



**AN EXPLORATION OF EARLY
LIFE TRAUMA AND IMPLICATIONS FOR
GARDA YOUTH DIVERSION SERVICES
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**



An Garda Síochána
Ireland's National Police and Security Service



YOUTH RISE

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FOREWORD

Youth RISE is proud to partner with the Garda Youth Diversion Bureau to co-fund this dynamic piece of research conducted by Quality Matters and University College Cork's School of Applied Psychology. This research considers trauma in the context of the Garda Youth Diversion Service- Ireland's long running youth diversion programme.

We would like to thank the Garda Youth Diversion Bureau (GYDB), Quality Matters, University College Cork's School of Applied Psychology and all Youth Services, Juvenile Liaison Officers and Youth Workers who participated in this research. In the GYDB, we give special thanks to Chief Superintendent Colette Quinn and Inspector Nuala Finn- without their support this would never have been possible. In Quality Matters, we would like to particularly thank Caroline Gardner, Aoife Dermody, Anne Rackow, Juliana Garcia and Robert O'Donoghue who took a central role in designing, planning and implementing this project. In UCC, we would like to particularly thank Dr. Sharon Lambert and Mary Elizabeth O'Brien.

Young people can experience a wide range of trauma through Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) as a result of neglect, physical abuse, verbal abuse, sexual abuse and a range of other traumatic experiences. ACEs can cause profound negative effects on normal neurodevelopment including negatively affecting mood and emotional regulation, learning and the likelihood of engaging in a range of risk behaviours. They are associated with a wide range of negative physical health, mental health and social outcomes.

ACEs can be considered to be at the intersectional roots of many health, social and community safety issues which can adversely affect the wellbeing of young people and the communities in which they live. They are often caused by, or compounded by, poverty, stigma, discrimination and marginalisation.

This research finds that young people involved with the GYDP have high levels of ACEs with a majority experiencing four or more. Young people with a higher number of ACEs were also more likely to come from disadvantaged areas. This reaffirms our need as a society to develop pragmatic solutions which address socioeconomic inequality directly. Stigma and discrimination is also considered by this report which underlines the need to consider all intersectional groups young people may be part of which may experience stigma and discrimination including those living with HIV, using drugs, coming out of care and those who are members of ethnic minority and LGBTQIA+ communities.

Fundamentally, we believe this report will contribute to the conversation around the intersections between law enforcement and public health and the central role of trauma in this context. We hope this report will help move us to a happier, healthier and safer future by contributing to the body of work supporting the wide scale adoption of trauma-informed practices.

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ABOUT THIS REPORT

This research explores the prevalence of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) among a cohort of young people engaged in Garda Youth Diversion Programmes (GYDP), and the implications for Garda Youth Diversion Projects. The Gardaí and Youth RISE¹ commissioned research to answer the following questions:

- 1 What are the levels of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) among young people formally engaged with Garda Youth Diversion Programmes?
- 2 Could trauma-informed approaches to service delivery be relevant to the Garda Youth Diversion Programme?

THE RESEARCH SOUGHT TO ANSWER THESE QUESTIONS BY:

- Holding focus groups with Youth Workers and Juvenile Liaison Officers (JLOs) to understand their perceptions of barriers to working effectively with young people who have experienced trauma and adversity.
- Youth Worker completion of anonymised ACEs questionnaires for a sample of young people in the Garda Youth Diversion Programme. This was based on a file analysis and team knowledge of the young people they work with.
- Facilitating a workshop with senior Gardaí to consider the implications of the research, and to co-develop a next step recommendation.

WHY STUDY TRAUMA IN THE CONTEXT OF CRIMINAL JUSTICE

It is widely recognised that a great majority of young people involved with the criminal justice system have been exposed to multiple types of trauma to a larger extent than young people in the general population (1,2). Young people in contact with the criminal justice system have approximately three times more ACEs² than the average population and are four times more likely to have experienced four or more ACEs (4).

A high prevalence of ACEs is linked with increased chances of involvement with the criminal justice system and recidivism (4,7–9). In the United States, between 70 to 90 percent of juvenile offenders have had some degree of traumatic experience (6,10). Similar trends have been noted in the UK and Scotland, where findings show that young people with four or more ACEs were 15 times more likely to have perpetrated a violent act in the last 12 months and 20 times more likely to have been incarcerated in their lives, compared with the general population (11). It is likely that this pattern would be mirrored among Irish populations; reports on the profiles of young people in custody in Ireland include data on high levels of loss of parent, and young people referenced in these reports have profiles similar to higher childhood adversity experienced populations, including people with mental health difficulties, substance use difficulties, care experience, and/or disengagement from education (12).

For young people with trauma experiences, coming into contact with the criminal justice system can be challenging. Interactions with law enforcement and other actors of the criminal justice system can intensify fear, anxiety and negative feelings in young people, possibly leading to re-traumatisation (10). Branson et al. (2017), in a systematic review of trauma-informed juvenile systems, outlines the relationship between some policing practices, increased post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms and post-release criminal behaviour, all of which interferes with the rehabilitation of young people and their ability to desist from crime (6).

Research indicates that there are benefits to understanding trauma and then adapting systems to become trauma-informed. A trauma-informed justice system can enhance young people's resilience and well-being and help them to reduce aggressive behaviours and chances of recidivism (13–16). It can also lead staff to have a heightened sense of safety and self-efficacy, by decreasing the frequency of crisis situations (14).

**A TRAUMA-INFORMED
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ENHANCE YOUNG PEOPLE'S
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2 Adverse Childhood Experience (ACES) are assessed through a 10-question survey which covers abuse, neglect and household dysfunction in childhood.

INTRODUCTION TO THE GARDA YOUTH DIVERSION PROGRAMME

The Garda Youth Diversion Programme, established by the Children's Act 2001, is a multi-agency initiative (17) designed to provide young people who have engaged in criminal activity under the age of 18, who accept responsibility for their actions, with the opportunity to receive a formal or informal caution and avoid entering into the criminal justice system (18). It is managed and implemented at the national level by the Garda Youth Diversion Office under the Garda Bureau of Community Engagement.

When required, Garda Juvenile Liaison Officers (JLOs) administer cautions to young people. This process involves contacting the young person and their family in order to facilitate a conference, through which responsibility for actions is encouraged and an opportunity for young people to apologise is provided (17). During this intervention, the young person is supported by a professional to develop an action plan to decrease the likelihood of re-offending in the future (17). This can include involvement in other support services, community projects or clubs and/or Garda Youth Diversion Projects (GYDP) (19). According to the Garda Bureau of Community Engagement, GYDP provide activities to facilitate personal development, promote civic responsibility and improve long-term employability (17). The overall goal is to support the young person to stay away from antisocial behaviour and improve both the community's quality of life and the young person's relationship with the Gardaí (20).

In 2018, an evaluation report; *Consultations with Young People Engaged in Garda Youth Diversion Projects*, pointed at a number of key factors young participants considered as effective and ineffective about the GYDP approach. The report's key

findings shed light on the importance that building positive relationships with workers has for young participants. Young people indicated that the relationship with Youth Justice Workers was the best thing about the project, adding that qualities such as being friendly and non-judgemental greatly contribute to them feeling supported and listened to, being able to establish trust and, ultimately, stay away from crime. In the same way, a negative relationship with the Youth Justice Worker was viewed as unhelpful when these qualities were not present.

The report highlighted that a lack of comprehensive training for Youth Justice Workers to support them to work effectively with young people experiencing behavioural issues was a challenge for the service. Some young people identified relationships with Gardaí as an issue, wherein they reported experiencing negative interactions with Gardaí as a challenge to engagement (21). Positive factors in the programme were the education, training and employment supports provided, opportunities to socialise such as activities and trips as well as opportunities to develop skills (21).

The report highlights a range of opportunities for improvement of the service. While the report does not contextualise these with a trauma-informed approach, many of these are in line with principles of trauma-informed care. Namely where the focus of improvements is on building the relationship and rapport between the young person and professionals to be safe, supportive, trusting and respectful.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

ACE SCORES OF GYDP PARTICIPANTS

The study involved analysing the ACE scores and demographic profiles of 125 young people, which were gleaned from their case files and knowledge of youth workers working with them. The young people who were included in this research were predominantly from economically disadvantaged areas, with a significant minority (42%) out of work and education, and a majority being young men (75%).

The ACE scores of the population are as follows:

- 37% had three or fewer ACEs
- 63% had four or more ACEs
- 36% of the total had six or more ACEs

The most frequent ACEs reported were the loss of a parent, emotional abuse and household substance use. The items where youth workers were least likely to know whether the young person experienced it, or knew they had not, were sexual abuse and domestic violence against the mother.

More than five times the proportion of girls compared to boys were reported as having experienced sexual abuse in their lifetime³. Over 1.5 times the proportion of boys were reported to have experienced emotional neglect compared to girls. The difference in gender scores for all other

ACE items were within a range of 10%. Young people attending GYDP in Ireland have significantly higher ACE profiles than the general population, for example 63% people in this study had four or more ACEs whereas in the general population approximately 12% of people have four or more ACEs (22).

The ACE profile of young people in this study mirror more closely that of populations accessing homeless, probation and substance use support services than the general population (23,24). This finding highlights high rates of trauma in this population, and the importance of effective intervention, engagement and diversion strategies.

**THIS FINDING HIGHLIGHTS
HIGH RATES OF TRAUMA IN
THIS POPULATION, AND THE
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3 However it is likely that this score is significantly lower than the reality – most young people who have been sexually abused in the home will not disclose this in childhood

THEMATIC ANALYSIS: TRAUMA THEORY AND POLICING / GYDPS

Findings from focus groups with JLOs and with Youth Workers found that:

- There was unanimous support among the group for the validity of the case file analysis findings – all professionals felt that most young people engaged with the Garda Youth Diversion Programmes are likely to have high trauma profiles.
- JLOs engage already in a number of behaviours that are in line with principles of trauma-informed practice. While it was felt that many JLOs are engaging in many different types of practices that could be considered trauma-informed, this is not taught or formalized, and in fact may be learned through making mistakes at the expense of relationship-building with young people in GYDPS. JLOs are commonly perceived to be currently engaging in more behaviours that are in line with trauma-informed care principles than general Gardaí.

WHEN PRACTICES AND POLICIES ARE NOT ALIGNED WITH THE NEEDS OF TRAUMATISED POPULATIONS, TRAUMA SYMPTOMS DISPLAYED BY YOUNG PEOPLE CAN GO UNRECOGNISED OR BE MISUNDERSTOOD BY STAFF.

- There are a number of practical considerations for using trauma theory in the delivery of criminal justice services:
 - The nature of policing work can be inflexible due to its statutory role. High-risk situations arise frequently for Gardaí where compassion-focussed or trauma-informed approaches may be harder to use.
 - There is also a need to ensure that trauma profiling (e.g. recognising a young person as having a high trauma load) does not have a negative impact on young people if, for example, the theory was used in a deterministic way to predict that the young person has no chance of successful diversion from criminality.
 - There are structural barriers in terms of the hierarchy of the organisation and perceived utility of the approach at higher levels that would need to be considered or managed.
 - Training and implementation at a whole organisation or even whole team level can be expensive.
- It was unanimously agreed that trauma training or trauma-informed approaches would be beneficial across the organisation for work not just with young people but generally. Any approach or training must be cognisant of, and relate practically to, the nature of policing work.

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATION

Young people engaged with Garda Youth Diversion Programmes have significantly higher levels of traumatic life experiences than people in the general population. Higher levels of trauma increase the likelihood of engagement with the criminal justice system. Traumatic experiences impact on behaviours in a range of ways that can negatively affect a young person's engagement with a programme such as the GYDP. This can include difficulties with emotional regulation, self-soothing, learning and social engagement, all of which can negatively impact on how the young person works with figures in authority, with community programmes, with workers and with their peers.

When practices and policies are not aligned with the needs of traumatised populations, trauma symptoms displayed by young people can go unrecognised or be misunderstood by staff. Where services such as social, criminal justice, community and health fail to recognise the symptoms of traumatic experience in a young person's behaviour, this can be misunderstood as 'challenging' behaviours. This mistaken labelling of such behaviours can impact on how workers treat young people and can compromise the continued engagement of a young person in a service, possibly resulting in the young person's needs going unmet and the objectives of the programme not being achieved. In environments that are not trauma-informed, service users are more likely to perceive the service or environment as unsafe or threatening and may be reluctant to trust staff, all of which can hinder their effective engagement with the service.

There was agreement from stakeholders involved in the research that a better understanding of trauma and good practice for working with people affected by it would be beneficial for those working in GYDPs. Understanding trauma, its effects on behaviour and its impact on the service provider-user interaction could help criminal justice professionals to avoid triggering traumatic reactions or re-traumatization, potentially aid in the recovery and healing process and, at the same time, promote a greater sense of safety among staff. It was recommended, based on the findings in this research and subsequent consultation with Garda management, that An Garda Síochána pilot a trauma-informed practice project that involves training and implementation supports.

This should consider:

- Pilot site/professionals e.g. Gardaí or JLOs, geographic areas etc.
- Engaging other key professionals working with young people e.g. residential care workers
- Evaluation to support exploration of roll out – this should measure indicators of success that could include engagement, perceptions of staff safety and others as relevant to trauma theory implementation.
- Considering trauma-informed policing projects in other jurisdictions to inform the model developed⁴

4 <https://www.traumainformedmd.com/lawenforcement.html#/> <https://www.scotland.police.uk/whats-happening/trauma-informed-policing/>

