



THE
BIG
AMBITION



THE BIG AMBITION FOR SAFETY FROM CRIME
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The Big Ambition for Safety from Crime

“The government should focus on prevention instead of cure, a lot of mistakes I have made and many other young people have made was due to a lack of help from professionals.” – Boy, 17.

- In the Big Ambition 73% of responses by and on behalf of children agreed that they feel safe and protected in their local area.
- 66% of 12 to 18-year-olds said that they feel safe and protected in their local area, compared to 80% of 6 to 11-year-olds. Children were most likely to agree they felt safe at age 7 – 82% agreed – compared to 62% of 15 year olds.
- Children whose ethnicity was mixed, or other, were the least likely (both 69%) to agree that they feel safe and protected in their local area, while children whose ethnicity was white or Asian/Asian British were the most likely (both 73%).
- 74% of children in less deprived schools felt safe and protected, compared to 69% of children in more deprived schools (schools where a majority of pupils are eligible for free school meals).
- 48% of children who were not in education agreed that they felt safe, compared to 73% of children who attended school or college. 55% of children in Alternative Provision agreed they felt safe, compared to 74% in state-funded mainstream schools and 82% of those in independent mainstream schools.
- There was notable variation around the country – 61% in Croydon felt safe, compared to 79% in Richmond upon Thames.

“Instead of investing so much money into keeping guys in prison invest that money into them before they end up in prison it cost you 50 to 60 grand for me to be here a year imagine if you invested that into my education and activities I wouldn't be here.” – Child.

The Big Ambition results show that most children and parents feel safe in their local area – confident that they can engage in their local communities, play, and learn. However, this is sadly not the case for many children. Too many children do not feel safe and, compared to *The Big Ask* in 2021, this perception seems to be getting worse.

Ensuring that children are protected from violence and harm, but also that they feel safe and confident as they go about their lives should be fundamental measures of success for any government. More is needed to ensure that children feel safe, that child victims receive the real and specialist support they need to heal, and that children are safer for having come into contact with the justice system.

What children and families have told the Children's Commissioner over the last three years

The Children's Commissioner has heard from hundreds of thousands of children, parents and carers since taking up her post in 2021. She has explored in detail how children experience life, what they want to achieve and the challenges that they face.

A strong theme to come out of *The Big Ask* was the desire to feel safe and confident in public spaces. Among 9- to 17-year-old *The Big Ask* respondents, 80% were happy with 'my personal safety' and 96% were happy or OK with this. Yet some girls reported sexual harassment being a significant issue for them, affecting their confidence and happiness, and many spoke about the mental health impact of fearing sexual violence.

Between the two surveys, there has been a notable difference in the feelings of safety. In *The Big Ambition*, only 73% agreed that they felt safe in their local area.

What needs to happen

The Children's Commissioner set out the five over-arching outcomes she wants for every child, namely that they are safe, healthy, happy, learning and engaged in their community. To achieve that within support in keeping children safe from crime will mean achieving the following ambitions:

1. Every child is safe in their home, school, relationships and local area.
 2. Every child is prevented from being affected by violence and criminality.
 3. Every child who is a victim of crime receives specialist care and support.
 4. Every child is safer after an interaction with the police or youth justice system.
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Many of the recommendations set out in other chapters are fundamental for promoting a holistic and preventative approach to children's involvement with criminality, from tackling child poverty to ensuring every child has the opportunity to thrive in their community or pursue the career they dream of.

Ambitions

Ambition 1: Every child is safe in their home, school, relationships and local area

"I think the Government should try to make children feel safe whoever they are, wherever they are." – Girl, 9.

What is needed to get there:

- **Every local authority completes a children's safety audit to map and improve the places where children don't feel safe and consults with children when making changes to public space.** Children use public spaces in different ways to adults and have different priorities, but their views are often overlooked. Local authorities must consult with children, including those with different needs, about what improvements to the built environment are needed, such as lighting on school routes and in parks, access to playgrounds and open space for games, and safe and accessible transport.

"They need to listen to the children more and ask us what we would like done in our area." – Boy, 14.

"Listen to people's views and make [city] a better place for children with and without disabilities so they can go out without feeling scared. Make more playground that include all ages so that people of all ages can access and have fun. Make playgrounds and parks entertaining." – Girl, 12.

- **Every child learns about safety, their rights if they are a victim of crime, and where to go to if the need support, through high-quality PSHE lessons in schools.** Teachers should be trained to deliver high-quality lessons which are based on current and emerging risks to children's safety. Oak National Academy should produce a range of age-appropriate resources to be used by schools.

“Sex education should be spoken about in early years of secondary school because some children who aren't educated in these areas could easily be sexually assaulted and therefore not know what to do after being assaulted.” – Girl, 17.

- **Every child is safe from bullying or sexual harassment and abuse, wherever they experience them.** Schools are empowered to take a whole of school approach to tackling sexual harassment and a safeguarding approach to harm between pupils. Children know who to go to receive support, and professionals working with children are empowered to respond to harms that happen outside the school or online.

“Take action against bullying.” – Girl, 13.

Examples of how progress can be measured:

- More children report feeling safe in their communities.
- More children report feeling safe in their school.
- All local authorities submit children's safety audits.
- Fewer children report being bullied.

Ambition 2: Children are prevented from being affected by violence and criminality

“Try to make the world safer and less violent for generations to come.” – Girl, 12.

- **The government commits to a cross-government public health strategy to preventing serious violence.** This takes a life-course approach, identifying key opportunities from the early years onwards to support children and families, including addressing disparities driven by poverty, deprivation and discrimination based on ethnic background.

“Crime needs to be tackled on the streets, meaning the youth of today can feel safe and able to use the positive aspects of the world to help them to grow.” – Boy, 15.

- **The government defines serious violence affecting children and has a clear and ambitious target to reduce it to its lowest-ever level.** This definition must include all forms of violence which children suffer, including sexual violence, and set out a national strategy for tackling it.

“Make there be no gun violence or gangs and make the kids feel safe again when they go outside.” – Boy, 14.

- **Every police force area has a SAFE taskforce and a Violence Reduction Unit, which is funded to commission evidence-based youth work to reduce violence.** Violence Reduction Units bring together partners to tackle violence in their local areas, and have established best practice models that would be rolled out across the country. The Home Office would fund them to monitor the impact of evidence-based youth work, and agree the long-term commissioning of those that are shown to have a positive impact.

“All children should be able to live without violence.” – Girl, 9.

Examples of how progress can be measured:

- Fewer incidents of serious violence affecting children.
- All areas have a Violence Reduction Unit and SAFE taskforce.

Ambition 3: Every child who is a victim of crime receives specialist care and support

“Protect children, support children who are victims. All children deserve to be safe and happy.” – Boy, 13.

What is needed to get there:

- **Every child victim has their rights as a victim upheld, and all professionals working with children understand their responsibilities to them.** All victims have rights under the Victims Code if they are a victim of crime, whether or not they report it. It is essential that there is a Victims’ Code which addresses the unique needs of children, and guidance for the professionals who will need to support them.

“The police and authority figures in general (including teachers/schools) need to respond in a better way to things like sexual assault and harassment and take them seriously rather than dismissing them

and nothing happening. These situations also need to be handled with more empathy for the victims and they should be asked how they are, and what they want to happen.” – Girl, 14.

- **Every child victim of the most serious crimes is supported by a specialist advocate.** These advocates support children to navigate the police and criminal justice system, and to access their rights under the Victim’s Code. Every child receives a mandatory, multi-agency needs assessment at the earliest opportunity after a crime is reported.

“The children should be heard about their points of view as in if a crime was committed and they are the victim they should be listened to.” – Girl, 16.

- **All child victims are recognised in law and consistently identified.** This must include those subject to exploitative, abusive and coercive relationships with adults, as well as with their own peers. This will be enabled by a statutory definition of Child Criminal Exploitation.

“Me and countless people I know around the ages of 15-18 have been a victim of or directly witnessed youth on youth violence, been assaulted, and nobody reports it because they feel as though the punishment the police give will not be useful, whereas the backlash from teens involved in crime (for reporting the crimes they have done to you) will outweigh the police actions.” – Young man, 18.

- **Child victims of crime receive therapeutic support that is holistic and not subject to a postcode lottery.** This includes the establishment of a sustainably-funded national network of Child Houses, which provide joined up care to child victims of sexual abuse. These would be based on the Lighthouse in Camden which brings together all the services children and their families need.

“More support must be in place for children [...] who are the victims of crime. There is not enough support for such people, as I have found in my own experience help has either been withheld until that is no longer possible, or is simply inaccessible.” – Child, 17.

Examples of how progress can be measured:

- Children report they have agency in the youth justice system.
 - Child victims are consistently identified and supported.
 - Timely decisions are made about cases involving children as victims and/or perpetrators.
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Ambition 4: Every child is safer after an interaction with the police or youth justice system

“There needs to be more on offer that is relatable to children so they don’t fall victim to child exploitation or feel they have nothing to do but turn to crime.” – Parent of boy, 8.

What is needed to get there:

- **The age of criminal responsibility is raised from 10 to 14.** No child at the age of ten should be sentenced for a crime. While a robust response to any harmful behaviour from a child of any age is required, for young children this must always be a safeguarding response.

“The age of criminal responsibility should be higher, as 10 is too young to be responsible for your actions.” – Girl, 13.

- **Every police force has an action plan to treat every child fairly, with respect, and as children first, which addresses ethnic disproportionality.** This is part of a child-centred justice system that recognises vulnerability, prioritises diversion and rehabilitation, and meaningfully addresses disproportionality experienced by children from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds, children with SEND, and care experienced children.

“Currently, homicide appears to be the only thing taken seriously and only just. There is a lack of investigation when it comes to other forms of crime and I would not trust that the police would be able to protect me before/after a crime has taken place.” – Girl, 17.

- **The Home Office reforms PACE codes to reform stop and search.** Children report the traumatising impact of searches, particularly strip searches, and the way they affect their trust and confidence in police. Ensuring that searches only happen where absolutely necessary and proportionate, that there is no ethnic disproportionality in their use, and that safeguards are in place in every search could address this.

“Stop the police from harassing the young black youths in the area if they haven’t done anything wrong because stop and searches have increased with the police not finding nothing and leavening it about even an apology.” – Boy, 17.

- **Children who have suffered exploitation are given specialist support.** Training is given to all frontline police officers on responding to trauma and exploitation.

"Nobody should be getting sexually exploited especially not young people." – Girl, 15.

- **A safeguarding response to child involvement with criminality is developed.** A safeguarding outcome is added to the criminal outcome framework, and a greater emphasis placed on safeguarding children from exploitation. A safeguarding referral would be made after any arrest, caution or search of a child, and youth offending teams would be brought into local authority children's safeguarding teams.

"The government should invest in more enrichment activities and most of all, invest in facilities to help young people who are less fortunate and have turned to crime reform, and work with social workers to find the root of their issues rather than blaming young people who have deep seated issues and problems with authority and "arresting them" just to release them without much of a warning or reason to not reoffend." – Girl, 16.

- **Every local authority has a specialist safeguarding team to address extra-familial harms.** These team would have a specific focus on addressing the harms that children face in their wider environment, including relationship abuse, criminal exploitation and sexual exploitation. They would work closely with youth services, offending services, and community provision to provide an expert response.

"I know the risks within the community that impact on children's lives and I would like to see more provision available to help children stay out of criminal lines and... risk of exploitation." – Parent of boy, 4.

- **The youth justice system recognises vulnerability in children, and agencies have the knowledge and resources to effectively safeguard children in need.** This will mean all agencies, including the police and all those in the court system, have appropriate training on working with children, and their safeguarding responsibilities towards them.

"Fix the justice system so children can actually feel safe." – Girl, 11.

Examples of how progress can be measured:

- More children are diverted away from crime and the justice system.
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- Children's confidence in the police is increased.
- Children report feeling that their race does not determine how they are treated by the police or within the youth justice system.



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