



Child arrests in England and Wales 2016

Research briefing

Picture: Elly Godfrey/Alamy

Howard League for Penal Reform

Key points

- In 2010 the Howard League for Penal Reform launched the Programme to Reduce Child Arrests
- In 2016 there were 87,525 child arrests in England and Wales, down from 245,763 in 2010
- There were 703 arrests of primary-age children in 2016. Arrests of 10- and 11-year-olds have fallen at a faster rate than that for older children
- There were 14,487 arrests of girls in 2016. Arrests of girls have fallen at a faster rate than for boys
- Every force in England and Wales has reduced the number of child arrests between 2010 and 2016, with 12 forces achieving reductions of more than 75 per cent
- The number of child arrests has reduced by 64 per cent between 2010 and 2016
- The number of children in prison fell by 58 per cent between 2010 and 2016
- This analysis is based on freedom of information data from 43 police service areas in England and Wales and the British Transport Police.

Introduction

In 2010 the Howard League launched a programme to reduce the number of child arrests in England and Wales. The charity works closely with police forces around the country to stem the flow of children entering the criminal justice system. This programme has proved successful. The charity publishes annual data on child arrests, which show a year-on-year reduction. In 2016 there were 87,525 child arrests in England and Wales. The number of child arrests has reduced by 64 per cent between 2010 and 2016.

As gatekeepers to the system, every police force across the country has successfully reduced the number of child arrests, which has led to huge reductions in the number of first time entrants to the youth justice system and the number of children in prison. The number of children in prison fell by 58 per cent between 2010 and 2016 (YJB, 2017). The rate of reduction in arrests and custody shows a clear relationship – if we reduce entrants to the system we stem the flow into custody.

At a time when senior police officers have expressed concerns about having the resources to deal effectively with serious public safety incidents, such as terrorist attacks, it is welcome that valuable police time is not being wasted in pursuing the unnecessary criminalisation of children. It also means that tens of thousands of children have not been exposed to the harmful youth justice system and had their life chances blighted.

This positive trend across police forces has been led at a national level, most notably by the National Police Chiefs Council (NPCC), which has prioritised improvements in the policing of children. In 2015, the NPCC published the 'National Strategy for the Policing of Children and Young People', which emphasises the importance of a proportionate and consistent response and avoiding unnecessary criminalisation – especially where the behaviour can be dealt with more appropriately through other means.

The Howard League regularly meets and corresponds with forces and shares evidence of good practice in local areas. There are so many examples that this briefing cannot showcase them all, but they include the Chief Constable of Durham Police, who has met with each of his officers individually to impress upon them a problem solving approach rather than relying on arrests. Surrey Police have focused on shifting the culture within the force. As part of this, they have delivered training to all custody and frontline staff focusing on the need to reduce the number of children arrested. They also ran an internal force communications campaign to encourage people to see the 'child first and the offence second'. Thames Valley, like many forces, now has a system in place so that an inspector reviews every child arrest.

This briefing paper tells a good news story. The Howard League is concerned, however, that too many children are still being brought into conflict with the criminal justice system, with negative implications for their future lives at the expense of their communities and the taxpayer. Evidence shows that the more contact a child has with the formal criminal justice system, the more entrenched they are likely to become, which increases reoffending rates (McAra and McVie, 2007). The Howard League will continue to work with police forces across the country to develop their good work and reduce the number of child arrests to an absolute minimum.

To support this aim, and in response to concerns repeatedly raised with the charity by police forces, the Howard League has launched a programme of work to end the unnecessary criminalisation of children living in residential care. Exploring best practice within the police service and residential care sector, it builds on the charity's work to keep as many boys and girls as possible out of the criminal justice system and make our communities safer.

Child arrests

The data obtained by the Howard League shows that in 2016 there were 87,525 child arrests in England and Wales. This constitutes a reduction of 64 per cent since 2010 and a 14 per cent reduction compared to 2015.

Every police force in England and Wales has reduced the number of child arrests between 2010 and 2016, with 12 forces achieving reductions of more than 75 per cent. All but three forces have reduced the rate of child arrests by more than 50 per cent since 2010.

Two forces reported an increase in child arrests compared to 2015. Although the numbers are relatively small, this is of concern and the Howard League will work with both forces to address this trend.

Twenty-three per cent of all child arrests in England and Wales in 2016 were made by the Metropolitan Police, which was heavily criticised by HM Inspectorate of Constabulary for systemic child protection failings. The force is now addressing these concerns. The focus on improving the policing of children is welcome and the Howard League is supporting and advising on their work. It is hoped that this will lead to a substantial reduction in child arrests in London.

Gender

There were 14,487 arrests of girls in 2016. Arrests of girls have fallen at a faster rate than for boys. The number has fallen by 69 per cent since 2010. Between 2010 and 2016 the number of girls in penal custody in England and Wales fell by 78 per cent (YJB, 2017).

Table 1: Number of child arrests 2010-2016 by police service area

Police force	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
Avon & Somerset Constabulary	7,255	5,608	4,321	2,929	2,342	1,767	1,533
Bedfordshire	1,853	1,692	1,770	1,390	1,290	1,175	1,085
British Transport Police****	*	*	2,077	1,645	1,336	1,014	130*****
Cambridgeshire Constabulary	3,440	2,099	1,473	1,067	1,060	979	1,013
Cheshire Constabulary	1,870	1,904	1,508	1,269	1,266	1,292	1,187
City of London	273	192	136	122	77	80	51
Cleveland Police	4,367	3,368	2,407	1,862	1,527	1,358	1,206
Cumbria Constabulary	1,274	1,864	1,263	1,125	1,073	1,034	900
Derbyshire Constabulary	4,194	3,938	**	1,930	1,840	1,573	797**
Devon & Cornwall Constabulary	4,132	3,363	2,398	1,431	1,470	1,297	994
Dorset Police	2,310	1,053	1,252	815	770	916	447
Durham Constabulary	3,658	2,841	1,767	1,445	1,493	1,193	1,157
Dyfed Powys Police	2,307	1,643	1,584	1,165	687	625	501
Essex Police	7,739	5,870	4,237	3,931	3,718	2,635	2,588
Gloucestershire Constabulary	1,516	1,412	1,268	920	861	725	663
Greater Manchester Police****	***	10,903	7,807	6,144	5,969	4,587	3,714
Gwent Police	2,503	2,163	1,698	1,569	980	1,172	930
Hampshire Constabulary	8,267	6,533	5,091	6,058	3,192	2,295	1,711
Hertfordshire Constabulary	3,948	1,809	2,478	1,776	1,753	1,632	1,558
Humberside Police	5,751	2,067	2,732	2,008	1,460	1,300	1,409
Kent Police	7,505	6,409	4,412	4,602	3,752	2,976	2,900
Lancashire Constabulary	9,779	5,476	4,158	3,201	2,887	3,074	2,775
Leicestershire Constabulary	3,322	2,685	2,252	1,670	1,553	1,103	806
Lincolnshire Police	***	1,911	1,290	1,027	990	1,117	913
Merseyside Police	10,197	8,421	6,213	5,066	5,295	3,273	2,570
Metropolitan	46,079	39,901	30,155	26,442	23,402	22,328	20,387
Norfolk Constabulary	2,510	2,201	1,316	1,384	1,561	1,602	1,261
North Wales Police	3,420	2,596	2,022	1,780	1,554	1,577	1,532
North Yorkshire Police	4,525	3,644	1,152	1,556	1,445	1,317	1,291
Northamptonshire Police	2,594	2,177	1,660	1,289	1,270	1,115	885
Northumbria Police	11,407	9,280	6,983	5,990	5,280	3,829	2,838
Nottinghamshire Police	5,743	4,640	2,989	2,189	2,319	1,840	1,466
South Wales Police	5,659	2,551	3,166	3,245	2,978	2,854	2,499
South Yorkshire Police	6,235	5,094	3,344	2,693	2,285	1,812	1,396
Staffordshire Police	4,163	3,316	2,491	1,741	1,418	1,808	1,350
Suffolk Constabulary****	3,716	1,684	1,388	1,118	1,030	1,011	858
Surrey Police	1,955	1,974	1,483	1,524	1,624	1,338	889
Sussex Police	5,779	4,564	4,423	4,018	3,220	2,679	2,185
Thames Valley Police	8,012	6,539	2,531**	3,808	3,225	2,872	2,446
Warwickshire Police	1,419	1,050	673	623	563	619	597
West Mercia Constabulary	5,491	3,442	2,664	1,758	1,418	1,354	1,247
West Midlands Police	14,387	10,487	7,484	7,123	5,803	5,438	5,244
West Yorkshire Police	12,947	10,600	7,492	6,148	5,417	5,045	4,663
Wiltshire Constabulary****	2,262	1,997	1,054	1,122	991	1,048	953
TOTAL	245,763	202,961	150,602	131,718	115,444	101,678	87,525

*Not sent FOI requests in 2010 or 2011 **Limited data - some data lost when new system was introduced *** Police force did not supply data **** Revised data provided
***** Data limited to 1 January 2016 to 20 February 2016 as crime recording system was changed

Primary-age children

There were 703 arrests of primary-age children in 2016. Arrests of 10- and 11-year-olds have fallen at a faster rate than the reduction of all child arrests in the same period. Between 2015 and 2016 there was an 18 per cent reduction in the number of arrests of primary-age children.

Case study – Hampshire Constabulary

Hampshire Constabulary has achieved a 79 per cent reduction in child arrests since 2010. This is likely to be an underestimate of their success as the data set changed during this time to include 17-year-olds.

Between 2014 and 2016 Hampshire Constabulary delivered training packages to all frontline officers, investigators and custody officers, which gave staff the tools to consider all options available when dealing with children. The training courses delivered included Pace Code G, Out of Court Disposals and Exercising Your Discretion. The Exercising Your Discretion course specifically used case studies that highlighted previous interactions with children and how positive outcomes could be achieved by less intrusive means. Officers were also trained on how to use the National Decision Making model whilst considering the most appropriate outcome for the child, victim and the police. Neighbourhood officers and response officers received further training in relation to looked-after children.

In early 2014, Hampshire Constabulary introduced multi-agency youth triage panels. The panels consider appropriate outcomes and early intervention with youth services. Cases are considered whether the child was arrested or not, further reducing the need for children to come into custody.

Case study – Dorset Police

Dorset Police has reduced the number of child arrests by 81 per cent between 2010 and 2016, making it one of the most successful forces in

the country. The number of child arrests made by Dorset Police fell by 51 per cent between 2015 and 2016.

Custody sergeants are contacted by officers before they take any child into custody and they appropriately challenge any request made and fully record the rationale for decisions taken. This robust approach allows officers to explore other more suitable options when dealing with children, treating them as children first.

Dorset has a schools incident policy, which provides guidance on the type of incidents where the police should be involved and those that should be dealt with by the school. From April 2014, incidents in schools have been dealt with predominantly by the Safe Schools and Communities Team. These incidents would previously have been dealt with by police officers and some of those would have resulted in arrests and children going into custody.

Dorset Police won the 2016 Howard League Community Award in the Policing and Children category.

About the Howard League for Penal Reform

The Howard League is a national charity working for less crime, safer communities and fewer people in prison.

We campaign, research and take legal action on a wide range of issues. We work with parliament, the media, criminal justice professions, stakeholders and members of the public, influencing debate and forcing through meaningful change.

A full list of references is available on our website at www.howardleague.org/what-you-can-do/children-and-policing/

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