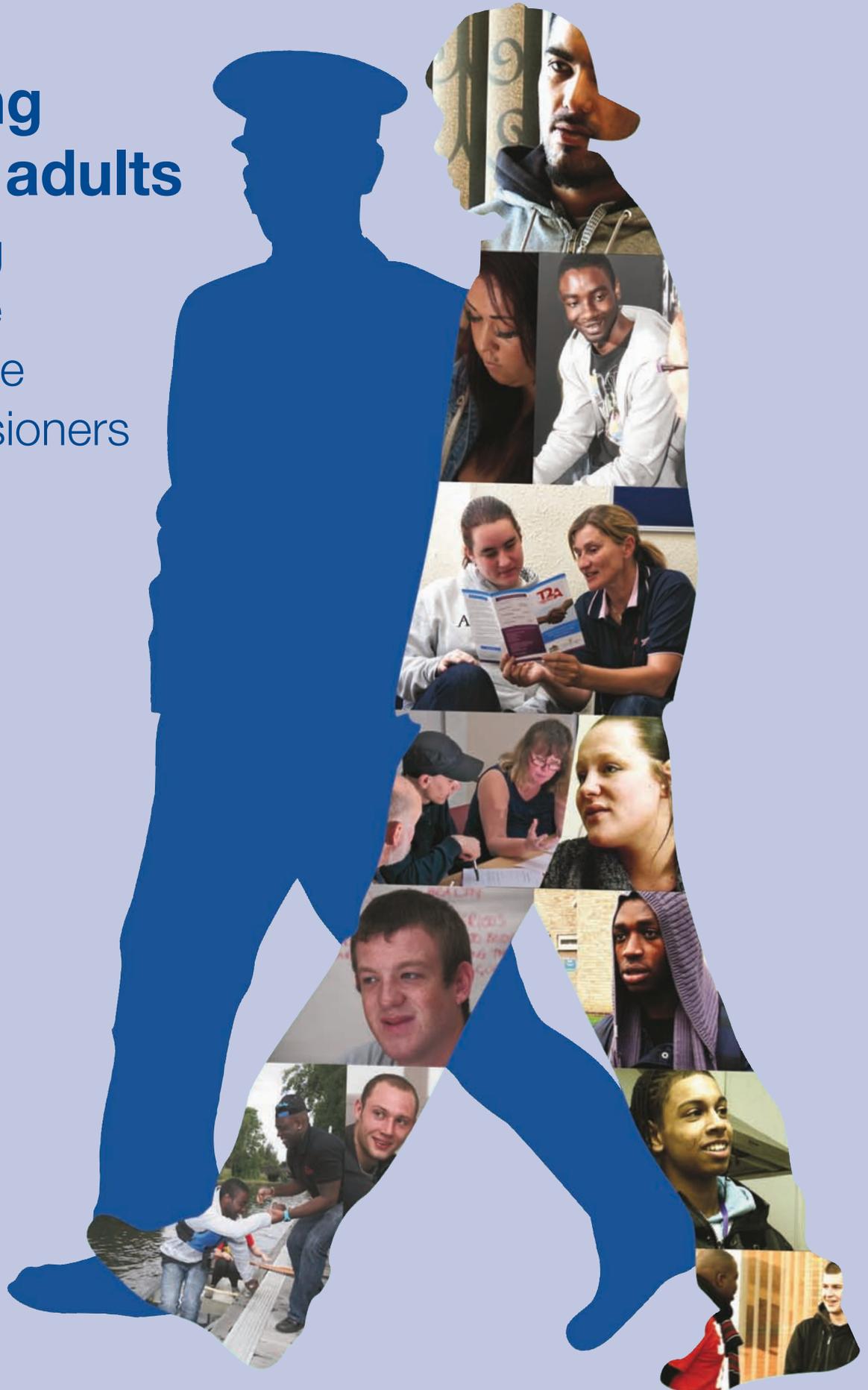


Policing young adults

A briefing for Police and Crime Commissioners



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Introduction

This briefing aims to provide a summary of the key findings and implications from a small study on the policing of young adults. It provides an insight into the key challenges front-line officers face in street encounters with young adults (aged 18-24), referring in particular to stop and search and the night-time economy. It focuses not so much on how front-line officers should best enforce the law in these situations, but on how they should best negotiate such encounters without risking escalation and how this should be embedded in police practice.

The briefing is divided into six sections:

- Background
- Encounters with the police
- Stop and search
- The night-time economy
- Engaging with young adults
- Training and supervision

Background

On reaching their 18th birthday, young adults are considered as fully mature and responsible adults under the criminal law. In reality, however, the transition to adulthood varies between people and does not instantly take place on a person's 18th birthday. Recent research on brain development suggests that psycho-social

maturity – those aspects of development and behaviour that involve interpersonal relationships and help individuals make socially responsible decisions – doesn't develop until young people are well into their twenties. Furthermore, psycho-social maturity comes with responsibility and independence, but in the last few decades the means for achieving both have become increasingly scarce: young adults today leave home, secure jobs, get married and have children later than any previous generation.

Despite making up just 10 per cent of the population, young adults account for more than a third of those going through the criminal justice system.

The Transition to Adulthood (T2A) Alliance has been working for a number of years to shift criminal justice policy on young adults towards a more rational and effective approach that takes account of this extended transition and its implications for personal maturity and social responsibility. With funding from the Barrow Cadbury Trust, the Police Foundation undertook a scoping study⁽¹⁾ on the policing of young adults, the findings and implications of which are summarised here specifically for the benefit of Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs).

1. Graham, J. with Karn, J. (2013) 'Policing young adults: A scoping study'. London: The Police Foundation

Encounters with the police

Members of the public who have had contact with the police hold more negative views of them than those who have had little or no personal contact. Bad experiences lead them to think twice before asking the police for help or deciding whether to report a crime and hostile or prejudicial attitudes can escalate a relatively benign encounter into a serious confrontation. Conversely, a positive interaction can help to avert a minor incident from becoming a major one. The same, only more so, applies to young adults, particularly young black men, who tend to hold particularly negative views of the police. Many young adult women, although they experience fewer encounters with the police, also hold similarly negative views.

Young adults are more at risk of victimisation than any other age group, yet the police tend to see them as suspects in need of control rather than potential victims in need of protection. Given their high-risk, street-based life styles, this may be understandable, but it can serve to undermine relations between young adults and the police and face-to-face encounters often reflect this. On the whole young adults, especially young women, feel over-policed and under-protected.

‘They are there to protect, but we don’t feel protected; we would go to our family, not the police, for protection’.

Where young people have no respect for police authority, lack trust in their capacity to protect them or deal fairly with them or are overtly hostile and antagonistic towards them, the risk that such encounters may escalate into aggressive exchanges and even violent incidents increases. This becomes particularly critical where such antagonism is rooted in a history of poor community-police relations and entrenched negative stereotyping by both

parties. How the police handle encounters with young adults, especially in high-risk situations, therefore influences the willingness of young adults to cooperate with the police, their trust and confidence in them and ultimately police legitimacy.

Stop and search

Stop and search plays a vital role in determining relations between young adults and the police. Young adults, particularly young men, are more likely than any other group to be stopped and searched, with young black men seven times more likely to be stopped and searched than their white counterparts. In the last decade, the use of stop and search has nearly doubled, while the proportion of searches resulting in an arrest has fallen.

The very nature of police encounters with young adults, especially in connection with stop and search, can create conflict even where police action is well conducted and appropriate. *How* officers conduct a stop and search is therefore as important as *why*. Young adults expect to be told why they have been stopped and/or searched – if they are treated as suspects, they have a right to know what they are being suspected of – but such explanations are not always forthcoming or convincing. Young adults understand that the police may have good reasons for stopping them and asking questions, but if the police use such powers unfairly, disproportionately or excessively, they are less likely to cooperate with the police or comply with the law. A single negative interaction can even affect an entire community.

Better training, observing more experienced officers and proper supervision could all help to reduce the risk that poorly conducted stops/searches trigger an incident and/or undermine relations with young adults. Given the inevitability of target setting, this study suggests that stop and search targets should be reviewed.

'A success may be nothing happening, police defusing trouble, everyone having a good time and getting home safely ... success is often quite a boring day really.'

The night-time economy

Whereas stop and search is disproportionately likely to affect young men from deprived, black and minority ethnic (BME) communities, the consumers of the night-time economy include young men and women from all ethnic backgrounds. The focus is more on prevention and risk management rather than rapid response and detection: policing of the night-time economy is organised around the imperative that everyone should have a good time and get home safely. The police are therefore more concerned with preventing problems than fighting crime and work closely with other partners, including the leisure industry, to maintain an orderly and peaceful environment.

Arguments over who gets the next taxi home are resolved by effective marshalling of taxi queues, not by arresting queue jumpers.

The night-time economy presents the police and their partners with significant challenges and ties up considerable resources. Although the key to managing the night-time economy seems to be good partnership working as part of a problem-solving approach, with law enforcement seen as a last resort, in reality little is known about the most cost-effective way of allocating resources.

Engaging with young adults

A frequent criticism of community engagement is its failure to engage with the full spectrum of

Second Wave, a youth and community arts charity in South London, has been running a project called **Critical Encounters** for the past eight years. It comprises a series of local workshops where young people and police officers meet and take on each other's roles. The project aims, among other things, to:

- Create a safe space where young people can engage in a creative process of police/community collaboration
- Develop positive face-to-face dialogue on key issues (including stop and search)
- Identify and explore the significance and impact of 'critical encounters' involving young people and the police

Originally initiated in response to the pressures and anxiety that young people experienced from being persistently stopped by the police, the workshops are now fully supported by the Borough Commander and embedded in local police training. Project staff believe that newly recruited officers are now more attuned from the start to the idea that policing requires the support of the community and that this requires effort.

Second Wave has built strong links with the local council and the police and is helping to improve local interactions between young Muslims and the police. It is making positive improvements to relations between the police and young people in a poor inner city area with a significant BME population and a history of community tensions.

community residents, especially the young, certain ethnic minorities and people with complex needs and multiple disadvantages. Where relations between the police and young adults are poor, efforts need to be made to identify better ways of engaging with this age group. But while young adults are a major client group for the police, there is a paucity of specifically tailored engagement strategies, although a shining exception to this rule is Critical Encounters (see above).

Training and supervision

As well as better engagement, the policing of young adults could be improved through better training and supervision. The main emphasis of police training is, however, on the law and how to enforce it, not on interpersonal skills and how to deploy them. The police receive little training on managing encounters with different members of the public and defusing difficult situations. Neither do they receive much on-the-job mentoring or supervision. In practice, many (especially young) officers are ill-prepared for interacting effectively with young adults and are inadequately supervised by their senior officers. A more effective approach to changing police behaviour might be to integrate more police training into routine practice.

Conclusion

Young adults come into contact with the police more than most other age groups, if only because they often tend to occupy public space and engage in risk-taking behaviour, such as substance misuse and associated criminal activity. The police, for their part, tend to view young adults as potential suspects at risk of offending rather than potential victims who need to be protected. In reality they are both. Young adults, in the main, understand and accept what the police have to do but dislike the way that they do it. A minority actively despise and fear them. These largely negative stereotypes create a poor basis for cooperative relations. But what needs to change?

This study points to a number of possibilities. They include:

- Raising awareness of the changing transition to adulthood and its implications for policing
- Changing how the police interact with young adults, particularly when exercising their powers to stop and search

- Developing more imaginative and effective ways of engaging with young adults
- Expanding police training to incorporate interpersonal skills and aligning officer training more closely with on-the-job supervision for probationers
- Investing in the development of a stronger evidence base

Since November 2012, the replacement of the old police authorities with newly elected PCCs has fundamentally altered the relationship between the police, the government and the public. Given their mandate to hold the police to account, oversee the policing budget and reflect the wishes of local citizens in their plans, PCCs will now determine whether young adults will form part of the new governance, budgetary and consultative arrangements or become marginal to them. They hold the key to whether resources are invested in the right kind of training, supervision, management and leadership that will produce a step change in how young adults are policed. In reality, there is neither the budget for over-policing nor any excuses for under-protection.

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