



## Behind the mask

# The Impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the Youth Justice System

---

TIM BATEMAN

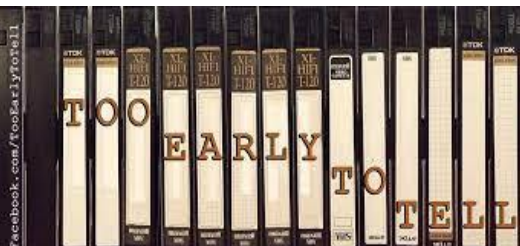
UNIVERSITY OF BEDFORDSHIRE

With thanks (and apologies) to  
Harris and Goodfellow, 2021

# Impact on offending

## Too early to tell?

- Contrasting dynamics? Lockdown associated with reduced short-term opportunities for crime? The consequences potentially 'criminogenic' in the longer term?
- Research with practitioners suggests that there has been little or no reduction in children criminal exploitation or the reach of county lines (Robinson et al, 2021)
- Limited statistical information currently available
- During 2020, there was a 27% reduction in child convictions (the biggest fall by some margin since 2011; a 13% fall in 2019)
- But ... between February and June 2020, there was a 42% increase in outstanding youth court cases



# Relevant considerations



- 
- How have children experienced the pandemic?
  - The response to children in trouble
  - Future implications

# The ills of social isolation

---



- The restrictions of lockdown were felt acutely by all
- But social isolation has a disproportionate impact on adolescents, with far-reaching consequences for their longer-term wellbeing
- Contact with others is a basic human necessity *'analogous to other fundamental needs such as food consumption or sleep... [teenagers are] at a unique period in their lives when the social environment is important for crucial functions in brain development, self-concept construction, and mental health'* (Orben et al, 2020)
- 83% of children think the pandemic made their mental health worse and 67% thought the impact would be long term (Young Minds, 2021)

# Increased inequality – exacerbated disadvantage

---



- Families on low incomes have experienced growing debt, and the number of children in poverty is expected to increase (EHRC, 2020)
- Children *‘who before this crisis were already vulnerable or living in precarious situations... are facing particular hardship’* (Children’s Commissioner for England, 2020)
- A *‘huge disparity’* in levels of education received during lockdown – both between schools and between students in the same school (Joint Committee on Human Rights, 2020)
- The number of young people (aged 16-24) in employment fell by 273,000 (Powell and Francis-Devine, 2021)
- Social factors that naturally lead to teenagers *‘growing out of crime’* have thus been impeded (or even put into reverse) by the pandemic

# The response unequal to the task

- *'A failure to prioritise children in policy'* – accompanied by the removal of *'vital safeguards'* (Harris and Goodfellow, 2021)
- Reduced services: 88% of youth organisations likely to cut provision; a third anticipating staff redundancy; 17% reported likely permanent closure (UK Youth, 2020)
- A 370% rise in remote court hearings; impeding children's participation; practical considerations taking priority over children's well-being
- Justice delayed; and crossing age barriers
- YOTs' response *'effectively balanced'* staff safety and meeting children's needs by a rapid move to remote working but question marks over whether the quality of assessment and engagement suffered



# The pains of imprisonment

---

- The 'normal state of the estate' – particularly for the vast majority of children in YOIs and STCs – is widely acknowledged as unacceptable
- The custodial population fell by one third between in the year ending March 2021 – but this is partly at least a consequence of the court backlog
- **No children** benefited from the government scheme to accelerate early release from prison
- Outside of SCHs, time out of cells / bedrooms was curtailed to 'essential activities'; face to face visits suspended
- Some children in YOIs were locked up for more than 22 hours every day for more than 15 weeks – solitary confinement – where children are effectively put in '*deep freeze*' (Harney, 2001) has become the norm



# Future implications

---

- A short-term reduction in youth crime – but a contrasting expansion in the circumstances associated with children’s lawbreaking
- Large numbers of children unlikely to re-engage in education
- A bulge in caseloads – with no additional resources
- The *‘immediate and cumulative effects on children’s mental health have been severe’* (Independent Monitoring Boards, 2021) but concerns over a shortage of appropriate mental health support for children in trouble are longstanding
- A new digital world?

