

# What have ACEs got to do with Justice?

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Everything. This paper sets out a summary of the evidence on the links between childhood adversity and victimisation and criminality in adulthood. It makes a strong case for preventing crime by targeting those most at risk of experiencing adverse childhoods, and supporting people in the Justice System whose lives have been affected by adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) in order to reduce reoffending and prevent intergenerational crime and victimisation. It argues that this will require a coordinated and collaborative effort across government.

**Most** of the recognised ACEs (and other adversities) impact on the Justice System.

Children and adults with experience of ACEs may come into contact with the criminal justice system - both as victims or witnesses and perpetrators of crime. They may also interact with the civil justice 'family law' system.

The justice system therefore has a key role in preventing and, in particular, mitigating the impact of ACEs.

**Preventing ACEs** could provide a significant opportunity to reduce crime in Scotland. Some studies have estimated that preventing ACEs could halve violence perpetration and incarceration. (Bellis et al., 2014)

**Research** consistently shows a strong association between ACEs and crime. People who experience multiple ACEs are more likely to engage in risk taking behaviours which are harmful to health and - significantly for Justice - sometimes associated with criminal behaviour. The Welsh ACEs Study (Public Health Wales NHS Trust, 2015) reported that compared with people with no ACEs, those with 4+ACEs were:











- x14** times more likely to be a victim of violence in the last 12 months
- x15** times more likely to be a perpetrator of violence in the last 12 months
- x20** times more likely to have been incarcerated in their lives

## How can a harsh childhood lead to criminal behaviour?



- ACEs theory is consistent with theories of crime which have proven links between childhood factors and adulthood criminality and victimisation (e.g. Agnew, 1985; Farrington et al, 2006)
- Prolonged exposure to stress in childhood disrupts healthy brain development. This can manifest as emotional and conduct problems in childhood, and risk-taking and criminal behaviours in adulthood. (Levenson et al, 2016)
- The more ACEs someone experiences the more detrimental the effect on their well-being (known as a 'graded dose-response'). (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2015)
- ACEs have been linked to many 'criminogenic' risks (factors that increase risk of offending) including substance and alcohol abuse, deprivation, poor educational attainment, and mental health problems. (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2015)

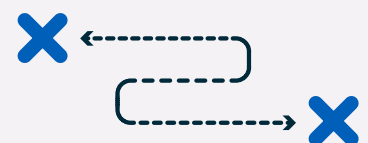
## 10 most commonly measured Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

ABUSE	HOUSEHOLD ADVERSITIES
 Physical	 Mental Illness
 Verbal	 Incarcerated relative
 Sexual	 Domestic violence
NEGLECT	
 Physical	 Parental Separation
 Emotional	 Substance abuse

## POINTS FOR REFLECTION

The evidence does not prove causality. Not all children who experience multiple ACEs become victims or perpetrators of violence in adulthood, but they are statistically more likely to than people with no ACEs.

**What is predictable is also preventable.**  
(Dr R. Anda)



# What do we know about the childhoods of justice ‘users’?

# 2

Although Scottish data is limited, international evidence consistently shows high levels of childhood trauma and maltreatment in adult perpetrators and victims of certain crimes. Both criminality and victimisation can be intergenerational which points to the need to support families at the earliest stage possible. The list of 10 ACEs which is used in many ACEs studies does not cover all childhood factors associated with crime. There may therefore be merit in policy responses aimed at reducing crime to consider a wider range other childhood adversities.

**People** who offend are more likely to experience traumatic childhoods than the general population.

US studies report a higher incidence of ACEs in various offending groups (Leitch, 2017). Whilst equivalent research does not exist in the UK, prison surveys in the UK and in Scotland report high rates of childhood abuse, family violence, experience of being in care and school exclusion in people in prison. (MOJ, 2012; SPS, 2015)

Having a convicted family member and being excluded from school have been reported as risk factors for reoffending in adulthood. (MOJ, 2012)



### Did you know that in Scotland...

**45%**

Adult prisoner survey respondents reported that they had been physically abused in their home as a child

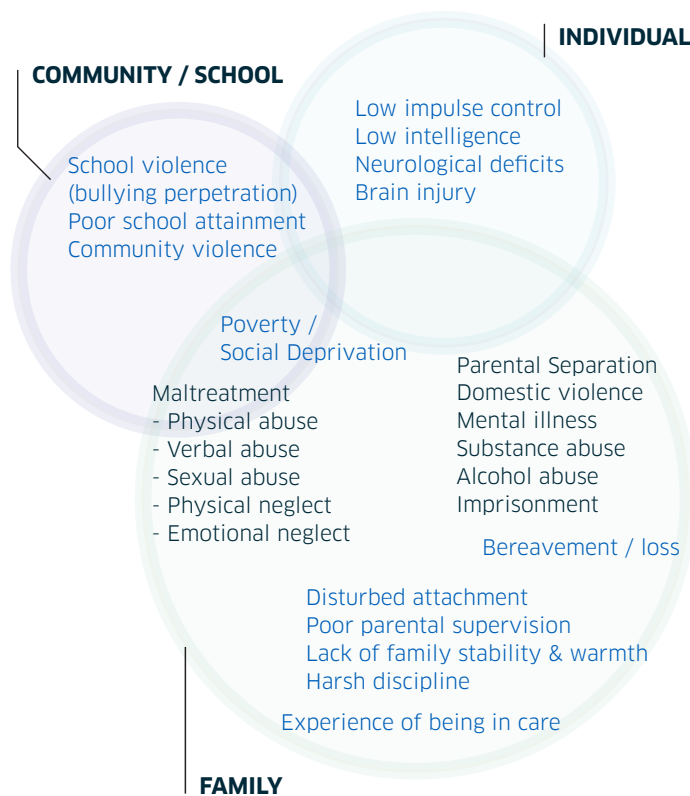
**61%**

Adult prisoner survey respondents had been bullied at school or somewhere else

**56%**

Young people in custody said they had been sworn at, humiliated, or put down by an adult in their home

### ACEs and childhood risk factors for Criminality



- ACEs
- Other risk factors

**Many childhood adversities**, including those not included in the standard ACEs framework, tend to co-exist which makes it hard to identify which risk factors best predict criminality - some risk factors may be the result of early childhood trauma e.g. neurological deficits. However, some ACEs research has drawn links between specific ACEs (e.g. child sexual abuse) and specific types of crime (e.g. sex offending).

Further research is needed to understand the causal mechanisms between childhood adversity/trauma and different types of criminality and victimisation in adulthood.

### POINTS FOR REFLECTION

Much less is known about the incidence and effect of childhood trauma on male offenders and victims.

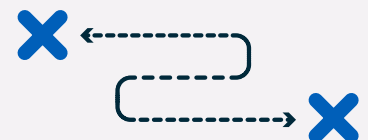
Given that men are more likely to be a victim of violent crime and that the rate of conviction is higher for men, further research is needed.

**People** who experience multiple ACEs are more likely to be a victim of violence in adulthood than people who have no ACEs.

Research shows that people who are abused as children are more likely to be abused as an adult. As ACE scores increase, so too does adult sexual victimisation (Ports et al, 2016). People who experience child abuse or witness

domestic violence in childhood are more likely to be abused by a partner in adulthood than those who did not experience abuse/witness violence, particularly women. (CSEW, 2017)

These studies point to the importance of understanding the role of childhood maltreatment in preventing and addressing victimisation in adulthood.



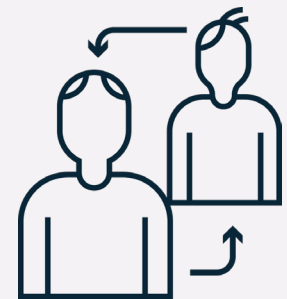
# Why are some children more resilient than others?

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Not all people who experience adverse or traumatic childhoods become victims and/or perpetrators of crime. Understanding why some children do well despite early adverse experiences is crucial. Identifying which buffers, or 'protective factors', can mediate the effects of childhood adversity and trauma can inform policy and practice to help more children reach their full potential and reduce crime and victimisation.

The single most common factor for children who develop resilience is "at least one stable and committed relationship with a supportive parent, caregiver, or other adult"

(Harvard University Center on the Developing Child).



## Protective factors against offending.

### LOW LEVELS OF POVERTY & SOCIAL DEPRIVATION



- Live in safe neighbourhoods with opportunities for positive activities
- Low neighbourhood economic deprivation
- Higher family socioeconomic circumstances

### EDUCATION / INTELLIGENCE



- Resilient young people tend to be more intelligent & flexible
- Higher level of school attainment

### POSITIVE PEERS & NEIGHBOURHOOD CONNECTIONS



- Connections with pro-social peers
- Involvement in positive organisations, activities, sport
- Low social isolation

### TRUSTED ADULT & EFFECTIVE PARENTING



- Strong attachment with parent/ carer
- 'Always available adult'
- Stable family structure
- Parental supervision
- Parental interest in education
- Parental style/discipline (non-harsh)

### BEHAVIOUR & COPING MECHANISMS



- Low hyperactivity & impulsivity
- Pro-social behaviour
- Good social skills

### POSITIVE ATTITUDES & SELF-ESTEEM



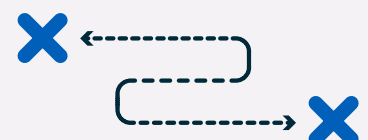
- Positive / hopeful about the future
- Good self-esteem
- Pro-social attitudes
- Positive school attitude
- Religion

**Research** suggests that resilience is built at an individual, family and community level. Policy responses should target all three domains to be most effective.

## POINTS FOR REFLECTION

- One of the criticisms of trauma-informed care is an over-emphasis on risks. It is argued that ACE-informed practice (and research) could be enhanced by identifying protective or strength-based factors in people's lives.
- Some protective factors fall out with the reach of the justice system. Policy responses will therefore need to be cross-government.

**Research** is limited in some areas. There is a lack of ACEs population studies which examine resilience in the context of offending and/or victimisation. Criminological research on resilience tends to focus on youth offending. That being said, resilience factors identified in ACEs research (in relation to mental health) and criminological research are remarkably similar. For example, social support is consistently identified as a protective factor for mental health, offending and victimisation.



# A call for compassion? How to build resilience to reduce crime. 4

Building resilience in children and young people, and their families and communities, is crucial to reducing crime and victimisation. Cross-cutting policies are needed to identify and support children and their families at risk of early adversity at the earliest stage possible. The justice system is well placed to identify such families, and support victims and people who offend to promote their resilience and well-being, and reduce reoffending. There is an emerging body of evidence pointing to the value of trauma-informed approaches which advocate a more compassionate and strengths-based justice system.

## Trauma-informed Care in Youth Justice

Common themes from US approaches to young people in custody



<p><b>ACEs screening</b> - All children in custody are screened for ACEs.</p>	<p><b>Highly skilled professional staff</b> - trauma-informed training for staff (intensive training &amp; input from psychologists)</p>	<p><b>Family engagement</b> - children and their families are involved in the treatment planning process</p>
<p><b>Caring culture</b> - shift from a sterile approach to a humane one</p>	<p><b>Partnership working</b> with child welfare, education and health</p>	<p><b>New custodial environments</b> - some states have replaced traditional prisons with 'group homes'</p>

### A trauma-informed approach asks 'What happened to you?' not 'What is wrong with you?'

Trauma-informed approaches in other countries tend to target women and young people in the justice system. Examples include ACEs screening in probation, community police hubs (similar to the Whole Systems Approach), trauma-informed case management for young offenders, problem-solving courts and trauma recovery programmes. Although there is strong support for a trauma-informed approach in justice settings, there is a lack of robust evaluations and limited empirical evidence of its effectiveness, particularly in relation to men who offend.

### What works to build resilience in children:

- Facilitating supportive adult-child relationships;
- Building a sense of self-efficacy and perceived control;
- Providing opportunities to strengthen coping skills and self-control;
- Mobilizing sources of faith, hope, and cultural traditions. (Harvard Center of the Developing Child)

### What works to reduce crime



The most successful programmes for preventing youth offending are early intervention preventative programmes which focus on the family. These include:

- Parenting programmes** that focus on early parenting methods to improve children's self-control (e.g. effective discipline), and to increase parental involvement in children's education.
- School-based programmes** aimed at addressing truancy and exclusions, and improving self-control and social skills.
- Home-visiting and pre-school education programmes** which target at-risk children.

This evidence summary was undertaken by Tamsyn Wilson of Justice Analytical Services, Scottish Government between Nov 17-Jan 18. Evidence is drawn from a range of academic disciplines including criminology, health and psychology academic databases. Full references are available on request. Justice Analytical Services, Scottish Government, Victoria Quay, Leith, EH6 6QQ.

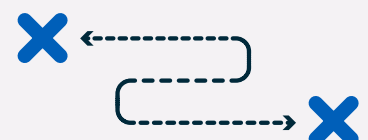
- [JusticeAnalysts@gov.scot](mailto:JusticeAnalysts@gov.scot)
- <http://www.gov.scot/Topics/Research/by-topic/crime-and-justice>.

### POINTS FOR REFLECTION

Although building resilience should be done at the earliest opportunity, it is never too late to support people affected by childhood adversity.

We need to test out approaches and build our evidence about 'what works' in relation to a trauma-informed justice system.

**"It changes how you look at a person - whether you look at them as just a criminal or someone who had trauma in their background"**  
[\(acestoohigh.com\)](http://acestoohigh.com)





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