



Child arrests in England and Wales 2017

Research briefing

Howard League for Penal Reform

Key points

- In 2010, the Howard League for Penal Reform launched its Programme to Reduce Child Arrests
- In 2017, there were 79,012 child arrests in England and Wales, a 68 per cent reduction from the 245,763 child arrests in 2010
- Every force in England and Wales has reduced the number of child arrests between 2010 and 2017, with 15 forces achieving reductions of 75 per cent or more over this period
- There were 616 arrests of primary school-age children in 2017, a reduction of 12 per cent from the previous year
- There were 12,495 recorded arrests of girls in 2017. Arrests for girls have fallen at a faster rate than for boys since 2010
- The number of children in prison fell by over 60 per cent between 2010 and 2017 as fewer children were drawn into the penal system
- 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 high number of child arrests in England and Wales. We have worked closely with police forces around the country to curtail the number of children coming into the criminal justice system and to prevent children's lives being blighted by criminal records and unnecessary police contact. The annual data we publish on child arrests testifies to the success of this work. In 2017, there were 79,012 child arrests in England and Wales, down every year from 245,763 in 2010. This represents a decrease in child arrests of 68 per cent between 2010 and 2017. This reduction in child arrests has contributed to a fall in child custody levels of over 60 per cent between March 2010 and March 2017 (Youth Justice Board, 2018a, Supplementary Tables: Chapter 7, Table 7.2).

The Howard League has worked alongside national police leaders, the inspectorate and forces to support best practice in dealing with children. Improvements in the policing of children have been encouraged at a national level, most notably by the National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC), which has prioritised a 'child-centred' policing agenda. Its *National Strategy for the Policing of Children & Young People* (NPCC, updated 2016), highlighted children's vulnerability and emphasised the importance of keeping children out of the criminal justice system where possible. Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Constabulary's *State of Policing Report 2017* (2018) reported that inspectors had found a significant change in the way the police were understanding and treating vulnerability in children and that officers and staff were increasingly starting to ask, 'What is causing this behaviour?' and 'What can I do about it?'

We know from our meetings and campaigning with police forces that the work of the NPCC and others to improve the policing of children is being well-received and taken on board by many forces. There is a tangible change in police culture as well as a better understanding of vulnerability and trauma which is undoubtedly driving many of the initiatives we have heard about that are helping to keep children out of the criminal justice system. The British Transport Police, for example, informed us that '[we] encourage

our officers to look beyond the obvious when engaging with children and young people and not simply see criminality but try and uncover deeper and more complex explanations for certain behaviours'. Other examples are provided in the case studies from the police forces at the end of this briefing. This shift in culture and awareness is most in evidence amongst senior and specialist staff; more work needs to be done to educate all officers and to embed child-centred policing throughout forces. We hear all too frequently that frontline officers feel they receive inadequate training on these issues and that they feel ill-equipped to interact with vulnerable children.

Reducing child arrests requires careful monitoring and analysis of all police contact with children. For example, we are aware that some forces are increasing their use of voluntary attendance whereby children are interviewed at a pre-arranged time. This can lead to no further action or an out-of-court disposal. We welcome efforts to reduce the severity of contact between police and children but we urge forces to ensure that all children receive legal advice from a youth justice specialist lawyer and support from a suitable appropriate adult. We have found that not all police officers are aware of the long-term criminal record consequences of police cautions and police records which do not result in formal outcomes. We are also concerned that children and their parents are sometimes ill- or mis-informed about the lifelong consequences of decisions they take without legal advice.

Key areas to achieve further progress

The continuing drop in child arrests during 2017 is very welcome. The Howard League's work around policing and children continues to shine new light on areas where further progress can be achieved. In particular, the criminalisation of children in residential care, the criminalisation of children who are being exploited by county lines gangs and the disproportionate levels of criminalisation of children from black and minority ethnic (BAME) backgrounds are key areas that all forces should be aware of and be actively seeking to address in order to further reduce the numbers of child arrests and the unnecessary criminalisation of children.

Table 1: Number of child arrests 2010-2017 by police service area

Police force	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
Avon and Somerset Constabulary	7,255	5,608	4,321	2,929	2,342	1,767	1,533	1,342
Bedfordshire Police	1,853	1,692	1,770	1,390	1,290	1,175	1,085	943
British Transport Police	*	*	2,077	1,645	1,336	1,014	130**	865
Cambridgeshire Constabulary	3,440	2,099	1,473	1,067	1,060	979	1,013	821
Cheshire Police	1,870	1,904	1,508	1,269	1,266	1,292	1,187	1,025
City of London Police	273	192	136	122	77	80	51	140
Cleveland Police	4,367	3,368	2,407	1,862	1,527	1,358	1,206	936
Cumbria Constabulary	1,274	1,864	1,263	1,125	1,073	1,034	900	554
Derbyshire Constabulary	4,194	3,938	*	1,930	1,840	1,573	797***	1,038
Devon and Cornwall Police	4,132	3,363	2,398	1,431	1,470	1,297	994	895
Dorset Police	2,310	1,053	1,252	815	770	916	447	459
Durham Constabulary	3,658	2,841	1,767	1,445	1,493	1,193	1,157	1,009
Dyfed Powys Police	2,307	1,643	1,584	1,165	687	625	501	341
Essex Police	7,739	5,870	4,237	3,931	3,718	2,635	2,588	1,923
Gloucestershire Constabulary	1,516	1,412	1,268	920	861	725	663	649
Greater Manchester Police	*	10,903	7,807	6,144	5,969	4,587	3,714	3,197
Gwent Police	2,503	2,163	1,698	1,569	980	1,172	930	747
Hampshire Constabulary	8,267	6,533	5,091	6,058	3,192	2,295	1,711****	3,960
Hertfordshire Constabulary	3,948	1,809	2,478	1,776	1,753	1,632	1,558	1,480
Humberside Police	5,751	2,067	2,732	2,008	1,460	1,300	1,409	1,385
Kent Police	7,505	6,409	4,412	4,602	3,752	2,976	2,900	2,683
Lancashire Constabulary	9,779	5,476	4,158	3,201	2,887	3,074	2,775	1,893
Leicestershire Police	3,322	2,685	2,252	1,670	1,553	1,103	806	1,129
Lincolnshire Police	*	1,911	1,290	1,027	990	1,117	913	779
Merseyside Police	10,197	8,421	6,213	5,066	5,295	3,273	2,570	2,336
Metropolitan Police	46,079	39,901	30,155	26,442	23,402	22,328	20,387	17,672
Norfolk Constabulary	2,510	2,201	1,316	1,384	1,561	1,602	1,261	1,083
North Wales Police	3,420	2,596	2,022	1,780	1,554	1,577	1,532	1,040
North Yorkshire Police	4,525	3,644	1,152	1,556	1,445	1,317	1,291	1,034
Northamptonshire Police	2,594	2,177	1,660	1,289	1,270	1,115	885	880
Northumbria Police	11,407	9,280	6,983	5,990	5,280	3,829	2,838	2,440
Nottinghamshire Police	5,743	4,640	2,989	2,189	2,319	1,840	1,466	1,466
South Wales Police	5,659	2,551	3,166	3,245	2,978	2,854	2,499	1,820
South Yorkshire Police	6,235	5,094	3,344	2,693	2,285	1,812	1,396	1,302*****
Staffordshire Police	4,163	3,316	2,491	1,741	1,418	1,808	1,350	1,081
Suffolk Constabulary	3,716	1,684	1,388	1,118	1,030	1,011	858	903
Surrey Police	1,955	1,974	1,483	1,524	1,624	1,338	889	730
Sussex Police	5,779	4,564	4,423	4,018	3,220	2,679	2,185	1,893
Thames Valley Police	8,012	6,539	2,531***	3,808	3,225	2,872	2,446	2,482
Warwickshire Police	1,419	1,050	673	623	563	619	597	447
West Mercia Police	5,491	3,442	2,664	1,758	1,418	1,354	1,247	805
West Midlands Police	14,387	10,487	7,484	7,123	5,803	5,438	5,244	4,674
West Yorkshire Police	12,947	10,600	7,492	6,148	5,417	5,045	4,663	3,953
Wiltshire Police	2,262	1,997	1,054	1,122	991	1,048	953	778
TOTAL	245,763	202,961	150,062	131,718	115,444	101,678	87,525	79,012

*Data unavailable **Data limited to the period from 1 January 2016 to 20 February 2016 as crime recording system was changed ***Limited data – some data was lost when a new system was introduced ****Police force provided data for number of children arrested not number of arrests. 2017 data relates to number of arrests and is therefore not directly comparable with previous year's data *****Does not include data from 6 December 2017 onwards when a new recording system was implemented

Residential care

In 2016 we launched a programme to end the criminalisation of children in residential care in response to concerns raised with us by police forces all over the country about high levels of call-outs from some children's homes, which were creating huge demand on police resources and leading to the unnecessary criminalisation of children. This project has highlighted the factors that can lead to children being unnecessarily arrested and criminalised and shown how good practice by the police is helping children and preventing them from being drawn into the criminal justice system. Forces that have tackled this problem have been able to significantly reduce the numbers of calls they are receiving from children's homes with resulting benefits for both children and forces, as the example below from Surrey Police illustrates. For more information about this programme, including examples of good practice from forces around the country, see *Ending the criminalisation of children in care. Briefing Two: best practice in policing* (Howard League, 2017) which is available on our website.

County lines and child criminal exploitation

One of the forces that has reported a small increase in child arrests this year, Suffolk Constabulary, told us that the greatest rise in arrests was of children aged 16 to 17 years. The main offences these children were being arrested for were possession with intent to supply, possession of an offensive weapon, affray and robbery. The force's Assistant Chief Constable informed us that these arrests were *'without doubt directly linked to the increase in county lines activity in Suffolk'*. Testimony from other forces indicates that it is likely these children were being trafficked to sell drugs and the Howard League contends they should be seen as victims first and foremost.

We have seen the awareness of child criminal exploitation (CCE) by county lines gangs develop rapidly over the last year among the police and other agencies. However, there is still a limited understanding of the ways in which these gangs recruit and control children and the victim status of children being used by these gangs to run drugs and commit other crimes, including violent crimes. Ann Coffey MP, Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Runaway and Missing Children and Adults, has said, *'There is a recognition that this is*

the new grooming scandal and it has echoes of Rotherham and Rochdale. We must not make the same mistakes again of blaming children. Children and young people caught up in this brutal world are victims of criminal exploitation and not criminals' (2018). Police officers need to be educated so that victims of CCE can be identified early and protected rather than criminalised. Evidence indicates that thousands of children are being exploited by these gangs (National Crime Agency, 2017) and many of them will be included in the current child arrests figures.

Children from BAME backgrounds

Our data shows that, in 2017, 26 per cent of child arrests were of children from BAME backgrounds despite the fact that BAME children make up only 18 per cent of the 10-17 general child population (YJB, 2018a). This disproportionality worsens further on in the system: in May 2018, 48 per cent of children in custody were BAME (YJB, 2018b). In his influential review into the treatment of, and outcomes for, BAME adults and children in the criminal justice system (2017) David Lammy highlighted the fact that BAME children were not benefitting from efforts to keep children out of the youth justice system at the same rate as white children. It is vital that the police, the gatekeepers to the criminal justice system, address this inequality.

One of the factors driving the high levels of arrests of BAME children is the increased media coverage around knife crime and gang involvement, much of which has been focused on children from non-white backgrounds. It is important that authorities do not respond to this coverage in a knee-jerk fashion and rush into responses and policies that cause children to be swept up unnecessarily into the criminal justice system.

Summary of child arrests data

The data obtained by the Howard League shows that in 2017 there were 79,012 child arrests in England and Wales. This constitutes a reduction of 68 per cent since 2010 and a decrease of ten per cent compared to 2016.

Every police force in England and Wales has reduced the number of child arrests between 2010 and 2017, with 15 forces achieving reductions of 75 per cent or more. All but three forces have reduced the rate of child arrests in their areas by more than 50 per cent since 2010.

Five forces have reported a rise in child arrests in 2017 from the previous year. We will be working with these forces to understand the reasons for these increases. As the example of Suffolk Constabulary shows, monitoring and analysis of even small rises in child arrests can highlight areas of concern, which can then be addressed.

22 per cent of child arrests in England and Wales in 2017 were made by the Metropolitan Police. The force has seen a welcome 13 per cent reduction this year but the number of children being arrested by the force is concerning. Prison custody levels are correspondingly high – in the year ending March 2017, 30 per cent of children in custody were attached to a London youth offending team (YJB, 2018a).

Gender

There were 12,495 recorded arrests of girls in 2017. Arrests for girls have fallen at a faster rate than for boys, decreasing by 73 per cent since 2010, compared to 67 per cent for boys.

Primary school-age children

At ten years, the age of criminal responsibility in England is one of the lowest in Europe, contravening international juvenile justice standards. It is argued that this low age of criminal responsibility is arbitrary and lacks an evidence base (Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, 2018). In 2017, there were 616 arrests of primary school-aged children.

Case Study – South Wales Police

South Wales Police achieved an impressive 27 per cent reduction in child arrests between 2016 and 2017. Their approach to policing children demonstrates the change in police culture outlined above which is helping to reduce child arrests in England and Wales. The force is working with the Children's Commissioner for Wales to embed a children's rights approach to their contact with children based on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. The force intends that this new framework will better serve the needs of children in order to help them develop and make the most of their potential rather than having their lives blighted by criminalisation.

Officers are encouraged to employ restorative approaches which avoid arrest, while custody officers have been trained to take a robust

approach to questioning officers' decisions to bring children into custody. The force informs us that the work they have done has '*nurtured officers and raised their awareness of less intrusive methods of investigation than arrest*'.

Case Study – Surrey Police

Surrey police has seen an 18 per cent reduction in child arrests between 2016 and 2017 and a 76 per cent reduction since 2010. The force reports that this success is part of a continued change in culture around the policing of children and young people where officers are trained to see the '*child first, offence second*'.

At the end of 2016, the force implemented an initiative, as part of its existing Youth Restorative Intervention Scheme, to reduce the criminalisation of children for offences committed in their own homes. When incidents occur, officers research family histories. Wherever possible, rather than treating the child as an offender, additional support is offered to the family to address difficulties.

Over the last year the force has delivered a Total Respect programme to 500 frontline officers and staff, including custody officers. The programme is an immersive learning experience led by young people – most of whom have been brought up in care, have experience of the care system or have lived in domestic abuse environments as children. The training aims to help police officers and staff better understand the experiences of young people in care and how childhood trauma can affect behaviour. It also teaches officers to deal with and relate to children in vulnerable situations.

Over the last eighteen months, Surrey police have trained staff in all the children's homes in the area about restorative approaches and appropriate working with the police. This work has led to a reduction in call-outs from children's homes which has also impacted on the child arrests figures.

Case Study – Cumbria Constabulary

Between 2016 and 2017, Cumbria Constabulary achieved a 38 per cent reduction in the number of child arrests. The force's Chief Constable informed us that a range of activities has promoted a growing recognition and understanding of early intervention and prevention which is helping divert children into support services and away from the criminal justice system.

In 2016, the force implemented a programme of refresher training for Custody Sergeants. The training focused on Association of Chief Police Officer guidance which stated that *'Arrests should only be made when necessary'* and highlighted children's vulnerability and the detrimental impact on children of arrest and being held in custody.

At the same time, the force introduced a new process for tracking youth crime investigations which included greater scrutiny of investigations. The process emphasised the importance of seeking early support and advice and of achieving the most proportionate outcome for children, taking into account input from partner agencies such as youth offending services.

Case Study – Essex Police

Essex Police has reduced the number of child arrests in its area by over 75 per cent since 2010; between 2016 and 2017 the force achieved a reduction of 26 per cent.

The force has been proactive in educating officers about the issues some children face, such as childhood trauma. For example, in April 2018, the Howard League was invited to present at a training day for police and partners on preventing the criminalisation of children in care. The force has also set up an initiative called Project Advocate which enables police officers quickly and easily to put children in care in touch with an advocacy service through the charity, Coram Voice.

One of the officers driving improvements in the force noted how important it had been to have the support of the Chief Constable to get things done and to promote child-centred policing throughout the force.

Case study – Sussex Police

Sussex Police has seen a 13 per cent reduction in the number of child arrests between 2016 and 2017.

The force promotes child-centred policing, advocating that, *'All children should be treated as children first in every encounter. The vulnerability of children and young people should be identified and responded to in order to protect them from harm'*. Senior officers aim to send *'strong messages around understanding why young people may be vulnerable, challenging culture and improving engagement'*.

The force has introduced 90 Youth Ambassadors who are tasked with spreading the message that police officers should see the child first, not the problem. The Youth Ambassadors, who are readily identifiable by a specially designed pin badge, come from all parts of the organisation and include administrative staff as well as officers. They are tasked with challenging colleagues and changing perspectives.

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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Howard League for Penal Reform

1 Ardleigh Road
London
N1 4HS

t
e
w

020 7249 7373
info@howardleague.org
www.howardleague.org

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