

Senedd Cymru | Welsh Parliament

Y Pwyllgor Plant, Pobl Ifanc ac Addysg | Children, Young People and Education Committee

Plant a phobl ifanc sydd ar yr ymylon | Children and Young People on the margins

Ymateb gan Cymdeithas Seicolegol Prydain | Evidence from British Psychological Society (BPS)

BPS Response to the Senedd's Children, Young People and Education Committee inquiry into children and young people on the margins

This submission sets out the British Psychological Society's (BPS) response to the Senedd's Children, Young People and Education Committee's (CYPE) call for evidence to inform their inquiry into children and young people on the margins. We welcome the CYPE Committee's inquiry into reviewing the scale of the problem, how it is being addressed in Wales, and the support services available to them.

The BPS is the representative body for psychology and psychologists throughout the UK. We are committed to providing and disseminating evidence-based expertise and advice, engaging with policy and decision makers, and promoting the highest standards in learning and teaching, professional practice and research. Psychology has an important role to play in government policy and improving lives of the public. We are a registered charity with a total membership of around 60,000 – over 1,600 of whom are in Wales.

Many psychologists in Wales work in education, health and forensic settings, supporting children on the margins who are either at risk of becoming victims of crime or fall into criminal behaviour. There are many types of environments that predispose children into a cycle of abuse and crime, and we see patterns of behaviour that are often shaped by situations beyond their control.

They key points of our submission to this inquiry are:

- The nature and scale of children at risk or who go missing is difficult to quantify, but we are concerned that many children who are on the margins and more likely to fall into crime or become victims of crime.
- Childhood and adolescence are challenging times for many children and young people but those on the margins are more vulnerable to external factors that could place them at greater risk.

- Policies in Wales should be more child-centred, placing them at the heart of decisions making, particularly as children and young people are our future generations.
- The list of the types of children and young people at greater risk of being the margins is long, including those with adverse experiences, those in poverty, those with relatives/parents in prison, etc.
- Therefore, a one-size-fits-all approach to supporting vulnerable children won't work. Children and young people on the margins are often from complex backgrounds, with difficult experiences, who have faced adversity in many aspects of their lives. Support must be person-centred.
- We must develop a shared understanding between all of the various professionals involved in a child's care and support, in health, social care, education, and criminal justice. It's also important to have an understanding on who is coordinating the child's overall support.

Nature and scale of the problem

It is difficult to quantify the number of children and young people who may be considered to be "on the margins" in Wales; both those who are missing and/or likely to become victims of or become involved in crime. The classification of "missing" covers a broad range of circumstances, where a child may go missing for a few hours but return at night, go missing for several days only to eventually return, or a child who goes missing on a regular basis. Many of these children and young people may not be captured in our support system if they return quickly or if there are differing perceptions about when or why someone might be considered missing.

It is easier to quantify the number of those children who have engaged in criminal activity or are victims of crime with the data available. We know that in Wales the rate of children cautioned or sentenced is 2.1 in every 1,000 children (lower than most areas of England, and the same rate as the South West and South East of England).¹ We also know that in Wales:

- around 11% of children aged 10 to 15 were victims of at least one reported crime in the latest year ending March 2020
- in 2021-22 the police classed 3,729 crimes as involving child sexual abuse and 752 as involving child sexual exploitation
- there were 2,612 arrests of children aged 10 to 17 for notifiable offences in Wales in 2020-21 (to note - many young people will have engaged in criminal activity but not had charges brought to them)
- But there was a fall of 28% in the number of first-time entrants to the Youth Justice System in Wales in 2021 compared with 2020 (possibly due to the pandemic).²

The general picture is of concern. We have high rate of childhood poverty, family breakdown, and children in care. These children are growing up in a cost-of-living crisis, compounded by additional pressure including gangs, violence, drugs and alcohol.

¹ [An stats202122 v7 \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://stats202122.v7.publishing.service.gov.uk)

² [Wellbeing of Wales, 2022 \(children and young people's wellbeing\): a Wales of cohesive communities \[HTML\] | GOV.WALES](https://gov.wales/wellbeing-of-wales-2022-children-and-young-peoples-wellbeing-a-wales-of-cohesive-communities)

In addition, the existing financial constraints on public bodies and the growing need for support are continuing to impact on services. For example, the Wales Expert Group on the Cost of Living Crisis highlighted in 2023 that many single-parent households or households with more than two children fall outside of the eligibility thresholds for grants, benefits, and allowances, making them more vulnerable and in greater need of support from services who are already stretched.³

At risk groups

Childhood is a time of great change and growth but also represents a period of vulnerability which requires guidance and care in a range of ways. Young people have many core needs: a loving, secure attachment figure, safety and protection, being understood and valued, a sense of belonging and boundaries and an understanding of right from wrong. Our members tell us that where such needs are not consistently met young people are at greater risk of developing strategies to meet these needs in less healthy ways. This places them at greater vulnerability and can lead to unsafe situations which further perpetuate harm.

There are many characteristics that can make a child more vulnerable, leaving them at the margins. Children experiencing adverse childhood events (ACES) are those with one or more disadvantages in their lives that render them vulnerable to poor mental and physical health, poorer educational outcomes, and to be involved in crime both as victims and as perpetrators.⁴ Multiple ACES will further increase that likelihood and this can lead to the development of intergenerational patterns.

We would like the CYPE Committee to investigate further the following groups of children and young people:

- **Young carers:** Children and young people who look after a family member at home are often more isolated from friends, or bullied by classmates, due to these additional responsibilities.⁵ They are more likely to miss school (around 1 in 20) or do worse in school due to caring for their family member or because of their experiences in school.⁶ This makes them more susceptible to grooming and exploitation, particularly where parents are not always able to support and monitor a child as much as they would like to, and children may withhold concerns from a parent in order to protect them.⁷
- **Neurodivergent children:** Barnardo's reported in 2015 there are many factors that increased the vulnerability of children with learning disabilities to (sexual) exploitation, including "overprotection, disempowerment and social isolation, and a lack of accessible sex and relationships education and information".⁸ They also reported a lack of knowledge, understanding, awareness and training, specifically about the sexual exploitation of children with learning disabilities.

³ [WEGCoLC, Summary Response and Recommendations for Action, Welsh Government, 2023, pp 5 and 6.](#)

⁴ [Adverse Childhood Experiences - Public Health Wales \(nhs.wales\)](#)

⁵ [protecting-young-carers-from-bullying-a-guide-for-schools-community-groups-and-policy-makers.pdf](#)

⁶ The Children's Society (2013), Hidden from View: The Experiences of Young Carers in England (The Children's Society).

⁷ N-Compass and Catch 22 (2019), Young Carers and Child Exploitation.

⁸ *Unprotected, overprotected: meeting the needs of young people with learning disabilities who experience, or are at risk of, sexual exploitation*, Barnardo's, 2015, [INQ005420_033](#)

Conversely, it's estimated that possibly half of those entering (adult) prison are likely to have "some form of neurodivergent condition..."⁹, and there is extensive evidence of co-occurrence between conditions, as well as interlinking with adversity and childhood traumas.¹⁰ There needs to be a better understanding of this trend and how to provide better support in the early years.

- Children with a parent in prison: According to Barnados, children with relatives in prison can struggle with poor physical and mental health, a breakdown of support networks, feeling loss or rejection, fear of being stigmatised, additional care responsibilities, and an impact on their education. Schools assume a lot of responsibility for these children but if they leave school and go 'missing' they are at most risk.

We are aware of groundbreaking support services designed to help fathers in prison. Invisible Walls¹¹ launched its first Family Interventions Unit that enables fathers in prison to retain or rebuild relationships with their children while they are in prison. This has been adopted by countries across the world. The Welsh Government has just commissioned research into this model to review outcome data on the impact that these interventions have on the children.

- Children in care: broadly are at greater risk of exploitation and more challenging behaviour because of disruption to attachments and their experience of unmet needs. In addition, those who are placed in residential care face an additional challenge, either because the nature of their needs is more complex or because of a reduced sense of belonging and exposure to new experiences and networks, which other young people may be protected from. This is a growing challenge in Wales given the paucity of foster placements has led to young people who would benefit from family settings are instead receiving institutionalised care.

This list is not exhaustive - it should also include more generally children living in poverty and more specifically some ethnic minorities, refugees, and traveler communities.

Policy

In November 2023, five UK Children's Charities called on the UK and devolved governments to place children at the heart of policy making.¹² They highlighted that more children are now living in poverty, that children are facing a growing mental health crisis, that they are waiting too long to receive support, that more children are persistently absent from school, that more are experiencing abuse both on and offline, and that a rising number are being taken into care after reaching crisis point. This is a concern not just in Wales but across the UK.

However, in Wales we should be in a good position to tackle these trends and question why we are still behind. The Wellbeing of Future Generations Act places a duty on public bodies and the Welsh Government to consider future generations in terms of resilience, prosperity, community, and health. Children should be the forefront of any decisions as they are by

⁹ [Neurodiversity in the criminal justice system: a review of evidence \(justiceinspectors.gov.uk\)](https://www.justiceinspectors.gov.uk)

¹⁰ Kirkby, Amanda (2021) Neurodiversity – a whole-child approach for youth justice, HMIP, Academic Insights, 2021:8, p.2.

¹¹ [Home - Invisible Walls](#)

¹² [Why children must be at the heart of the next government | NSPCC](#)

definition the future generation, but we question if children are considered as much as they should be. In our experience, most policies and legislation are formulated through the lens of adults unless they deal specifically with children.

We are concerned more generally that there is no government portfolio for babies, children and young people, and that policies, legislation, and services in relation to them will straddle several departments. This means that dedicated strategies, frameworks, plans, will be the responsibility of several organisations across public services but with no clear accountability, particularly at the top. We would like to see a Childrens Minister in the new Welsh Government as recommended by the Senedd's Equality and Social Justice Committee.

Practice

Services are working hard to tackle the many issues highlighted by the UK children's charities (see above) but professionals working in these services often feel that they are firefighting to meet the growing demand.

Children and young people on the margins are often from complex backgrounds, with difficult experiences, who have faced adversity in many aspects of their lives. Support services therefore cannot use a 'one size fits all' approach and as far as possible must be designed to encourage flexibility to meet the specific needs of each child and their family.

The nature of children and young people's life experiences varies from person to person, but for those who are at greater risk of going missing, we must begin to understand **why** this happens. There are a range of factors which underpin behaviour and understanding the psycho-social experiences underpinning young people is critical in order to identify how to keep them safe from experiencing (and perhaps causing) harm.

We held a focus group of our members from health, education and the criminal justice system who told us that once a young person is engaging in criminal activities, they often no longer have the usual buffers (such as family and friends) that protect them, putting them at greater risk of harm. These young people may seek belonging elsewhere and are prone to communities and environments that are unsafe or dangerous. We were told that understanding a young person's behaviour through a developmental lens is important when differentiating which kinds of behaviours may represent 'typical' developmental milestones. For example, the increase in impulsivity associated with adolescence may place someone at greater risk of making decisions that they would otherwise not have chosen. Likewise, the developmentally appropriate 'pull' adolescents feel to begin to connect more with their peers and gradually distance from their parents may also drive a young person to connect in new ways. It is often not the 'what' of these behaviours that are concerning, but when such (developmentally appropriate) needs lack limits or are expressed in less safe ways they can lead to behaviour that is harmful to themselves or to others.

Supportive education and community settings

Education and community settings are key to providing children and young people with stability and opportunity, and teachers and support staff play a vital role in facilitating this. We would like to see these settings view children and young people in a person-centred way and for staff to be more supported around this. This is essential, particularly where children and their families face more complex circumstances that require more significant adaptations and support. These settings must adopt a better understanding of equity and inclusion. The new curriculum caters for this, particularly for those with 'challenging behaviour', but we

continue to see schools overstretched so outcomes and targets set by schools continue to focus on neurotypical children. Adopting more 'relational' rather 'behavioural' approaches are key. Relationships are the foundation to any learning – this needs to be supported to ensure progression and wellbeing.

Multi-agency working

When children and young people go missing, or are placed out of area, a variety of public services will be called into action. Police, local authorities, health services, and schools are often all involved in a single case. They rely on sharing information at the right time and must be clear about which public body or bodies and which team or teams are leading. This doesn't always happen.

There are many challenges around communicating things in a timely manner and safeguarding is who is responsible for what. We must have a multi-agency approach to supporting vulnerable children and young people. However, even in those services that are regarded as good or exemplary, we often see a high turnover of staff and tightened budgets, which impact on continuity of care.

Data sharing

Despite the ambition of a Healthier Wales of delivering a whole system approach to health and social care by making our systems digitally ready, our members tell us that local authorities and health boards continue to face barriers to sharing data on vulnerable children and young people. This disconnect and lack of joined up working raises concerns that vulnerable children are more likely to go unnoticed and could be denied the support they need.

The Welsh Government is proposing to place a duty on local authorities to develop and maintain a Children Missing in Education database, which local health boards will also be required to feed into. We will respond to these proposals in due course, but despite the need for improvements in this area, we would like to stress the importance of patient confidentiality, that there is clear communication for consent, data protection is met, and there is a clear understanding of what the information will be used for.

The right approach at the right time

Multi-agencies must have prevention, timeline, and exit strategies. There will be segments, at all points of the process, that will require different interventions. But the thresholds for requiring support services are currently very high, which brings with it a sense of urgency rather employing a gradual, long-term approach. By the time children come into these services, treatment and support are costly due to their complex needs are complex. Early intervention is key to ensure that vulnerable children and young people are less likely to require ongoing support.

Where cases are complex, we must develop a shared understanding between all of the various professionals involved in a child's care and support; in health, social care, education, and criminal justice. It's also important to have an understanding on who is coordinating the child's overall support.

A flexible approach to support

Criteria for specialist children's services can be disabling and inaccessible, and we have to question how appropriate, valid, and reliable these are. If we provide accessible support in

the community at the earliest stages, this would reduce the need for specialist services, but also provide more person centred and needs led (rather than service led) support.

Focus on psychological need

In psychology we use a biopsychosocial formulation as an alternative to a medical model/ diagnostic framework. For each of these children, we need to focus on psychological needs by understanding their lack of belonging, fears for their safety, lack of personal skills, lack of community involvement, substance abuse, and their lack of understanding of what is 'criminal'. We need to understand what these mean to the child or young person so that we provide the right support or intervention. These same characteristics are seen through different lenses depending on the professionals serving them, so multi-agency professionals need to understand the context around them. The function of a service often defines what we see in a child.

The role of psychology and psychologists is to develop the right interventions that will best serve the individual's context and needs. Interventions can involve prevention, consultation to services working with those vulnerable to such harm, development of skills (such as emotional regulation, distress tolerance), adequate support to families and carers, psychoeducation, multi-agency working to hold physical, social and psychological needs in mind and engaging those adults involved in every element of a young person's care. There are also critical social factors such as poverty that require addressing and significantly impact these issues.

Youth Justice Blueprint

We would like to highlight the importance of the Youth Justice Blueprint, which is the strategic framework designed to reform the approach to youth justice by emphasising prevention, early intervention, and rehabilitation. The overarching aim is to create a more effective, equitable, and compassionate system that addresses the root causes of youth offending, supports young people in avoiding the criminal justice system, and provides opportunities for them to reintegrate into society successfully. It uses a children-first and a trauma informed approach, supported by collaboration across government departments, local authorities, health board, the police, education, community providers and third sector.

The Blueprint provides a comprehensive risk assessment for children known to the youth justice system, that include the potential for going missing. These assessments inform individualised plans that aim to mitigate risks and address the child's broader needs.

We would like either the CYPE Committee or the Equality and Social Justice Committee to look more closely at the impact of the public health approach to preventing youth crime.

For enquiries regarding this response, please contact: