

# Evidence-Based Practice at the Youth Justice Board

*Dr Hannah Collyer is the Head of Evidence and Insights at the Youth Justice Board (YJB) for England and Wales. She is interviewed by Dr Rachel Bell who is an Operational Manager currently seconded to the Women's Operational Policy and Strategy Team in His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS).*

**Hannah's role includes oversight of the YJB's research and evaluation activity. Hannah was previously a Senior Researcher at What Works for Children's Social Care where she led on pilot, implementation, and process evaluation of a range of programmes seeking to improve outcomes for children with a social worker. This work aimed to build the evidence base for how and why interventions bring about change. Hannah has also previously worked as a Government Social Researcher in the Early Years team at the Department for Education, where she led on the longitudinal Study of Early Education and Development, designing evaluation for the early years social mobility programme and for education recovery programmes following the Covid-19 pandemic, and translating research evidence to inform policy and practice.**

The interview took place in June 2023.

**The YJB describes its strategy and central guiding principle as Child First. What does Child First mean?**

Child First is a summary of contemporary evidence about what works in youth justice to improve outcomes for children and to make communities safer, which has four components or tenets. The first tenet is seeing children as children. This involves recognising that children are different from adults, with their own needs, capacities, and rights as children. And it is about prioritising their best interests, making sure that any work is child-focused and developmentally informed.

The second tenet is developing pro-social identity for positive child outcomes. This recommends that work should be constructive and future focused, looking to promote children's strengths and capacities to develop their own prosocial identity, empowering them to fulfil their potential, and make positive

contributions to society. It's about building up children's strengths.

The third tenet is collaboration with children. This means that all activity should encourage children's active participation, engaging and including them in the process as much as possible.

And the fourth tenet is promoting diversion, a childhood outside of the justice system. This is about providing support for children but in a way that uses the minimum intervention within the formal justice system that is possible. It recognises that's not always possible, but wherever it is possible, prevention and diversion support and intervention from relevant agencies are preferred to formal justice system intervention. We know that contact with the criminal justice system increases the risk of criminogenic stigma and labelling which actually has worse outcomes for children.<sup>1</sup>

The YJB advocates for the use of Child First across the youth justice system and the wider services that children come into contact with.

**Can Child First be described as an evidence-based policy, or an evidence-based strategy?**

Child First isn't a policy or strategy per se but it's an evidence-based approach to youth justice. All four tenets of Child First are based on the latest evidence about how children develop and what works to achieve positive outcomes for children (and therefore ultimately reduce offending). Loughborough University have published a literature review which summarises all the evidence behind Child First.<sup>2</sup>

This review includes research evidence that children's capacity to make decisions and take in information is not fully developed in the same ways as that of adults. The evidence highlights what we know about speech and language and communication needs,

1. McAra, L., & McVie, S. (2007). Youth Justice? The Impact of Agency Contact on Desistance from Offending. *European Journal of Criminology*, 4, 315–45.
2. Case, S., & Browning, A. (2021). Child First Justice: the research evidence-base. Loughborough University. Available at: <https://www.lboro.ac.uk/subjects/social-policy-studies/research/child-first-justice/research-evidence-base/>

recognises children with those types of needs are overrepresented within the youth justice system, and that those children in particular struggle to understand legal proceedings and the sort of environments that they might experience through the justice system. There is an international evidence base highlighting the benefits of strengths-based, family, and community approaches to youth justice. And we also know from international research, including the longitudinal Edinburgh Study that formal criminal justice processing makes children more likely to commit crime again.<sup>3</sup> And, conversely, we know that pre-court diversion reduces the likelihood that children will commit another offence. So the approach is based on a huge body of evidence about how children develop and how they can be best supported in terms of actually delivering a Child First youth justice system.

Pathfinders, which are YJB funded innovative practice, also provide research evidence to help us understand what's working well in delivering Child First youth justice, that can be used to inform practice in other areas. However, although Child First is evidence-informed as an approach, there are still gaps in our evidence base. For example, more research would help us to get a better understanding of exactly how Child First can best be delivered in a range of different settings and services, and which approaches to Child First practice (such as diversion) work best and for which children.

**It seems to me that there are values, as well as evidence, underpinning the Child First vision. Can you explain a bit more about the relationship between values and evidence in Child First?**

Child First absolutely aligns with a range of different legislation and guidance about children's interests and welfare. The Children's Act directs that all services must promote the welfare of children, while the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)'s position is that children's best interests should be primary. In that sense a Child First approach

aligns with these values and principles about protecting the interests and experiences of children in the system.

However, it's a misinterpretation to assume Child First is a value-based position as it is derived from our evidence-based understanding about what works in youth justice. The evidence suggests that adopting a Child First approach would have benefits not just for the experiences and rights of children within the system, but also for making society and communities safer by improving positive, pro-social outcomes for children, and as a result reducing rates of offending by children.

So, while there is alignment with values around children's interests, Child First is about outcomes for society as a whole, and the evidence base around what is likely to be most effective to achieve those outcomes.

**Since 2012, the number of first-time entrants to the youth justice system has fallen by 78 per cent and the number of children held in custody has fallen by 77 per cent. What has caused this significant change?**

There are likely to be a number of system changes that have affected decreases in these statistics, many of which the YJB has advocated for over time, based on our understanding of the contemporary evidence base. These include a movement over time from a deficit-focus on managing 'risk of offending', towards a more constructive focus on helping children to make positive contributions to society — this is just more effective. Another change is the increased use of prevention and diversion; the YJB published a report this year about prevention and diversion and the report shows that this type of activity now makes up over half of youth justice service caseloads in England and Wales.<sup>4</sup> We know this is beneficial for children to improve their pro-social outcomes, and as a result reduce offending and make communities safer.

There's also been other changes in the wider system. Custodial sentences are increasingly a last

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3. See footnote 1.

4. YJB (2023). Final Report: Prevention and Diversion Project – Youth Justice Board for England and Wales (February 2023). Available at: <https://yjresourcehub.uk/research-articles-reports-and-briefings-thematic-broader-research-inform/item/1077-final-report-prevention-and-diversion-project-youth-justice-board-for-england-and-wales-february-2023.html>

resort — partly because of improved confidence in alternatives to custody. And there have been reduced school exclusions, increased support for contextual safeguarding in children's services provisions, changes in the way in which the police operate, and targets for policing. All those things contribute to the changes that we've seen.

But we must also look beneath these headlines when considering what future work is needed; youth justice involvement has not decreased at the same rate for all children. As a result, we see things like the proportion of Black and ethnic minority children in custody has grown in recent years. Looking underneath the data at how changes are different for different groups of children is a really helpful way of us thinking about where we still need to drive change in the system.

**To what extent has evidence helped the YJB advocate for the system and policy changes that supported this change?**

The YJB's statutory duties include distributing grants to local authorities who provide youth justice services, but also oversight of the youth justice system to understand how it's performing, commissioning research to support practice development, and identifying and sharing evidence-informed practice across the sector. So the YJB is intended to be an independent source of evidence-based advice and support for the sector.

The YJB uses data from youth justice services to publish annual youth justice statistics. These provide an opportunity to understand where progress has been made, and where more work might be needed.

We also run a number of stakeholder groups. We have an Academic Liaison Network which is a group of academics who are sector experts across the spectrum of youth justice. And we have the Youth Advisory

Network which is a forum coordinated by the YJB to get the voices of children into the work that we do. That's a really key part of the process of how we drive improvement in the sector — part of the Child First approach is involving children and listening to their experiences directly.

We also commission research and evaluation to develop the evidence base and inform our priorities and activity. Our most recent research publications include research exploring ethnic disparities in reoffending rates,<sup>5</sup> and a process evaluation of enhanced case management,<sup>6</sup> a trauma informed approach to practice in youth justice.

And I mentioned pathfinders earlier. These are local innovation and practice development that is often accompanied by evaluation. They help us to understand what's working in different types of practice around the country and all of that information is shared on our resource hub as it becomes available — this can be accessed by practitioners and used to inform their work.<sup>7</sup>

The YJB draws together all these different sources of information and evidence to inform its support for the youth justice sector.

**So sharing evidence about effective practice plays a critical role in improving outcomes for children?**

Yes. As I've said, oversight of how the system is performing, and identifying and sharing

evidence-informed practice are statutory functions of the YJB. And understanding how the system is performing is a key part of understanding how and where there are opportunities to improve practice.

A recent example of our work to understand system performance is the recently published systems mapping report called Brighter Futures.<sup>8</sup> It draws on the insights of over 200 youth justice experts from England and Wales. And it reports how far we are achieving a

And there have been reduced school exclusions, increased support for contextual safeguarding in children's services provisions, changes in the way in which the police operate, and targets for policing. All those things contribute to the changes that we've seen.

5. YJB (2023). Understanding ethnic disparity in reoffending rates in the youth justice system. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/understanding-ethnic-disparity-in-reoffending-rates-in-the-youth-justice-system>  
6. YJB (2023). Enhanced case management evaluation: phase one report. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/enhanced-case-management-evaluation-phase-one-report>  
7. <https://yjbresourcehub.uk>  
8. YJB (2022). Child First: Identifying Progress and Priorities Using a System Map – Youth Justice Board for England and Wales. Available at: <https://yjresourcehub.uk/research-articles-reports-and-briefings-thematic-broader-research-inform/item/1044-child-first-identifying-progress-and-priorities-using-a-system-map-youth-justice-board-for-england-and-wales-october-2022.html>

Child First youth justice system and what steps could be taken to better utilise an evidence-based Child First approach.

As well as understanding the system, an example of the evidence-informed practice shared by the YJB includes the recently revised case management guidance for youth justice services. This guidance was developed drawing on expertise from professionals from across the youth justice system, children and young adults, academic researchers.

These types of outputs published by the YJB are part of the reason we see increasing use of an evidence-informed, Child First approach in youth justice.

**Despite the impressive reductions in the number of entrants to the youth justice system, rates of assault and self-harm in youth custody, and reoffending on release from custody, all remain serious challenges. Does your evidence strategy offer any hope of addressing these problems?**

It is a sad reality that no approach will entirely eliminate all harm or bring an end to crime. But the YJB is confident that the evidence-based Child First approach is the most likely to prevent victims, make communities safer, and enable children to lead crime free lives.

A lot of the work that's needed will be about operationalising what we know already from the existing evidence base. There is generally good buy-in to Child First across the youth justice system, with lots of Child First practice going on. But translating Child First into practice is still a work in progress. It is the YJB's continuing goal to support a move to a more Child First sector, and address inequalities in the system that drive overrepresentation of certain groups of children in the system, with the ultimate goal of improving outcomes for children and communities.

One way we'll be doing this is through our newly launched oversight, assurance, and compliance framework which sets out how the YJB will perform our oversight function. This will involve working closely with youth justice services to understand how they are performing and, where there are challenges, to provide additional support to help them drive up standards in delivery. The YJB also works in close partnership with other agencies and services such as education, police, the judiciary and the voluntary and community sector, who also play a key role in the youth justice system.

As well as operationalising what we already know, at the YJB we also seek to continue to generate new evidence through our research — that will have real-world applications in terms of understanding best practice in youth justice. We have ongoing projects evaluating the impact of enhanced case management, a

trauma informed approach to youth justice, and another project seeking to understand the use of pre-sentence reports. And we're also in the process of setting our research agenda for the coming year by considering where the gaps in understanding currently are.

The YJB are also on a journey to make sure we make the best use of the evidence, intelligence, and data we have available to us. This includes improving the usefulness of the data that is collected by youth justice services, through introducing a new set of key performance indicators and ensuring that there is better data collected about children who receive diversionary activity through youth justice services. This is a big gap in our knowledge and understanding at the moment. We are also working to improve the skills and capabilities in data analysis within the YJB so we can get the best out of the data we hold. And then we are reviewing and refining the ways we work with our stakeholder groups who provide us with intelligence and insights from across the system. And we are also putting in place processes to better synthesise data, research evidence, and the intelligence coming from stakeholders and practitioners. That will enable us to draw more holistic insights from across all these sources of information to inform the YJB's priorities, our decisions, and the guidance or advice that we give.

Ultimately all this ongoing activity at the YJB has the aim of continuing to develop the evidence base and use this to drive decision making, policy, and practice in the youth justice sector.

**The YJB has clearly taken a really considered and focused approach towards generating and communicating evidence. What do you think the learning is for the rest of the justice sector?**

I think there's a lot of learning from the Child First approach. The components of the Child First approach can be applied more broadly than just in youth justice. They are relevant in terms of understanding the individual and their needs, and in building up a positive identity and positive future, rather than taking a more punitive approach to justice. At least in youth justice we know that drives more positive outcomes. And there's some logic in assuming that with other groups of people involved in crime that a more positive and constructive approach is likely to drive good outcomes as well.

In terms of evidence and strategy our approach is very ambitious. What we're wanting to do is to combine the data and the research with the soft intelligence from the stakeholders and practitioners on the ground about what's actually happening and what the issues are. I think bringing all of that together is a really useful holistic approach that that is potentially beneficial for others to be able to do too.