (SEN) are 168 times more likely to be permanently excluded than white British girls without SEN.¹²

Disability and neurodiversity don't stop the criminalisation of young people either, with Black boys being over-diagnosed with Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD), especially as "psychologists and psychiatrists have also attempted systemically to associate particular personality traits with criminal behaviour."¹³

Ofqual's chief regulator Dr Jo Saxton once said, "Behaviours that lead to exclusions happen when students perceive there to be no limits and no expectations and no rules", which clearly indicates the dominant kind of English educational thinking that seeks to control students, not nurture them. School exclusions are used as markers of pre-criminality towards Black children in particular. When teachers give into this notion, they give up on the children in their care. This racist criminalisation manifests itself in many forms, with 'adultification bias'¹⁴ being one of the most harmful.

It's been demonstrated with Child Q, a young Black girl who was strip searched by police officers – something we would define as a sexual assault – because of a supposed smell of weed, the labelling of friendship groups as gangs, and with young Black boys being sent deportation letters before they are even sentenced.¹⁵

There have even been numerous instances where disabled children were illegally kept away from school and punished due to the school not following their care plan. Meanwhile, punitive and ableist attendance and punctuality measures see children and poorer parents being disproportionately affected by fines, exclusions and off-rolling. We also know that 'safeguarding' principles such as PREVENT are harming and endangering children.

It's clear we need to transform approaches to safety and discipline in the classroom, especially because these harms are so deeply ingrained into the system that they have become the system. We need to create an education system that works for all and provides an environment for all children to survive and thrive.

"What we have got at the moment is not working. Can we at least agree it does not work?"¹⁶

Zahra Bei, co-founder of NME

WHAT TO BUILD

Within schools, the ability to take an exam is both a privilege and a problem. Children predicted lower grades are frequently and illegally taken off the school register before they can take their exams. All of which affects their capacity to study for these exams. This isn't someone falling through the cracks, this is someone being thrown into a canyon.

These children are seen as a threat if they learn, and locking them out of higher-tier papers, from achieving higher results, or from getting any qualifications, upholds hierarchies and pushes Black, neurodivergent kids towards the bottom of the pile. If you've managed to survive school, once you leave you're just left to fend for yourself, without the tools to become a fully-formed person. We need to have a greater understanding of ourselves and what we want for our futures, and acquire the tools to make decisions that are right for us.

Exam culture is also deeply individualising. It creates a dog-eat-dog mindset that breaks down community-forming skills. It's motivated by fear of the power of the

collective; individualising you makes it easier to break you down. In Cuba, young people in schools are politicised towards becoming members of different established groups specific to their identity or occupation. It helps them to build solidarity outside the school, by not treating school as an isolated space separate from the rest of the world, but one which intersects with other aspects of students' identities.¹⁷

According to [TJ Coati](#), from the Coalition of Anti-racist Educators, "self-regulation and self-control are behavioural mantras and expectations that are constantly levelled at young people in schools under conditions which invisibilise power relationships and social harms."¹⁸

Children are expected to know how to do these things, but who is doing the teaching? Somatic practitioner Maria Holzmann explains the idea of 'interoception' as the "ability to notice, feel and describe what's happening in your body. The more you can do that, the more you'll be able to pivot and decide how you're going to respond, rather than going into fight mode."

WE NEED TO SEE BEHAVIOUR WITHIN A WIDER FRAMEWORK OF OPPRESSION

Children learn how to regulate their own emotions through co-regulation with adults. This requires a relationship with secure attachment. In a secure relationship, children feel safe and supported.¹⁹ Teachers need to be trained in trauma informed response, to better understand behaviour as communication, which challenges perceptions of criminality.

Trauma informed methods also means not individualising, and instead, as the [Centre for Mental Health states](#), seeing how children and young people are also traumatised by "poverty, racism, and other forms of discrimination and oppression".²⁰ Again, it's about seeing behaviour within

a wider framework of oppression in order to address the root causes, not just the symptoms of that system.

Smaller class sizes would ensure that teaching staff are able to tailor the care given to each and every child, giving them the attention to make sure their needs are met. There would be more time to hold spaces where the learning isn't just numbers, but maybe activities that engage pupils' senses, like sculpture. We want neurodivergent students to feel like they're not being 'othered' into separate schools, away from the wider community of students. We need education for all.

EXISTING GOOD PRACTICE

RECENT PROGRESS

At NME, we've already made some steps towards putting into practice what we envision. In April 2021, following the reopening of schools after the lockdowns, we celebrated one of our biggest achievements: gaining a 94% majority vote at the National Education Union (NEU) annual conference in favour of our moratorium on school exclusions. More recently, at the 2022 NEU conference, a motion calling for the immediate removal of police in schools was also passed. Similar to the 2021 conference, we held stalls and campaigned; applying the pressure collectively, especially as we were able to recognise exactly how weak and carceral

the original motion was. It was a result of our collective action as NME that our amendment to the emergency motion for their White Paper policy was passed, with our exact wording included unequivocally advocating for "no police in schools". Both of these historic achievements have helped further our fight for a critical transformation of the education system today, moving away from the carceral logic that enables the idea of children as disposable. This is just one step of the many we're prepared to take.





ENDING POLICE IN SCHOOLS

DECRIMINALISING THE CLASSROOM

Although the presence of police in schools has a long history in Britain, numbers have grown in recent years. In 2021, The Guardian newspaper reported there were 683 police officers working exclusively in British schools.¹ Their increasing presence has been supported by growing calls from those in positions of power for the introduction of more school-based police officers. From the Children's Commissioner, to the former head of the Metropolitan Police, to the mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, and his Greater Manchester counterpart, Andy Burnham, political support for police in schools appears to be widespread.

The Guardian's headline count offers only a partial picture. Not only does the political clamour mean this figure is already likely to have risen significantly, but the narrow focus on police officers working exclusively in schools hides the true extent to which police are present. There are a whole range of relationships and programmes that see 'community-based' police officers working in and with schools. This perhaps goes some way towards explaining the significant discord between the official narrative about the nature and extent of police in schools, and what affected communities are experiencing.

In this chapter, we follow the established abolitionist principle of considering why we need to dismantle oppressive structures like policing, alongside how we simultaneously build new ways of responding to harm and inequality. As the US writer and activist Angela Davis explained in her book, *Are prisons obsolete?*, abolition is not simply “a negative process of tearing down” but one of “re-imagining institutions, ideas, and strategies, and creating new institutions.”² With that in mind, we first identify some of the key harms caused by police in schools, before we consider what we collectively need to build in order to prevent these harms. We end by reflecting on some of the good work already being done to get police out of schools and to enact new forms of justice.

DISMANTLING: IDENTIFYING THE HARMS CAUSED BY POLICE IN SCHOOLS

In 2020, the Northern Police Monitoring Project and Kids of Colour consulted Greater Manchester residents about police in schools. Over 550 people shared their views and experiences, making our community resource - the *Decriminalise the Classroom* report³ - the most substantial evidence base we have on this issue in the UK context. It shows clearly that policing in schools causes and extends a whole range of interlocking harms.

The presence of police in schools increases the likelihood of minor behavioural issues being needlessly treated as, or escalating into, criminal justice issues. This results in more young people being drawn into

the criminal justice system, and at risk of entering our ever-expanding and increasingly profit-driven prison estate. Much like the issues raised by No More Exclusions (see Chapter 3), it feeds a ‘school-to-prison pipeline’,⁴ burdening young people with a criminal record that can limit their future educational and employment opportunities.

Evidence shows that police are more likely to be placed in schools with high numbers of students eligible for free school meals (a rough proxy for socio-economic disadvantage), as well as in schools with high numbers of young people of colour.⁵ The result is that, from the outset, the negative effects of police in schools are experienced unevenly along race and class lines.

These inequalities are evident within schools, too. Symptomatic of institutional racism in policing more generally, Greater Manchester residents reported that young people of colour are more likely to face criminalisation in the school setting than their white counterparts. As one young person explained: “I fear that racial profiling and racial stereotypes of Black and brown kids being ‘criminals’ and ‘thugs’ will affect police’s judgement in schools.”

Young people also told us about police in their schools acting in ways that discriminate against students of colour, particularly Black students, as well as over-policing Gypsy, Roma and Traveller students, disabled students, LGBTQ+ students, Muslim students, and girls. Young people at the intersections of these groups are particularly vulnerable to

THE NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF POLICE IN SCHOOLS ARE EXPERIENCED UNEVENLY ALONG RACE AND CLASS LINES

police harm: the case of *Child Q* - a 15-year-old Black girl who was strip-searched at her school in 2020⁶ - provides the most painful reminder of this point.

While the racist strip-search of *Child Q* rightfully caused public outrage, the inappropriate conduct of officers towards girls in schools is all too common. Young people and their parents and teachers recalled examples of sexist victim blaming, the sexualisation of young people, and the use of offensive language directed at girls by police in schools.⁷ Police searches and questioning of young people without parental or guardian permission are also commonplace.

With growing public awareness of these issues, the tide seems to be turning on the presence of police in schools. Having once himself selected police officers to go into schools, former superintendent and Chair of the Black Police Association, *Leroy Logan*, has said he now realises “police officers should not be in schools.”⁸ In so doing, he joined a growing chorus of resistance, with Amnesty International UK also calling for “police to be removed from schools”⁹ and, encouragingly, the National Education Union passing a national motion against the placement of police in schools.¹⁰ We must remember, though, that these more high-profile declarations were made possible by the work of grassroots campaigning and organising.

**THE PRESENCE OF
POLICE IN SCHOOLS
INCREASES THE
LIKELIHOOD OF MINOR
BEHAVIOURAL ISSUES
BEING NEEDLESSLY
TREATED AS CRIMINAL
JUSTICE ISSUES**



WHAT TO BUILD

WHAT NEEDS TO CHANGE TO ADDRESS THESE HARMS?

Research into police in schools has found that many teachers are concerned that police can make young people feel unsafe and unwelcome.¹¹ This, in turn, is detrimental to learning and wellbeing. In this sense, the presence of police in schools is at odds with the welcoming and nurturing environment that many teachers would like to create. While the removal of police from schools is the most obvious and immediate step towards transforming school environments, it is only one part of the vision for safe and nurturing schools.

Our Decriminalise the Classroom report found that respondents wanted to see more investment in counselling services and youth

workers.¹² Demand for these services will only have deepened as the pandemic exacerbated the mental health crises young people face. There was also a desire for more teachers and teaching assistants, as well as pastoral workers and greater disability support in schools.

All of this is unsurprising given government cuts to school funding. Larger class sizes, fewer adults in the classroom, less funding per pupil, reduced curriculums and a lack of resources are just some of the devastating impacts of these cuts. However, as we press for more teachers, youth workers and staff in supportive roles, it is vital that we continue to insist on a commitment to anti-racism and anti-oppression, and stay alert to the ways teachers and others also contribute to the many harms facing young people.

EXISTING GOOD PRACTICE

A GROWING MOVEMENT AND EXISTING GOOD PRACTICE

The resistance against police in schools in Britain is growing rapidly. In Greater Manchester, the ‘No Police in Schools’ campaign was established in 2019 and involves young people, parents, teachers, youth workers, anti-racist activists and many more. In 2021, the campaign successfully prevented the placement of 20 new school-based police officers.¹³ While there is a need to be vigilant to the way new arrangements may reintroduce police into schools under different names and programmes, this community victory should nevertheless inspire hope.

The campaign has supported parents to write to their children’s schools and community members to contact their local MPs to express their concerns, with template letters available on the No Police in Schools website for people to take action.¹⁴ Campaign work in this area is also being championed by groups such as No More Exclusions and Hackney Copwatch, as well as allies in the US¹⁵ and Canada.¹⁶ This not only demonstrates

how the removal of police from schools connects to wider projects of transforming our schools and police abolition, but also points to the emergence of a national and international movement against police in schools.

With all this in mind, the prospect of building a more emancipatory education system, free from the presence of police, is closer than we might think. Premised on community safety, it is there in the work of groups like Kids of Colour¹⁷ and 4Front,¹⁸ both of which champion healing-centred approaches to the issues and harms facing young people. It is there in the work of Maslaha,¹⁹ which has developed a radical safeguarding workbook to empower practitioners to do things differently.²⁰ It is there, too, in the growing number of schools and individual teachers who reject the presence of police in their schools.

Although there is much work still to be done, we are well along the way both to dismantling police in schools and building new ways of responding to harm in our collective vision.



CONVICTIONS BY DESIGN

JOINT ENTERPRISE AND THE CRIMINALISATION OF BLACK FRIENDSHIP

WHAT IS JOINT ENTERPRISE?

Joint enterprise is a common law doctrine that can apply where two or more people are involved in an offence. Individuals in a joint enterprise may be a 'principal' – the person who carries out the primary offence – or 'secondary parties' – a person who knowingly assists or encourages a principal to commit the primary offence. Under the joint enterprise doctrine, the secondary party can be prosecuted as if they were a principal offender.

In practice, thousands of people¹ have been prosecuted under the joint enterprise doctrine,² often based on things such as text messages, drill lyrics and even participation in music videos years before any incident.³

Nearly 20 years ago, we both had loved ones convicted of murders neither of them committed, assisted, or encouraged, or indeed even knew was going to happen. This is what led us, and other mothers, to set up Joint Enterprise Not Guilty by Association (JENGbA). We have been campaigning against joint enterprise injustice ever since.

In this chapter, we shine a light on the racist, ableist and classist practice of joint enterprise. We uncover joint enterprise's role as part of a wider unjust, unfair and discriminatory justice matrix, triggered by a moral panic around 'gangs', to police working class, disabled and BAME communities. We end by demanding what needs to change to fix a broken system, and how we can create the society we want to see: one where everyone is supported to live safe, full, and happy lives.

DISMANTLING JOINT ENTERPRISE: A RIGGED GAME OF RUSSIAN ROULETTE

Joint enterprise doesn't impact everyone equally.

Evidence about people's associations – based on stereotypes and prejudices like a person's friends and family, their use of social media, and even music preferences – has been used to support joint enterprise prosecutions, in ways that have resulted in significant racial disproportionality in the criminal justice system.

Our research shows that a disproportionate number of people convicted under joint enterprise law are from marginalised backgrounds. Black people are 11 times more likely to serve a prison sentence for joint enterprise⁴ and 80% of the people who contact us asking for our help are Black or from a minority ethnic background. Almost all of them are working class.

Despite what is often portrayed in the media, your race or your class do not make you more likely to commit crimes. But they do make you more likely to experience worse outcomes throughout the criminal justice system: from the quality of defence lawyer representing you, to the length and severity of sentence you receive.⁵ As declared during the Parliamentary debate to amend joint enterprise in September 2022, it is "nothing short of a travesty."⁶

As Andrew Mitchell MP stated, "young people from ethnic communities have been, essentially, hoovered up for peripheral and in some cases even non-existent involvement in serious criminal acts." The burden of evidence is so low that to some extent a defendant's future is like a game of Russian roulette – one that is rigged against those most marginalised.

In our work, we have also highlighted the ways that joint enterprise affects women and girls. A 2020 study found that at least 109 women have been sentenced to long prison terms for joint enterprise convictions. The youngest girl was charged at just 13 years old. The majority of the women were convicted of serious violence offences, with an average sentence length of 15 years (with almost half serving sentences of up to 30 years). But none of the cases involved the woman or girl using a deadly weapon. In 90% of cases the women engaged in no violence at all, and in half of them they were not even present at the scene of the crime.⁷

The ongoing use of the joint enterprise doctrine – particularly the use of evidence relating to people's associations – endangers the right to a fair trial. The ways that joint enterprise creates miscarriages of justice and erodes trust in the justice system was highlighted in the Lammy Review into the over-representation of Black, Asian, and minority ethnic individuals in the criminal justice system. Its recommendations included a review of how the Crown Prosecution Service and the police approach gang prosecutions.⁸

In 2016, the Supreme Court reconsidered the joint enterprise doctrine in the case of *Jogee*.⁹ It stated that a person will only be guilty of an offence on a joint enterprise basis if they intended to encourage or assist the principal offender to carry out the crime that was committed. Mere foresight that the principal offender might commit that crime was not sufficient.

The Supreme Court acknowledged that the law on joint enterprise had previously taken a 'wrong turn', and *Jogee* was to set it back on course. In spite of this judgment, which arguably rendered many joint enterprise convictions unsafe and was expected to lead to a wave of successful appeals,¹⁰ only two such convictions have been quashed since 2016.¹¹ In short, "the same law is still being abused."¹²

One of the reasons for this is the 'restrictive approach' used by the courts in out-of-time appeals. Applicants must demonstrate they have suffered a 'substantial injustice', something which is exceedingly difficult to meet. This is why we worked with Charlotte May Henry, a lawyer and JENGBA campaigner, to launch a Private Member's Bill to demand the 'substantial injustice' test goes. Charlotte has been a JENGBA campaigner since 2014 when her brother Alex Henry was convicted under joint enterprise.¹³ This change in law, if passed, will be a life raft for people like Alex, whom *Jogee*'s 'wrong turn' decision has not reached. At the same time, we want to see greater powers for the Criminal Cases Review Commission, the independent body that investigates potential miscarriages of justice.

In February 2023, we had a major legal breakthrough in our campaign. After we took legal action against the Crown Prosecution Service, they finally agreed to begin monitoring the data (such as race, sex, and neurodiversity) of those prosecuted using joint enterprise – and whether 'gang' evidence is used in their cases. This means we will finally be able to shine a light on the unfairness in the system, and is a crucial first step towards ending the use of joint enterprise altogether.

WHAT TO BUILD

BUILDING A SOCIETY WHERE EVERYONE IS VALUED AND SUPPORTED TO THRIVE

There is a lot of work to do to remedy the harms of joint enterprise. And while we campaign for people who have been unfairly convicted, JENGbA is not an ‘innocence project.’ The reality is that our work has sadly introduced us to the violence of the wider criminal justice system.

As of March 2022, there were 8,610 people serving a life sentence of any kind.¹⁴ This is the highest number of lifers of any country in Europe, and more than France, Germany and Italy combined.¹⁵ Between 2006 and 2016, 197 children were given life sentences in the UK. The average age was 16 but the youngest just 13 years old. Three out of 10 children are sent to prison for non-violent offences. In 2018, the BAME population of children in prison had risen from 24% in 2007 to 46%.

Reading these statistics begs the question: what is going on in our criminal justice system? Why is it considered acceptable to put vulnerable children and adolescents into places of harm under the pretext of protecting the public?

Fundamentally, prisons do more harm than good. In Stories of Injustice, research carried out by Becky Clarke and Dr Kathryn Chadwick at Manchester Metropolitan University in partnership with JENGbA, we spoke to 109 women serving joint enterprise convictions.¹⁶ Here is what some of them told us about their experiences:

“Having flashbacks of the trial and remembering the unfairness and wishing if you knew the things you know now about the law and the trial process. Constantly telling yourself how you would fight differently to clear your name rather than just trust the system to do the right thing.”

“Knowing your children will face bullying and abuse because you are in prison.”

“Having a loved one die or knowing your parents will be dead before you reach the end of your minimum tariff.”

“Watching others self-harm and considering the reasoning must be some form of relief for the trauma of prison, and then trying it yourself.”

“Genuinely wanting to die rather than continue the living nightmare of prison.”

“Having no hope of ever having a future.”¹⁷

The answer to violence surely cannot be more violence. We must examine why imprisonment can be considered a route to safer communities. As the US writer and activist Angela Davis states about

the US prison system: “prisons do not disappear problems, they disappear human beings [...] in order to convey the illusion of solving social problems.”¹⁸

The impact of these disappearances is far-reaching. Not, however, on actual crime (in fact, long prison sentences have been shown to have little impact on crime),¹⁹ but on the people left behind: it is not just the families mourning the loss of their child, but their friends who no longer trust the police, the courts and the justice system as a whole. They see joint enterprise convictions simply as an extension of the systems that harass and condemn young people for their friendship groups and musical choices.

As mothers who have seen the violence of prison at close quarters, we are urgently calling for no child to be locked away. Most people believe that once a prison sentence ends, you can return to normal life. But evidence that people leave prison without a support system, barriers to employment,

WE WANT TO SEE LOVED ONES OUT OF PRISON - BUT OUR CALL IS MUCH WIDER

a one-off payment of £82 and a lifetime of shame, stigma and trauma, shows that this simply isn't true.²⁰ In the name of safety and protection, the State is perpetrating violence against countless people.

The world we want to see is one where the tough on crime rhetoric – a reactionary attitude that worsens with each successive government – is revealed for the dangerous policy that it is. This kind of knee-jerk political desire to be tougher on crime than the previous policy makers was clearly at work in the aftermath of the 2011 riots, when young people took to the streets to express their anger and frustration at racist policing that was killing young Black men.

Rather than listen to this outrage and address the root causes, such as poverty and lack of affordable housing, that make lives for our young people so difficult, the then Director

of Public Prosecutions, Keir Starmer, demanded 24-hour 'Nightingale Courts' to prosecute and imprison young people, predominantly of colour.

In the trials we witnessed, young defendants were persuaded by their legal advisors to take guilty pleas for lesser sentences, even though the evidence against them was sketchy at best. It is yet another example of the State being happy to criminalise rather than examine the reasons why young people no longer feel supported in society.

So today, although we want to see the loved ones of the families we support out of prison, our call is much wider. We want to see a society where the conditions under which their joint enterprise convictions occurred no longer exist, so nobody else has to go through what they have done, and we can all live lives free from violence.





ORGANISED ABANDONMENT

DRUGS POLICING AND YOUNG PEOPLE

The UK's drug framework is ineffective and fails in its own stated aim to reduce or eliminate drug use. Instead, drug policy, fuelled as it is by the criminal justice system, provides the architecture for racial and social control in society. This is harmful for all of us, with particular and egregious impacts on young people, specifically young people who experience systemic race and class oppression.

Drugs policing fuels race disparity in stop and search, and only exacerbates the risks of drug use because of the looming threat of detection, criminalisation and punishment.

By criminalising their use, trade and production, the UK has built a system that makes drug products very unsafe (in terms of adulterants within them) yet very lucrative, creating a risky and violent underground market that isn't built to support people that need protection or help in any form.

There's significant evidence of the failure of our punitive approach to drug control. Research about [student drug use](#) found that 16% of those who described having a "scary situation" with illegal substances did not seek emergency help for fear of punishment.¹ The Home Office's own research has shown that

our drug laws have no impact on levels of use, that law enforcement has little impact on disrupting the illegal drug supply market.² This same research highlights that attempts to disrupt drug supplies also increase violence as groups fight to take control of the market. Further, the presence of police in situations where young people may genuinely be at risk of harm or exploitation, for example, in relation to so-called ‘county lines’ drug dealing, only exacerbates potential harms; the police are more likely to arrest than help anyone involved with drugs.³ The unregulated nature of the drugs market also results in substances of unknown strength and purity being consumed by people, especially young people, who account for the largest group of users.⁴

Release has been working for over 50 years to protect the rights of people who use drugs and those impacted by drug law enforcement and criminalisation. We do this by providing legal aid to people with drug-related problems. We also campaign for evidence-based drug policies that reject the principle that those associated with drugs (either by using, growing, or trading them) are criminals that deserve to be punished.

In this chapter, we explore the relationship between young people and police in the context of drug policy in the UK. We assert that the safest and most effective drug policy framework is one that eradicates the need for drugs policing through changes to the law that remove criminal sanctions for both possession and use. We outline the many harms created by our punitive drug policy

framework, and we suggest recommendations for addressing these harms and building a new approach to drug policy that centres on the safety and wellbeing of young people, removing policing from drug policy altogether.

DISMANTLING

A key driver of violence that young people frequently experience comes from drugs policing. The police perpetrate a lot of violence under the guise of keeping drugs out of communities. The ‘war on drugs’ provides the ideal justification for the police to crack down on young people who are behaving ‘anti-socially’, or to patrol certain areas where they believe illegal drug-related activities may be happening.

This is an example of organised abandonment:⁵ by criminalising drugs, the state has abandoned their responsibility to provide a safe environment not only for those that use drugs, but also to those that don’t use them but have had their lives affected in direct and indirect ways by the criminalisation of the drug trade. Instead, they are able to exercise their surveillance and intimidation with state-sanctioned power over poor, young and ethnic minority communities.

As discussed by the Northern Police Monitoring Project (see chapter 4), police are frequently present in schools, will harass people using powers allowed to them under the Misuse of Drugs Act, and bring young people into unnecessary contact with the criminal justice system. This is all conducted

RESEARCH INCREASINGLY SHOWS THAT DRUG SEARCHES ARE A DRIVER OF THE DISPROPORTIONATE POLICING OF BLACK AND MINORITY ETHNIC COMMUNITIES IN THE UK

STOP AND SEARCH ENABLES POLICE TO INTIMIDATE AND HARASS YOUNG PEOPLE

in the name of ‘public safety’ and keeping communities safe from the risks of drug use, when in fact the criminalisation of drugs exacerbates risk and creates its own set of harms.

There is a myth that stop and search prevents crime, builds public confidence in the police and avoids unnecessary arrests;⁶ yet research increasingly shows that drug searches are a driver of the disproportionate policing of Black and minority ethnic communities in the UK.⁷ Due to the criminalisation of drugs, police can use the smell of cannabis as grounds to stop and search someone, whether the smell is coming from them or not. It is an often-used excuse, and one that’s difficult to contest in the moment, despite the College of Policing’s authorised professional practice stating that stopping someone just for the smell of cannabis is not considered “good practice for an officer to base his or her grounds for search”.⁸

Stop and search is primarily used for drug offences: Release’s research into its use demonstrated that two-thirds of all stop-searches were for drugs in 2016/17.⁹ It is applied in a racist manner: Black people are stopped up to 14 times more than white people¹⁰ – with range depending on geography,¹¹ even though ‘find’ rates (the rate at which drugs are actually found in a stop and search) are lower for Black people.

Stop and search is also ineffective police practice: even when the number of stop searches tripled in 2016 under Operation Blunt 2 to respond to knife crimes, analysis by the Criminal Justice Alliance demonstrated that nearly three-quarters of all stop and searches found no weapons or any other prohibited item.¹² While it is claimed to be used to keep communities safe, the majority of stop and searches are for low-level drug offences such as possession for personal use. Overall, the find rates are so low that

stop and search ultimately enables police to intimidate, harass and create violence in the lives of young people much more effectively than it is at removing illicit substances from communities.

Stop and search is an extension of decades of police-led intimidation of minorities in the UK. High profile cases such as Rashan Charles¹³ and Edson da Costa¹⁴ highlighted the brutality of drugs policing: both young men died in police custody, having swallowed packaged substances to avoid sentences. Charles’ fate is especially tragic as what he had swallowed was caffeine and paracetamol, which are not illegal, but could have been used against him in court as evidence of ‘bulking’ drugs with these substances. Ultimately, both men were demonised as drug suppliers as a way of excusing the police violence which led to their deaths. A similar picture was painted of George Floyd’s death in the US, which was blamed on fentanyl!¹⁵ by his defence.

Even during the first lockdown of the Covid-19 pandemic in spring 2020, when most people were at home, we found that people reported having more contact with the police than before.¹⁶ In May 2020 alone, the Metropolitan Police Service conducted the highest number of monthly searches in London since January 2012.¹⁷ Of these searches, 68% were for drugs.

Arguably, the most traumatic and invasive extension of police powers is the use of strip searches. This was notably used in the case of Child Q, who was illegally strip searched at school.¹⁸ Although her example may be



the highest profile, 25 other children were strip searched in 2020/21 in her borough of Hackney. Of those 25, only two were white; of those 25 searches, 80% were for drugs, but in 22 of them, no drugs were found.¹⁹

While policing in schools is alarming, they are just one of many places where police abuse their power. The reality is that in schools, police stations, vans, and many other places, police are able to traumatise young people through powers they are given under our current drug laws. These abuses of power will continue to be enabled through drug laws until there is serious reform of our society’s approach to drugs.

WHAT TO BUILD

At the policy level, Release advocates for the decriminalisation of all drugs.²⁰ This is not a new idea. It was first done in the 1970s and has been tested in over 30 countries. Although models of decriminalisation vary, the majority of jurisdictions provide legal limits for drugs that people can carry without being criminalised. Most models of decriminalisation carry civil sanctions like fines, but many advocates argue the best approach is to have no penalties for being caught with drugs. This removes one of the main reasons used by the police to stop and search individuals and ensures people's details aren't entering the criminal justice system.

Decriminalisation should also result in a reduction in funding, tools and other resources for the police, as it eradicates the need for policing in relation to drug possession. Given that over 60% of stop and searches are for drugs,²¹ this change in the law could dramatically reduce contact between young people and the police.

A key area to reinvest these freed-up resources would be in trauma services and mental health counselling, to help

repair the damage done to young people and over-policed communities. The health service is responsible for addressing negative experiences when they happen to ensure the harm is not carried throughout life; another part of the tragic cycle where traumatic childhood experiences lead to drug-related dependency issues in later years.²²

For those who are drug dependent and use drugs in public spaces due to poverty and lack of access to housing, safer locations for drug use (known as 'drug consumption rooms', or 'overdose prevention centres') provide much-needed protection and ensure users are not harassed by the police.

114 OVERDOSES AVERTED IN TWO MONTHS

Drug consumption rooms are already operational in 16 countries²³ and are a viable strategy for the UK. They are an example of how spaces can provide health and social interventions. From providing medical equipment (such as needles, pipes or syringes) to reducing transmission of bloodborne diseases or creating a safe space to discuss health and social needs with specialists and peers, drug consumption rooms are an excellent opportunity to engage usually marginalised populations, connecting them with services in a non-coercive manner.

In New York, a drug consumption room averted 114 overdoses in its first two months of operation,²⁴ a testament to their life-saving impact. Despite endless calls to open similar rooms in the UK from virtually every medical association,²⁵ nothing has been done, despite the UK having the highest levels of drug-related deaths on record, accounting for one in three such deaths in Europe.²⁶

Ultimately, the solutions pursued should eliminate the need for contact between police and young people in relation to drugs. The police have increasingly shown they are unable to address drug-related problems and are in fact a main driver of trauma, arrests

and other harms to young people. Drug possession offences are arguably a gateway into the criminal justice system; breaking this link could reduce (re)offending rates.

No matter how many times you reform police practices, educate them to be less racist, or to be nicer when arresting people, the police exist to punish certain groups in society. Pursuing alternatives to the current drug laws needs to happen alongside the abolition of drug policing, instead using other governmental departments to manage the issues around the drug trade in a less violent way.

FIRST STEPS

Drug policy reform, of course, cannot fully address police violence or end systemic racism on its own. But it can, without a doubt, reduce contact between communities of colour – especially children and young people – and the criminal justice system. Reforming the UK's drug policies can and must be a key step in the long journey towards addressing state violence and transforming the way policing occurs in our society.

EXISTING GOOD PRACTICE

There are some existing solutions from across the world the UK could adopt to create a safer environment for young people, at both the community and policy level. Both condemn many practices of the police as a whole, but particularly drug policing.

At the community level, coalitions to end strip searches can be created to end this traumatising practice. Movements like [#ENDSTRIPSEARCH](#)²⁷ rightly frame this practice as state-sanctioned sexual assault; given the low success rate in finding drugs or preventing any crime, we're inclined to agree. Beyond highlighting the racist and intrusive nature of this power, the campaign encourages collective action against strip searches, raising awareness and creating a network for collective action. The campaign could also bring to light police abuses of power, as there is a lack of consistent and publicly available data on the volume and scale of strip searches of children and adults.

Other efforts use technology to empower young people in the face of law enforcement. The [Y-Stop project](#)²⁸ gives young people the tools to interact with the police safely, equipping them with all the skills and knowledge they need to handle a stop and search. Run by Release, the project is a collaboration between charities, lawyers, young people, youth workers, community and media organisations. Through training and tools like apps, it increases young people's confidence and skills to deal with stop and search and reduces the risk of conflict and harm caused by contact with the police.

Both of these examples demonstrate what can be done to raise awareness around police practices, while equipping young people with the tools and skills needed to stay in control in police interactions. However, these are only temporary solutions that work within the current policed environment. For real change to occur, we need to propose and advocate for alternatives that can be cemented into place through policy change.





THE SHARPEST EDGE OF POLICE VIOLENCE

TRUTH, JUSTICE AND ACCOUNTABILITY FOLLOWING DEATHS IN POLICE CUSTODY

Serious youth violence does not exist in a vacuum. It is directly related to the state's marginalisation of working class youth, of which deaths in custody are at the sharpest end. Successive governments' continued policy of austerity and cuts to essential social services has coincided with a rise in youth violence. Other research suggests a strong correlation between school exclusion, youth detention and youth violence.¹

In this context, it is clear that the traditional mainstream view of youth violence as the senseless and isolated actions of young working class individuals is not fit for purpose. Instead, youth violence should be framed in the broader context of structural violence against disenfranchised youth. Any solution to serious youth violence therefore needs to be embedded in a human rights and social justice framework.

At present, the system is not delivering what is required: truth, justice, accountability and, most importantly, change.

At INQUEST, we work alongside families bereaved by deaths in state custody to challenge state violence and neglect. Over the past 40 years, we have worked with the families of hundreds of young people who have died at the hands of police, as well as in prisons and mental health settings.

Throughout this chapter, we highlight and contextualise the deaths of young people in police custody. We also discuss the failures of the post-death investigation process responsible for responding to these deaths and the reasons it has let down so many families and communities. Finally, we outline recommendations which we believe would enable fundamental transformative change.

CONTEXTUALISING DEATHS IN POLICE CUSTODY

Deaths in police custody are underpinned by inequality and poverty. They reflect the wider structural racism, sexism, disablism and neurodiverse and mental health discrimination endemic in society and its institutions. The thematic issues set out elsewhere in this guide are important and relevant to understanding the lives of the people and communities who are policed.

Marginalised young people in our society are criminalised and disproportionately policed, particularly young Black people. They are more likely than their White counterparts to be arrested, stopped and searched and have force used against them by the police. Black children are also more likely to be excluded from school, which is directly linked to their overrepresentation in prison. Despite Black children only comprising 4% of the 10 to 17-year-old population in England and Wales (census data 2011), for example, they account for 15% of arrests and 29% of the youth custody population.²

More generally, all children who are engaged with children's social services and care are far more likely to end up in prison. Children who have been in care comprise 24% of the prison population, but less than 1% of the population as a whole.³ On top of this, there is a crisis in mental health provision for children and young people.⁴ Already stretched health, welfare and social services for young people have been decimated in recent years by the austerity policies of successive governments - yet there always seems to be more funding available for police and prisons.

Deaths in police custody strongly reflect the systematic anti-Black racism entrenched within the police force. Official data on deaths in police custody and contact is published annually by the Independent Office for Police Conduct (IOPC). However, it does not allow for analysis of both ethnicity and age, and the categorisation of 'custody deaths' and 'other deaths' limits the clarity of the data and obscures significant cases.

Since 1990, INQUEST has been at the forefront of collating data on deaths involving the police in England and Wales.⁵ This information is based on our casework and monitoring. Our data shows that in the past 20 years (2002-2022) there were at least 83 deaths of young people in police custody and contact (not including road traffic incidents and pursuits). Of these deaths, 48 people were racialised as white, 19 as Black, and 6 as Asian, with information on the ethnicities of the remaining few not available. Of all the young people, 43 were men or boys and five were women or girls.

Despite Black people representing only 4% of the UK population (census data, 2021) at least 23% of the young people whose deaths were recorded in the period were racialised as Black. This is part of a longstanding wider pattern of Black men dying disproportionately in contact with police, particularly those with mental ill health.

Police involved in their deaths will often tell inquests how fearful they were in the face of 'big', 'mad', 'dangerous' Black men. Little to no attention is paid to racism or discrimination at an individual or systemic level in the post-death investigation processes. Furthermore, no voice is given to the fear those who died may have experienced.

Misogyny is also prevalent within policing. When 19-year-old Gaia Pope and her family tried to access support from the police, they were dismissed, ignored, and even laughed

at by officers.⁶ Not only did the police decide to take no further action against the man who raped her, but police also ignored her case when she went missing while in mental health crisis. There were also clear failures with mental health services who failed to support her long before this crisis point.

FAILURES IN RESPONDING TO DEATHS IN CUSTODY

The system for responding to deaths in police custody is intended to establish the truth of what happened to inform recommendations for change to prevent future deaths. It should also lead to justice and accountability for those involved in a death. All too often, the system fails on both counts.

A key part of the process is an inquest hearing, where a coroner and a jury create a public record of the circumstances of the death and identify any issues which contributed. Coroners can also issue prevention of future death reports, which make specific recommendations for change.

Alongside this, an investigation by the IOPC is supposed to identify any potential wrongdoing at an individual or corporate level. This can lead to professional misconduct hearings for officers involved and criminal charges against individual officers or whole police forces. The IOPC also has a role in examining systemic issues and reporting on key themes and patterns.

24% OF CHILDREN IN PRISON HAVE BEEN IN CARE

These systems are failing across the board. Post-death investigation processes often blame individuals for their own death and characterise the deceased through racialised tropes, with significant attention placed on the individual's real or imagined relationship to criminality, gangs, drugs and weapons. Far less attention is paid to police misconduct or indeed institutional racism within policing.

For example, at the inquest into the death of Edson da Costa, a 25-year-old Black man who died following police restraint, evidence showed police had no specific intelligence on Edson or his friends when their car was stopped – only that one of them “matched the description” of a suspect who had been in a totally different car.⁷ Yet police lawyers at the inquest repeatedly emphasised Edson's alleged connections with gangs and crime, and how dangerous the area of East London was, deflecting attention from the dangerous police force used against him.

Little attention is given in these processes to the social circumstances of the persons' life and death, and the enduring failures of public services to successfully support them. Rashan Charles, a 20-year-old Black man, died following police restraint. He had been known to children's social services and had had prior encounters with the police, with convictions going back to when he was just 13.⁸ He had been excluded from mainstream school, and was in alternative education.⁹

Despite deeply concerning evidence on the police's use of force, the inquests into both Rashan and Edson's deaths were largely uncritical and wrote the deaths off as ‘accidental’ (or in legal terms, ‘misadventure’).

Clear signs of mental ill health are often overlooked or misunderstood by police, who inappropriately end up responding to health crises where other services miss opportunities to engage.

For example, Mzee Mohammed-Daley was an 18-year-old Black man who had been diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder, PTSD and ADHD. On the day he died, his mother had desperately tried to contact the local mental health crisis team as well as police. Mzee ended up alone, in crisis, in a shopping centre, before being restrained by security guards and then police. The inquest put his death down to ‘natural causes’.¹⁰

The post-death investigation process takes years to be completed, with delays frustrating the opportunities to identify urgent recommendations to protect others. On the rare occasions where these processes do deliver the truth about what happened and make important recommendations, there is no national oversight of the issues identified and no one to ensure that change takes place.

DEMANDING JUSTICE AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Justice and accountability are rare when it comes to deaths in police custody. Since 1990, INQUEST has recorded 1,850 deaths in police custody and contact.¹¹ Only one police officer involved has been found guilty of manslaughter, and none have been successfully prosecuted for murder. Police misconduct processes, which examine breaches of professional standards, are also flawed and rarely lead to serious (if any) action against officers involved in deaths.

In 2017, an independent review of deaths and serious incidents in police custody was published.¹² The Angiolini Review, as it is also known, highlighted failures in the post-death investigation processes, as well as issues in policing culture and practice which lead to deaths and harms. It made 110 important recommendations.

These included ending the use of custody as a place of safety for children and ensuring NHS settings or local authorities could provide appropriate accommodation. The review also recommended sustainable funding of mental health initiatives which divert people from police contact and ensure health professionals respond to people in crisis. Five years on, the number of deaths each year remain at similar levels and the same patterns repeat.¹³

The systems for responding to deaths are too often failing to do their job, and justice and accountability remain elusive. This leaves bereaved people struggling for answers and allows preventable deaths to continue.

These systems also give little consideration to the underlying structures and patterns across individual cases. This prevents recommendations from addressing the deeper structural solutions required.

Today, too many people – particularly young Black men – are dying in police custody. The current system is not delivering justice, accountability or change. It is crucial that urgent and fundamental change is made to policing and the inquest system to prevent further deaths and provide grieving families with the answers they need.

WHAT TO BUILD

1. INVESTIGATE THE POTENTIAL ROLE OF RACISM AND DISCRIMINATION IN POST-DEATH INVESTIGATIONS

In INQUEST's experience, issues relating to racism and discrimination, as well as the potential role of racism or discrimination in the death, are not adequately considered (if at all) in post-death investigations. If these issues are not acknowledged or investigated, they cannot be addressed.

2. ESTABLISH A LEGAL DUTY OF CANDOUR FOR PUBLIC AUTHORITIES, INCLUDING POLICE

There is currently a culture of delay, denial and obfuscation among the police and their legal teams concerning post-death investigations. This frustrates the potential of these processes to identify the truth and enable justice and accountability, which ultimately precludes the possibility of change to prevent future harms and deaths.

Hillsborough Law, formally known as the Public Authorities (Accountability) Bill, should be implemented by Parliament. A key aspect of this is creating a new legal 'duty of candour' on public authorities and officials, requiring them to tell the truth and proactively cooperate with official investigations and inquiries.¹⁴

3. ESTABLISH A NATIONAL OVERSIGHT MECHANISM

When the processes work as they should, the recommendations arising from post-death investigations and inquiries are invaluable. But there is currently no oversight of these recommendations nationally and no mechanism to follow them up.

Therefore, the government should establish a new and independent body tasked with the duty to collate, analyse and monitor learning and implementation arising out of post-death investigations and inquiries. It should provide a role for bereaved families and community groups to voice concerns and provide a mandate for its work.



4. MOVE AWAY FROM POLICING AS A RESPONSE TO SOCIAL PROBLEMS

Over decades, police forces nationally (and internationally) have proven themselves incapable of reform. Rather than expanding the remit and resourcing of a failing criminal justice system, the government should focus on investment in services that holistically reduce harm, increase equality and improve lives.

A reallocation of criminal justice resources to well-funded, well-staffed, specialist community health and welfare services, including drug,

alcohol and mental health services, youth services, housing, and education should be the priority. This approach would address the root causes of crime and violence in our society and prevent future harm and deaths.

Urgent action is needed to prevent deaths in police custody and the associated collective trauma experienced by families and communities following a death. Only when we engage in transformative social change and implement meaningful policies can we begin to contribute towards an equitable and just society.

'BEING WITH' NOT 'DOING TO'

DECOLONIAL, ABOLITIONIST APPROACHES TO MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT

At NSUN, when we talk about mental ill-health, distress and trauma, we're speaking expansively and acknowledging the variety of people's experiences. Mainstream concepts of 'mental health' are often depictions of depression and anxiety – which can be severe and debilitating, but aren't the totality of mental distress, and aren't the most stigmatised of conditions, experiences or diagnoses. Included within our communities are people who hear voices and see things others don't, people who experience

'extreme' states, and people who are stigmatised as inherently violent, dangerous or destructive.

In this piece we look at different responses to the spectrum of emotional distress, particularly criminalisation and medicalisation. Both responses can inflict harm and mean that people experience violence at the hands of state institutions.

We want to recognise that emotions that come up around violence, politics, culture, faith, crime, justice and policing are often heavily scrutinised. This is especially true of Black and brown people's emotions. Sometimes, these emotions are criminalised, as in the recent case in Manchester where texts that a number of Black boys sent expressing grief and anger were used as evidence of criminal activity or intent.¹

We attempt to look at the material conditions and dangers faced by people who by virtue of their mental and emotional state are considered dangerous, crazy, unreliable or vulnerable. While those experiences are varied, they're also fertile ground for organising, shared struggle and shared communities of care: the building ground for alternative systems of support. We write this piece in response to calls to 'fund mental health not the police', in order to show how mental health is deeply political, and does not begin or end with care.

WHAT WE WANT TO DISMANTLE

WHAT IS HAPPENING TO PEOPLE IN CRISIS?

When you're in crisis, being placed in mental healthcare settings, like hospital wards, is often involuntary or pressured. When people are sectioned (kept in hospital for a minimum period of time) under the Mental Health Act it can result in hospital stays that are months or years long. It can mean being given treatments you don't consent to, having your movements

seriously restricted, being under constant surveillance and losing access to your benefits, housing, and support system. Huge cuts to services under austerity have stripped away services and choice, especially in communities, so there is often very little say over how people receive support. The choice of how, where, for how long and what kind is often taken away.

Being in distress can also mean that you end up criminalised - being passed on to the police for expressing your distress, and even being held in a police cell or remanded to prison custody for your 'safety' (something that Mental Health Act reforms should eventually get rid of).

If you're a person of colour, you're up to 40% more likely to enter mental health services through the criminal justice system. People of colour are also more likely to be restrained in mental health contexts, and more likely to be given medication over psychological therapies.

When distress is criminalised, medicalising those emotional responses can sometimes seem like a better or safer choice. Isn't it safer to be sick than a criminal? Not necessarily: in this piece we explore where the police are present in traditional mental healthcare, and how mental healthcare settings are places where people can experience controlling or punishing behaviour even when the police aren't directly involved. Criminalisation and medicalisation go hand in hand.

WHERE ARE THE POLICE DIRECTLY INVOLVED IN TRADITIONAL MENTAL HEALTH SERVICE PROVISION?

The historically embedded links between policing, prisons, and mental health continue to grow,² with society's dominant psychiatric model and entrenched coercion being 'violently upheld and enforced by the police, doctors, social workers and other agents of the state'.³ In this section, we look at where police are involved in mental health services and responses to people in crisis.

Police can be directly involved in the response to crisis, including prosecuting people for alleged offences associated with self-harm or suicidality.⁴ Being in distress and asking for help is criminalised. People might be given antisocial behaviour orders, community protection notices or criminal behaviour orders and threatened with prison after suicide attempts.

These practices aim to 'deter' suicidality but they go no way towards improving the conditions of someone's life or their suffering. Instead, they worsen it and deter help-seeking while removing access to care.

Another area where we see the policing of mental health crises is in 'high intensity use' models. High intensity use refers to people who frequently use emergency services like Accident and Emergency departments and calling 999. There have been a number of efforts to develop models to stop people

from being 'high intensity' users of healthcare services. The adoption of the 'Serenity Integrated Monitoring' (SIM) model by NHS Mental Health Trusts was brought into sharp relief by the StopSIM coalition⁵ of service users, survivors, and allies in 2021. SIM was pitched as reducing demand on services, involving police as interventionists in community mental health teams. Police were given access to service users' medical records and able to share police records with medical staff.

Police presence in crisis teams uses threats of legal action to pressure people into not seeking help when they need it. Knowing that you might be denied help and even passed onto the police after seeking support means people may not get the care they are entitled to when deeply distressed for fear of rejection or punishment if they reach out.

The StopSIM coalition succeeded in seeing the network that created the SIM model shut down. SIM-like models, however, and other coercive programmes persist in mental health settings.

Prevent, the public sector counter-terror duty, creates an environment in which Muslims, especially young Muslim men, are viewed with suspicion in education, health, the workplace and beyond. 'The cops are in our heads and our hearts'⁶ and whilst some resist, we are encouraged on a daily basis to remain alert to others' 'suspicious' behaviour.



Even without suspicion of radicalisation, Prevent referrals are used in mental health as a vehicle to ‘speed up access to support’.⁷ Racialised young people are shunted into a system of surveillance despite the risks to their safety and wellbeing.

Vulnerability Support Hubs, exposed through investigative work by Medact, show further how mental health settings and the police collude in the ‘securitisation of health’ (practices that involve extending the police system and its logic into healthcare, like surveillance, restraint, and being prosecuted for your distress) where people are coerced into spaces that are extensions of the criminal justice system and their treatment may be influenced by the involvement of counterterrorism police.⁸

These programmes can’t be separated from the 122% rise in Muslim prisoners in the UK between 2002 and 2015 with Muslims now making up 18% of the prison population.⁹ Mental health can be used to target certain communities, like Muslim communities in the UK, making their belief systems ‘symptoms’ of illness.

Prisons and police cells are no longer going to be ‘places of safety’ for people in distress once the law changes. These reforms, however, sit within a context of ongoing securitisation which is not going away and acutely impacts racialised groups.



WHO COMMITS HARM?

People experiencing mental distress, ill-health or ‘extreme’ states are often stereotyped as violent, particularly if they are Black or a person of colour. But there are types of violence and harm directed at people experiencing distress which are viewed as acceptable, even positive.

Restrictive practice is a euphemism for things that take place in mental health contexts that restrict people’s physical movement, emotional expression, and so on. It can range from 24-hour blanket surveillance without consent,¹⁰ to chemical restraint, and not being allowed outside. Restrictive practice is enabled by the power inequalities that exist in services and systems.

Restrictive practice can be violent and life threatening. What happened to Seni Lewis, piled on by almost a dozen police officers, might have been interpreted or justified by professionals involved at the time as necessary ‘restrictive practice’.¹¹ It was not. It was a brutal, fatal assault on a young person whose family trusted services to care for their loved one. Staff judged the ‘risk’ to themselves as being more important than the safety and life of someone vulnerable and in crisis. Seni’s family have tirelessly campaigned to right the wrongs that resulted in Seni’s death, including as part of the United Friends and Families Campaign (UFFC).¹² Seni’s Law, or the Mental Health Units (Use of Force) Act 2018 is part of this and it aims to increase protections and oversight on use of force in mental health settings.

WE NEED TO EXPLORE WHICH HARMS ARE TOLERATED

So-called restrictive practice is rarely considered assault. In contrast, even small acts by someone in distress can be framed as criminal and punished. The contradictions in how restrictive practice is framed take us beyond mental health: you can be harassed, followed, searched and violated, but those responsible are seen as just doing their jobs.

In their Radical Safeguarding Workbook,¹³ Maslaha asks people who work in schools to explore the harms which are tolerated to children and young people within a school environment. They argue that learning to see those harms and treat them as unacceptable is a really important part of abolitionist and liberatory progress. Their model can be applied to other settings to show how when people who experience distress or mental ill health are harmed by systems, it can be seen as socially acceptable or even encouraged. In other words, the system isn’t broken, it’s working as intended.

**THERE ARE TYPES
OF VIOLENCE AND
HARM DIRECTED AT
PEOPLE IN DISTRESS
WHICH ARE VIEWED
AS ACCEPTABLE
EVEN POSITIVE**



WHAT TO BUILD

BUILDING AS AN ABOLITIONIST APPROACH

In the mental health context, abolition means dismantling harmful practices found in traditional mental health systems, and building new structures of care and support, rooted in community and mutual aid. It also refers to solidarity across different experiences of marginalisation and discrimination. Abolition is described by Róisín Spealáin as “a new form of social life that values humans over any amount of property, profit or power. It is international solidarity, reparations, anti-imperialism, community, compassion, anti-psychiatry, liberation, justice and an end to exploitation. It is the understanding that illegality and immorality are not the same, that criminal is a word only ever reserved for society’s most downtrodden.”¹⁴

What does this look like? There are many organisers and groups exploring how we can do things differently, the groundwork for which has been laid by years of transformative abolitionist work in mental health survivor movements and beyond.

But just as there is no universal experience of mental distress, there is no universal approach to taking back power and creating alternative systems of care outside of oppressive traditional systems. As China Mills writes in her book, *Decolonising Global Mental Health* (2014), “frameworks for understanding and responding to mental distress need to be ‘homegrown’ within the local contexts from which distress emerges, privileging the knowledge of those with lived experience of distress, and enabling interventions based on community collaboration, self-help and peer support”.¹⁵

THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY

Crisis¹⁶ or Soteria¹⁷ houses are a relatively well-known and somewhat formalised example of community-based, ‘non-coercive’ crisis care, where the aim is to create a place of sanctuary as an alternative to inpatient admission grounded in the idea of standing alongside people and supporting their autonomy, instead of subjecting people to a system of care in which they have little voice or choice. We describe this as ‘being with’ rather than ‘doing to’.

However, they can often only offer short-term support for an extremely limited number of people. Some are run by the NHS, and for many, people need a referral by a mental health professional in order to access support. This shows how traditional community-based alternatives can be severely limited by underfunding and inaccessibility.

Mental health user-led community groups organising and doing peer support, mutual aid, and more exist ‘under the radar’ in a range of contexts across the UK, meeting needs unmet by traditional mental health service (or charity) provision in ways they know work best for them and their community. Some of them work towards wider transformative justice and abolition explicitly, for example Campaign for Psychiatric Abolition, who fight against policing, prisons, and psychiatry.¹⁸ Their educational resource list¹⁹ provides a starting point for anyone wanting to learn more about abolition. Cradle Community is another collective working towards transformative justice responses to violence in the name of seeking radical approaches to care and healing.²⁰ Some of them are building alternatives without necessarily naming their work as abolitionist - for examples of some of these, take a look at the profiles of some of the groups we have recently funded at NSUN.²¹

Community-based care doesn’t just look like one thing, but it might have some shared elements. In his piece on policing, morality, and mental health, Shuranjeet Singh considers the elements of a future grounded in community-based support and solutions.²² He writes that these solutions would: “view health and mental health outcomes as beyond biological causations; be dynamic and responsive to their contexts; work alongside others within their communities to serve populations; espouse compassion and care rather than criminalisation; be held accountable to those they serve and place a primacy on de-escalation”. Ultimately, community-based solutions should absolve the need for prisons and police in mental health, working towards their dissolution from society as a whole.

Community means more than just creating services to respond to mental ill-health, distress or trauma that are based ‘in the community’ as opposed to within traditional services. We also need to think about building systems in society that create conditions in peoples’ lives where they are less likely to reach crisis.

COMMUNITY ALTERNATIVES AND TRANSFORMATIVE JUSTICE: OUR VISION FOR THE FUTURE

What we see right now at NSUN is groups, grounded in community, coming together to develop their own ways of doing things with genuine care at the forefront. We hope to help create a world where their ability to carry out their work is properly resourced and valued, where they and we can work towards transformative justice by building alternative, sustainable strategies of care. In this world, we will be able to name and mourn the injustices that have been inflicted upon people who experience mental ill-health, distress and trauma.²³ We will also have the skills and the resources to fight for change without jeopardising our own mental health or that of others. Young people who feel anger, fear or depression, who act or feel in ways that others don't, or who see things differently will not be thought of as a problem, a threat or a risk, but as people who give and receive care, with important things to say, who know what they and their communities need.

What we've set out in this chapter requires a whole system and structure rethink. To get us on that journey, here are the things we are calling for right now:

1. An end to all forms of punitive intervention in schools, hospitals and the community: no more isolation, exclusions, chemical or physical restraint, non-consensual treatment or coercive programmes of surveillance for people living with mental distress like Community Treatment Orders.
2. Funded and sustainable spaces for people in crisis to go when they need help with genuine care, including residential care, where support is on their own terms and we acknowledge that help is not neutral. Power that any professionals in these spaces hold over others must be recognised and addressed.
3. Resources for communities to take care of their own - to take up space, organise together, and flourish. Many communities have experienced multi-generational deprivation and are targeted by punitive policies like the cap on child benefit. Building genuine alternatives needs resourcing, and their value needs to be better understood and respected by policy-makers and funders.

A common call in disability spaces is 'nothing about us without us'. We know that 'us' means different things to different people. We want space for people to define their 'us' and not to be defined by others.





RADICAL STORY- TELLING

DISMANTLING THE LOGIC OF PRE-CRIME THROUGH COMMUNITY LEARNING

At Maslaha, we work to change and challenge the conditions that create inequalities for Muslim and Black and brown communities in education, criminal justice, health and on the basis of gender, in a continued climate of Islamophobia, racism and negative media coverage.

Over the past 10 years, we have worked across a range of social issues because we understand the multiple identities

that communities hold and the multiple deprivations the people we work with might be experiencing.

In this chapter, we focus on the role of radical storytelling, which occupies a central part of our work in countering the violence enacted by the police and the state, and how we can create alternative, nourishing futures.

Radical storytelling is a communal practice that relies on building and renewing relationships and accountability. It is a way of creating society built on trust rather than suspicion, and hope rather than fear.

We illustrate the ways in which both counter-terror policing and ‘serious violence prevention’ harm our communities by viewing people through a lens of pre-emptive risk. And we explore how we can defy the narrow borders being built for us now and in the future that seek to limit our imaginations.

We discuss the forms of policing that are used in the name of prevention, and which require communities to be cut off from their contexts. We show how we can counter this by putting back those complex stories and genealogies.

We look at the impact the logic of prevention has on young people in schools, and ask what could be done instead. And finally, we show practical alternatives from our own work.

DISMANTLING: THE HARM DONE BY OVERPOLICING

RISK PREVENTION, FROM TERRORISM TO SERIOUS YOUTH VIOLENCE

A significant proportion of the people we work with live in deprived inner-city areas, and face disproportionate levels of unemployment, economic inactivity, ill health, educational underachievement,

and poor housing conditions. These conditions are exacerbated by institutional racism and poor racial literacy in our public services.

But rather than deal with these issues and address their underlying root causes, the state has singled out our communities for some of its harshest policing practices. From the Government’s counter-terrorism strategy, to safeguarding practices at schools, we are targeted by a wide variety of intrusive initiatives which claim to ‘prevent’ violence before it has occurred.

There are parallels in the approaches that lead to the surveillance of Muslims through ‘counter-terrorism’ and those that target young Black and brown people in the name of serious youth violence ‘prevention.’ For example, Section 60 stop and searches, which allow officers to stop and search a person without suspicion if they suspect serious violence is due to take place, mirrors the notorious and now-repealed Section 44 of the Terrorism Act 2000 – both powers enacted in the name of ‘prevention’ and both used disproportionately against people of colour. Recognising parallels like this is crucial to building solidarity across communities.

FORMS OF POLICING: LOST HISTORIES AND SPLIT-SECOND DECISIONS

Policing is not just an interaction with an officer, however. It is a broad and constantly evolving raft of policies and practices designed to regulate and punish

communities whose ‘forms of life’ do not fit with what is regarded as acceptable. At Maslaha, we have seen religious and cultural practice viewed through the lens of risk, leading to people being punished for engaging in these practices.

For example, [our research](#) shows that Muslim men in prison are frequently banned from Friday prayers for minor infractions of prison rules: they tell us the prison authorities know how much such prayers meant to them and deliberately use the threat of denying them their religious freedom as leverage.¹ As one said: “They know that’s the one thing that will get to a Muslim if he’s not going to get to Friday prayers. That’s their best threat.”

Our work with Muslim communities, across education, health, the criminal justice system, gender and the arts, shows we are facing a situation where you can be punished for being ‘too Muslim’ or ‘too Black’.

But while the long histories of racism are always present in the way these communities are policed, the denial of those histories is also an innate part of that policing. Over-policing is intimately tied to an organised decontextualising of communities: cutting individuals off from their communities and their complex histories, and instead compressing whole lives into isolated moments or actions that are labelled ‘criminal’ or ‘risky.’

At the sharpest and most tragic end of this way of viewing people is the logic of the split-second decision. In 2011, Mark Duggan was killed by police in the name of preventing serious violence. Crucially, officers believed Duggan to be holding a firearm – a belief that proved to be fatal, and that an inquest found was not true.²

Forensic Architecture, a multidisciplinary research group based at Goldsmiths, University of London, analysed the killing of Mark Duggan by police, and the defence of making decisions in a split-second and notions of ‘pre-emption’. According to the group:

“The logic of the ‘split second’ argument is entirely pre-emptive. It does not refer to situations of all-out confrontation, but to those supposedly pregnant with the potential for violence to erupt. In a split-second, the officer must decide which of multiple possible futures is most likely to take place.

“But police responses are learned, acquired through teaching, and training. They are also culturally and politically conditioned, and prey to racial bias and political context.”

The communities we work with are compressed into these ‘timeframes’, which exclude past trauma, and the personal and cultural history a person carries with them. It also excludes the racist history embedded in policing,

and the learned assumptions that might unconsciously guide how an officer perceives and chooses to respond to a situation.

Instead, responsibility is placed squarely on the shoulders of the individual: an individual who in that moment becomes a danger to society, with no recognition of society's responsibilities to the individual.

TRAPPED IN THE 'PRE-CRIMINAL' SPACE

This work of decontextualising is also present in tools and policies like Prevent. The Prevent duty is part of the Government's counter-terrorism strategy (otherwise known as 'CONTEST') and has been rolled out across a number of institutions in the UK. The duty places a legal obligation on public institutions to "have due regard for the need to prevent people being drawn into terrorism." As part of this duty, people who work with the public are expected to refer someone to the authorities if they have concerns about their "vulnerability to being drawn into terrorism."

As such, Prevent legally requires public sector workers, doctors, teachers and social care workers to work in what is sinisterly described as 'the pre-criminal space' – using moments out of context, or without understanding of culture or history, to designate individuals as 'risky.'

Examples include Muslim children being referred for drawing a gun in their school books, and for saying "alms", in relation to a conversation about charity. The teacher assumed the child was saying "arms".³

We have heard from Muslim parents who intentionally avoid talking about politics at home because they are afraid of what their child will say at school. We have also heard from pupils and students who have avoided mental health services.

We have heard from a former Government minister (who was also a GP), speaking proudly about referring a Muslim to Prevent after he became suspicious of his patient becoming overtly religious, dressing differently and having dry hands. The patient said his dry hands were because of ablutions and praying five times a day. The minister assumed it was because of handling chemical substances.

Both stop and search and Prevent – and others policing tools such as the Metropolitan Police's 'Gangs Matrix' – all seek to categorise communities into split-second discretions weighed down by learned and ingrained racism.

These simplified narratives are designed to create archetypes like 'the terrorist Muslim', 'the extremist' and 'the gang member'. They lay the foundations for new laws based on evidence which itself relies on these stereotypes.

WE HAVE SEEN RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL PRACTICE VIEWED THROUGH THE LENS OF RISK

WHAT TO BUILD

RECONTEXTUALISING OUR COMMUNITIES

The decontextualising described above can involve ignoring heritage, culture, religion, past trauma, systemic racism and the impact of austerity. At Maslaha, our work involves putting that context back, in all of its complexity, and seeing this as a strength and an opportunity through community knowledge, practice and storytelling.

Radical storytelling involves deep listening and a sophisticated analysis that is not only intellectually rigorous, but can also register emotion, vulnerability, heritage, culture, and religion. It also recognises the root causes of racism and harm, while beginning to outline a more compassionate way forward.

The case study below provides an example of how this approach works in practice. It highlights the harms school pupils experience when their context and history is ignored.

In place of these harms, we propose a process of questioning which allows us to take practical action that is both immediate and strategic. With each question posed, we explore practical steps and strategies we would take based on our existing work.

CASE STUDY: SHANE'S STORY

Shane,⁴ a Year 8 pupil, was excluded from school after being involved in several fights. His behaviour changed dramatically after his mother died and the school struggled to communicate with his carers. It is clear that early interventions rooted in care, trust and an understanding of his complex history would have prevented the exclusion.

1. WHEN SHANE WAS EXCLUDED AS A YEAR 8 CHILD, WHY DID THE SCHOOL NOT TAKE INTO ACCOUNT THE ONGOING TRAUMA OF HIS MOTHER DYING? HOW WOULD THAT AFFECT HIS BEHAVIOUR?

As mentioned earlier, at Maslaha when we create resources, design services, run training or campaigns, we look outside narrow time frames. We recognise, for instance, that an experience of racism is not a time limited event, but often an ongoing process that can continue to affect other social situations and relationships in the future.

One way of moving away from narrow timeframes is to involve many aspects of the community in the production of an intervention – for example, artists, families, youth groups, and imams. This allows scope to engage with different aspects of a young person's life, and therefore be more sophisticated and more likely to be trusted.

2. DID THEY TAKE INTO ACCOUNT THAT PERHAPS COMMUNICATION WITH HIS NEW GUARDIANS WOULD BE DIFFICULT BECAUSE THE SCHOOL WAS POOR AT COMMUNICATING WITH ITS COMMUNITIES, NOT BECAUSE THE GUARDIANS DIDN'T CARE?

There is a real lack of understanding within public services about how to communicate to marginalised communities. For instance, we have seen examples of largely white-led charities or parts of the NHS assuming that all Muslims speak Arabic – or simply not asking communities how they would like to receive information. For any public service, being able to communicate effectively is a vital part of creating trust.

3. DID THE SCHOOL UNDERSTAND THERE IS A HISTORY OF VIOLENT MENTAL HEALTH INTERVENTIONS INTO THE LIVES OF BLACK FAMILIES?

We have spoken to young people who have passed through the prison system and not trusted vital services such as mental health support because either the system discriminated against them based on their religious identity, or it was too generic.

THE EXPERIENCE OF RACISM IS NOT TIME LIMITED

We know from our work in prisons and supporting charities like the Samaritans that it is not enough to create culturally relevant resources, but also to have an understanding that systemic racism can prevent marginalised people from accessing vital services such as mental health interventions.

Our approach is to use the very aspects of someone's identity that are seen as a risk as a way to create social change. For example, our [Talking From the Heart](#) resource⁵ was designed to support Somali, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi communities with depression. It was produced with communities and public services and, importantly, it used religion and culture as a part of the therapeutic process.

4. DID THE SCHOOL SEE THE GLIMMER OF HOPE WHEN ART THERAPY WAS OFFERED FOR TWO WEEKS?

Art therapy allowed a different space to be created for Shane in school, one which was not punitive, but positive and potentially caring. Our Muslim Girls Fence project is built on similar principles. It creates a space where a young person's identity is no longer seen as a risk factor, but a powerful opportunity to fulfil their potential.

5. DID THEY SEE A CHILD AND HIS FUTURE BEING DECIDED BY A LARGELY WHITE GROUP OF ADULTS WHO TREATED HIM LIKE AN ADULT?

Public services tend to start from a position of assuming there is something wrong in communities, rather than scrutinising their own practices or policies. This assumption that 'the community' is a problem leads to relationships of paternalism rather than mutual trust. Our work has to involve these often-uncomfortable conversations and working with families, including young people and schools, to create alternatives.



EXISTING GOOD PRACTICE

RADICAL STORYTELLING IN PRACTICE: OUR PROJECTS

The examples below are from Maslaha's ongoing work and are a mix of practice, knowledge creation, creativity, and building community relationships and infrastructure.

MUSLIM GIRLS FENCE

Muslim Girls Fence is a project collaboration between Maslaha and British Fencing. It aims to facilitate spaces at a grassroots level for Muslim girls and women to challenge assumptions and narratives relating to their gender, racial, religious and other identities, through both physical and creative methods. The girls are coached to learn the traditionally elite and white male-dominated sport of fencing. Through this, they physically confront the stereotypes of fencers, but also the expectations our society has of them: that Muslim women and girls are weak, subordinate and lacking agency.

Alongside this, they engage in a range of discussions and creative exercises, such as collaging, drawing, photography and poetry to reflect on their identities, the ways they are represented, and the limited narratives about their experiences that are usually given a mainstream platform in society.

The project allows safe spaces to be created in schools and in communities. It is a space for critical thinking and creativity while learning a sport that many of the participants have described as enabling them to feel powerful and subverting what people, including teachers, think of them.

The project uses sport and arts to widen language around Muslim communities, as well as enabling Muslim girls and women to tell their own stories on their own terms. It also creates a space to talk about surveillance, Islamophobia, racism, Prevent, and policing in their local areas.

RADICAL SAFEGUARDING WORKBOOK

Our workbook is designed for practitioners working with children and young people, particularly in schools, who might be wondering how to start doing things differently when it comes to safeguarding.

Our understanding of a radical approach to child safety is one that traces the root cause of harms to children. This resource looks at some of the cultures and structures that underpin and enable this harm and suggests some models for understanding child safety. It includes a range of practical approaches and activities to support practitioners in fostering alternative, resistant, safeguarding practices.

The workbook explores cultures and structures in UK schooling that can cause harm to young people, and problematises current safeguarding

strategies and practices that criminalise and harm children, particularly those from marginalised communities.

There are practical suggestions for school leaders, safeguarding leads, school governors, support staff, groups working with young people, and class teachers.

TIME TO END THE SILENCE

Our report, ***Time to End the Silence: the experience of Muslims in the prison system***,⁶ is radical storytelling in action. The report shows, in stark detail, how Muslims in prison face racism and a system that has a basic lack of knowledge about Islam, which obstructs them from practising their religion and prevents them from accessing vital services, such as mental health programmes.



The report points to the harmful consequences of police action, sentencing in courts, and probation, that have received little or no coverage. It is unapologetic in centring the experience of Muslims in prison and recognising the expertise of those who have experienced the criminal justice system and the communities they are from. The recording and analysis of these stories is therefore more compassionate and sophisticated.

CREATING ANTI-RACISM RESOURCES FOR SCHOOLS

Our work with schools demonstrates the need for resources to help schools become actively anti-racist in order to better engage with families regarded as 'hard to reach'. We developed the film *Anti-Racism From Day 1*,⁷ which features 10 things schools can do to become safer environments for Black

and brown communities to participate in. This ranges from acknowledging power and privilege between schools and communities, taking an active, non-judgemental approach to getting to know families, and not stereotyping families.

We refuse to let others tell our stories because their version describes a present we don't recognise and outlines a future we were never meant to have. Our communal stories are part of the struggle. They can inspire and be tools for change, built from hard learnt experiences and blueprints left by ancestors.

But this storytelling also needs to be nurtured and renewed. A muscle that is developed so it can respond with intention to the over-policing of our young people and help create a different way of living we can leave for those who come after us.





REIMAGINING YOUTH WORK

CREATING HEALING-CENTRED SUPPORT FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

Today, young people of colour are not given the support they need for the grief, trauma and violence caused by racism. It is imperative that we, as communities, find a way to provide young people with this support outside the mainstream institutions that are currently failing them. Through our work at Kids of Colour, this has been made clear to us by local young people¹ who have challenged the support their schools have failed to give them,² and shared their experiences in our youth spaces.

There are many ways we can provide this support to young people. Trauma-informed and healing-centred spaces play an invaluable role in helping young people process feelings of sadness, anger and grief.

These spaces are not only for youth workers and community members to hold and support young people in their emotional processing, but they also provide young people with an opportunity to support one another.

↑↑ THEIR GRIEF WAS REFRAMED AS GANG ACTIVITY

This is crucial, especially for those who are experiencing multiple forms of exclusion from society, such as racism and classism. It is particularly important for those who are being excluded from mainstream education.

Having spaces such as youth groups - which are underpinned by these ethical practices - brings young people together who can share their experiences and show each other that, as hard as these experiences are, they are not alone. This focus on the roles that youth spaces play is even more crucial in the current environment, in which funding to youth services is continually being cut.

This chapter will outline the impact of existing practices in policing and education that must be dismantled, and explain what we need to build in their place. We will then discuss the support provided by Kids of Colour as an example of existing good practice in Manchester.

DISMANTLING INSTITUTIONS

Young people of colour, especially those from working-class backgrounds, are often either overlooked or made to feel like a problem at school. For some, this understandably leads them to feel angry and resentful. Unfortunately, the context of these emotions is regularly dismissed and they are instead labelled as being hyper-aggressive. The policing of emotions like frustration and anger often leads young people to be further excluded³ and in some cases institutionalised, whether this involves being put in exclusion rooms, pupil referral units or prisons.

The current system also prevents young people from safely processing grief and trauma. Take the 'Manchester 10' conspiracy case in July 2022,⁴ when a group of 10 young boys in Manchester were collectively given over 100 years in prison after being found guilty by association with one another.

They received a mixture of sentences, some for conspiracy to murder and others for conspiracy to cause grievous bodily harm. Throughout their sentencing, the use of gang narratives was consistently weaponised against them and they were framed as violent and calculated, rather than as they are: a group of young people grieving the loss of a friend; a group of young people who were consistently failed by institutions that should have given them support.

The rippling grief from this case is indescribable. It is not only the boys who are grieving and having to reimagine their lives after being imprisoned, but also their family, friends, partners and all the other community members that hold them close in their hearts.

Although we use this as an example to demonstrate how these specific young people were failed by multiple institutions, this is not the first case like this, nor will it be the last. We must stay vigilant about similar cases that lead to so much harm and community heartbreak. It is clear that if the correct resources were given to these young people, who were undoubtedly struggling with the loss of a friend, their grief would have been recognised and supported. Instead, they were neglected, leaving their form of grieving to be reframed by a racist justice system as 'gang' activity, resulting in life sentences.



**TRAUMA - INFORMED
AND HEALING - CENTRED
SPACES HELP YOUNG
PEOPLE TO PROCESS
THEIR SADNESS, ANGER
AND GRIEF**



WHAT TO BUILD

BUILDING SAFE, TRAUMA-INFORMED SPACES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

In a context where young people of colour face racism and exclusion daily, it is vital for us to build spaces that allow young people to heal from these experiences.

Such spaces enable young people to process their emotions in a healthy and constructive way, and they give professionals a chance to reframe our perception of young people's emotions.

If a young person is angry, for example, even if it is directed towards us, it is important for us to understand that these emotions will likely be a justified reaction to a complex range of issues they are dealing with. The anger could stem from grief or personal loss, feelings of isolation or a loss of faith in adults or systems that are supposed to protect young people.

It is crucial that these spaces are racially literate⁵ and that workers hold themselves accountable for their own racism and prejudice to prevent young people of colour being further alienated. Rather than demonising a young person further, we must create non-judgemental and caring spaces built on trust and radical love to equip young people with the language they need to express how they are feeling. It is not up to the young

IT IS UP TO US TO MAKE SPACE FOR HEALING



people to do this. It is up to us as teachers, youth workers and community members to make space for this healing.

Grief will always be complex. Everyone will have their own way of grieving, which makes it more important that nuanced and sensitive grief support is given to those who are experiencing these feelings.

These spaces also allow communities to change who has the ability to produce and pass on knowledge, and reclaim this power. While our education system remains extremely Eurocentric and colonised,⁶ being able to teach young people of colour about

their history is a crucial part of healing from racial trauma. It also helps them unlearn any internalised prejudice they may have towards themselves and others in their communities.

If we are to tackle cycles of grief, trauma and violence, more funding must be allocated to organisations that have the emotional and facilitation resources to support young people with processing their trauma and grief. It is important to find ways to disrupt the pipelines that lead to so many young working class people of colour to be imprisoned. If youth provision was carefully allocated to provide this early intervention support, the institutionalisation of young people could be prevented.

EXISTING GOOD PRACTICE

WHAT WE DO

The alternative spaces we create as communities - such as the youth spaces we run at Kids of Colour - give us a chance to counteract the oppressive environments that young people are so often subjected to. Kids of Colour was founded as a response to young people of colour reflecting on not existing in spaces where they felt heard and validated. That has always been, and always will be, the main priority for our work. In our youth spaces, young people are invited to guide their own learning and bring aspects of their identity to us; we provide a space for them to bring their own culture and histories, and a space which validates them. We want our youth spaces to feel joyful, while also leaving room for more difficult discussions about race and racism.

Our youth space is only for people of colour, including staff. We want the young people attending to be able to speak freely, without

feeling a need to monitor their emotions for white people; for them to feel assured that many other people present will likely have had similar experiences to their own.

We often begin by having a general check-in with the young people. Then we have conversations about anything they want to talk about. This often involves talking about events they have seen on social media or the news, giving them the space to talk through some of the heavier things that may be occupying their minds.

After ensuring they feel cared for and validated in any concerns they have raised, we move into a more joyful space where we eat and laugh together, while also continuing to support any difficult conversations that arise. We do this because we recognise the experiences of young people of colour are nuanced. Their lives are not defined by pain and suffering, but can instead build off the love and care given to them by their

WE HOPE WE CAN FOCUS ON THE JOY THAT COMES WITH SUPPORTING YOUNG PEOPLE

communities. This highlights the importance these carefully curated environments play and shows why they should not be overlooked when considering how we can help build up our communities.

There is still a long way to go. We are constantly reflecting on the best ways to support our young people, but we

believe with time and dedication these healing-centred spaces will become more mainstream, and that young people from marginalised groups who are dealing with trauma or grief will be given the support that they need. Within this, we hope we can also focus on the joy that comes with celebrating, supporting and uplifting young peoples' identities and communities.



AFTERWORD

When I was appointed Liberty's Interim Director in 2020, I was acutely aware that as a Black woman from a working class background, a non-lawyer, and an abolitionist, I represented a lot of 'firsts' in leading a decades-old institution. I was also aware that, taking the most cynical of views, my appointment might help insulate Liberty not only from demands being made of establishment organisations by a reinvigorated anti-racist movement, but more broadly, from a groundswell of dissatisfaction within the broader social justice movement with white, middle-class, reformist NGO leadership.

With this in mind, my main aim for my tenure was to work collaboratively with a group much wider than the 'usual suspects'. I wanted to go beyond firefighting and condemnation of existing government policies, to advance instead a collective, imaginative vision for a society in which we might all flourish. Amid a hail of regressive legislation that has been raining down for years, it didn't seem practically viable or strategically sound for Liberty (or the wider progressive movement) to devote the majority of its energy to defending a status quo that was already leaving millions behind. Seeing Liberty's membership pass an AGM motion

in 2021 in support of deprioritising policing as the primary solution to social harms, and setting this project in motion are two milestones of which I'm immensely proud.

It might be tempting to trace the roots of this Holding Our Own guide to the global Black Lives Matter uprisings of 2020, prompted by the Minneapolis police's murder of George Floyd. All of us whose lives have been touched by interpersonal and state violence, however, know we need to break the automatic equation of police and prisons with safety. We need imaginative and compassionate responses to social harms and their causes. These needs predate 2020 by decades, if not centuries, and are not confined to any one nation. In the UK, we hear the evidence that coercive state practices cannot keep us safe every time we say the names of these institutions' victims:

Cherry Groce (1985)

Joy Gardner (1993)

Mark Duggan (2011)

Sheku Bayoh (2015)

Sarah Reed (2016)

Mustafa Dawood (2018)

Sarah Everard (2021)

Oladeji Adeyemi Omishore (2022)

Chris Kaba (2022)

These are just a fraction. Of course, premature death is only the most final consequence of a lack of true safety and care in our communities. The contributions to this guide outline how surveillance and silencing, through policies like Prevent; adultification, whereby children are treated like adults by people and services supposed to care for them; and an absence of non-punitive mental health and family support also deform lives and relationships. One young person from Art Against Knives expresses it this way: "We're living in the trenches, bro. You're not guaranteed getting home every single day."

Bearing witness to harm and advancing pragmatic policy recommendations are integral to the mission of human rights organisations, and this guide does both well. But it also goes further – we might see it as a seed library, full of ideas and practices that, carefully tended, might grow into ways of living differently.

It is a joy to see so many contributions that outline projects and places where those seeds are already growing. Maslaha, for example, discuss why we need to resist one-sided narratives that make it easier to police and punish people. They are putting that resistance into practice with their Muslims Girls Fence project. NSUN point to models of crisis mental healthcare that don't rely on inpatient admissions, that are "grounded in the approach of 'being with' rather than 'doing to'." INQUEST makes a bold call for "a reallocation of resources to well-funded, well-staffed, specialist community health and welfare services." And in the work of Kids of Colour and

WE NEED TO EXPERIMENT TOWARDS THE WORLD WE WANT TO LIVE IN TOGETHER

Art Against Knives, we see what some of those spaces might look like, spaces where staff "actually care"; where it's possible to explore and process big emotions like trauma and grief; where minoritised young people can reclaim their histories, and crucially, take enough away with them to learn and grow and practice in their day-to-day lives.

Many chapters in this guide allude to an abolitionist vision of a world without police, prisons and punishment. That vision is far more expansive than the aims of human rights law, concerned as it is, mainly, with ensuring people's treatment by the state doesn't fall below a minimum standard. But even in pure policy terms, well-worn human rights principles like necessity, effectiveness and proportionality demand that we look more closely at state policies and institutions to see if the vast resources allocated to them are actually achieving their stated aims. The evidence is far more equivocal than mainstream political parties would have us believe. This is ground that human rights organisations and abolitionists can tread together.

Ultimately, our movement cannot be animated only by the threat of disaster. We need to cultivate and experiment towards the world we want to live in together. As this guide shows, many seeds have already been sown. Long may the work to tend them continue.



GRACIE BRADLEY

Gracie Mae Bradley worked in Liberty's policy team from 2017 – 2020, and was its Interim Director from October 2020 – December 2021. This afterword is dedicated to the memory of her cousin, Raheem Saifullah Samuel (1997 – 2019).

“
**WE NEED IMAGINATIVE
AND COMPASSIONATE
RESPONSES TO SOCIAL
HARMS AND THEIR
CAUSES**

GRACIE BRADLEY



DEMANDS

All the contributors in the Holding Our Own Guide detail some of the various steps and strategies that will take us to a place where all young people, and everyone in society, can live full lives free from violence. On the page opposite, we provide a snapshot of some of these steps in order to equip activists, teachers, power holders, friends, neighbours, policymakers, our loved ones and beyond, with the tools to take us on that journey to liberation.

Situating our asks in the shorter ('today') and longer term ('tomorrow') empowers us all to make demands on various institutions and people who hold the power to make the change towards the possibility of a future where all young people – and all of us – can flourish.

These demands call for the rolling back of police powers and a response to the root causes of social issues, like serious youth violence, that invest in community-led solutions that have human rights and social justice at their heart.

We encourage you to tear this page out, scribble on it, share it online, stick it on your walls, and distribute it in your neighbourhoods for use in your varied contexts.

We hope these demands energise you.

DEMANDS FOR TODAY

- 01 End school exclusions and remove police from schools
- 02 End drugs policing
- 03 Dismantle harmful practices in traditional mental health systems
- 04 End cuts to youth services
- 05 End the practice of joint enterprise
- 06 End pre-crime policing and surveillance practices that make public services unsafe for young people
- 07 Make the Inquest system more truthful, just and accountable

DEMANDS FOR TOMORROW

- 01 Build an emancipatory education system based on care and support, not discipline and punishment
- 02 Decriminalise all drugs and reinvest resources in trauma services, mental health counselling and harm reduction services
- 03 Build new structures of care and support for people experiencing mental health crises
- 04 Invest in safe, healing-centred and racially literate spaces for young people
- 05 Develop community-based solutions to harm that allow young people's friendships, communities and cultures to flourish
- 06 Invest in and mobilise the expertise and knowledge of our communities to create holistic public services
- 07 Move away from policing as a response to social problems

GLOSSARY

ABLEISM

A set of beliefs, practices and structures that devalue and discriminate against disabled people.¹

ABOLITION

Abolition seeks to radically transform society by permanently dismantling systems of punishment, like policing and prisons, in favour of building community-based solutions to harm that are rooted in care, support and transformation.²

ADULTIFICATION

When children (in particular Black children) are seen as older, less innocent and less vulnerable than white children.

CARCERAL

Centring the logics of incarceration when responding to a broad range of social issues (e.g: the use of isolation booths in schools).

CO-PRODUCTION

A way of working where service providers and people accessing a service work together to reach a collective outcome.³

CO-REGULATION

The ability to regulate emotions and behaviors to soothe and manage stressing internal sensory input or external situations, with the support and direction of a connecting individual.⁴

CRIMINALISATION

Making an act into a criminal offence by making it illegal.

DISENFRANCHISEMENT

When some groups of people are excluded from decisions and are not able to have their say on issues affecting them

DISPROPORTIONATE

When one group is affected by something more than other groups, often unfairly.

HOSTILE ENVIRONMENT

Some use the term “hostile environment” to describe all policies and practices that make life difficult for marginalised groups in the

UK. More specifically, the term is often used in the context of migrants rights, referring to a set of policies introduced in 2012 by then-Home Secretary Theresa May, with the aim of making life unbearably difficult in the UK for those who cannot show the right paperwork.⁵

INCARCERATION

Being confined in a state institution (e.g a prison or detention centre).

INSTITUTIONALISATION

Being placed or kept in a residential institution (e.g: a prison).

JOINT ENTERPRISE

A common law doctrine where an individual can be jointly convicted of the crime of another, if the court decides they foresaw that the other party was likely to commit that crime.⁶

MARGINALISATION

Treatment of a person, group, or concept as insignificant or peripheral.

NEURODIVERSE/ NEURODIVERGENT

“Neurodiversity” is a popular term that’s used to describe differences in the way people’s brains work. The idea is that there’s no “correct” way for the brain to work. Instead, there is a wide range of ways that people perceive and respond to the world, and these differences are to be embraced and encouraged.⁷

PUNITIVE

A focus on punishment, rather than care or support.

RACIALISED

Ethnic, racial and cultural communities who are in the minority have been racialised – that is, white-majority systems have categorised groups according to the colour of their skin or other cultural or religious features, and in doing so have ‘othered’ and marginalised them.

SCHOOL-TO-PRISON PIPELINE

The ‘school to prison pipeline’ is a term used to describe the path from school exclusion to entry into prison.⁸

SECURITISATION

A term describing how states use a combination of legislation, policy, and political narratives to frame social issues as ‘security problems’.⁹

STIGMATISED

Stigma involves negative attitudes or discrimination against someone based on a distinguishing characteristic such as a mental illness, health condition, or disability. Social stigmas can also be related to other characteristics including gender, sexuality, race, religion, and culture.¹⁰

SYSTEMIC

When an issue - like racism or sexism - is built into a system, rather than being an accident or occasional problem.

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