

# include YOUTH

## **Young people's views on policing during COVID 19 August 2020**

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## **Include Youth**

Include Youth is an independent non-governmental organisation that actively promotes the rights, best interests of and best practice with disadvantaged and vulnerable children and young people.

The young people we work with and for include those from socially disadvantaged areas, those who have had poor educational experiences, those from a care background, young people who have committed or are at risk of committing crime, misusing drugs and/or alcohol, engaging in unsafe or harmful sexual behaviour, or at risk of being harmed themselves. We provide a range of tailored employability programmes for these young people, including programmes in partnership with community based organisations.

Our Give & Take Scheme adopts a youth work approach to improving the employability and increasing the self-esteem and confidence of young people aged 16 to 24 who are not yet ready to participate in mainstream training.

Many of these young people have experienced social exclusion, poverty or have other complex challenges in their lives and therefore need additional support to overcome these barriers and positively progress their education, training or employment needs. Seventy-five per cent of young people on the Scheme are care experienced, while over a third has a background in offending. We offer a range of tailored programmes including

- Core - for young people referred to us through the Health Trusts
- Start Programme – a collaborative partnership programme with community based organisations, targeted at young people in the North Down, Ards and Belfast areas
- Outreach - for groups or organisations throughout Northern Ireland
- One to One - for young people at risk of child sexual exploitation
- Transitional support - for those moving on from our Scheme and into mainstream education, training or employment
- Strive – a cross community, cross cultural, and cross border programme that engages young people in good relations, person development and citizenship.

Our main offices are in Belfast, Armagh, Ballymena, Derry, Enniskillen, Newtownards and Omagh.

Include Youth also delivers an Employability Service on behalf of two of the five Health Trusts for young people aged 16 + who have had experience of the care system. This service is designed to offer tangible and concrete opportunities to assist young people leaving care to prepare for and engage in work.

Include Youth also engages in policy advocacy work in the areas of employability, youth justice and policing. This work is informed by relevant international human rights and children's rights standards, is evidence based, including that provided by young people and practitioners and is based on high quality, critical analysis.

## **Introduction**

Include Youth welcomes the NI Policing Board's review of PSNI's response to COVID 19 and the intention to examine how the response may have impacted on public confidence. We are especially pleased that the Board is keen to hear the views of children and young people and to find out how they have felt supported and protected during this time. We took part in the discussion with Mr Wadham on 30<sup>th</sup> June along with other members of the Youth Champions Forum and at this meeting we suggested that we would endeavour to consult with some young people engaged in Include Youth programmes, to ascertain their experience of policing in recent months.

It has proved challenging to engage young people on this subject or indeed on any policy consultations. The circumstances to engage in direct consultation were limited due to restrictions and many of our young people have become less engaged in online meetings. Our priority has always been to ensure our young people are supported practically and emotionally and as such meeting these very immediate needs have been our first concern in recent months. Second to that has been to ensure our young people continue to receive education through online classes with Include Youth's Essential Skills Tutors.

Prior to the current situation we would have been able to facilitate face to face group discussions with young people on policy topics as well as setting up direct meetings between decision makers and young people. While we do plan to reinstate this form of engagement in an online capacity in the coming months, we have not been able to accommodate this form of discussion for the purposes of the current review of policing during COVID 19.

That said, we remain committed to providing the Board with some form of feedback from our young people on the topic of policing during COVID 19. We therefore put together a Mentimeter survey on the subject of policing during COVID 19 and circulated it to all Senior Youth Workers across all our sites in NI. The Senior Youth Workers encouraged young people to complete the survey. The survey asked the young people to consider a number of questions which were designed to gauge young people's experience of policing during recent months, including how they felt policing during COVID 19 had impacted on their confidence in policing, how they believed the PSNI had dealt with the crisis and if they had had much contact with the police in relation to COVID 19 regulations.

## Survey Findings

24 young people from across our various programmes completed the survey. It should be noted that not all young people answered every question in the survey.

### Relationship between young people and the police:

50% (12 young people) of the young people felt that the COVID 19 crisis had impacted the relationship between young people and the police. 9 young people felt that the crisis had not impacted the relationship while 3 young people said that they had not noticed any impact.

### Confidence in the police:

When it came to assessing whether young people's confidence in the police had increased or decreased there was a mixed response. 9 young people said their confidence in the police had increased while the same number said their confidence in the police had neither increased nor decreased, with 5 young people saying their confidence had decreased.

### Feelings of safety:

When the young people were asked if police actions during COVID 19 had made young people feel more or less safe, 12 out of the 22 young people who answered that question felt that police actions made them feel less safe, with just 4 young people saying the actions made them feel more safe and 6 saying it had not changed their feelings of safety either way.

### Satisfaction levels of police response:

One third of the young people (8 out of 24) were satisfied that the police had responded to the COVID 19 crisis in the best way possible, while one quarter said that they were not satisfied with the police response. 10 young people had no opinion.

### Contact with police during crisis:

The majority of the young people had not had any contact with the police during the COVID 19 crisis in relation to regulations and social distancing rules (15 out of 22), with just 7 indicating that they had contact.

*"I've never been personally approached or contacted by the police in relation to COVID but I have seen a lot of the rules that have been in place over the last few months and how the police patrol the streets to make sure we are following the rules".*

3 of the young people said they had been 'harassed' by the police.

*"Harassment for walking to the shop."*

*“Told me I shouldn’t be hanging around, when I was just waiting for a lift.”*

Another said they had been questioned with friends and asked why they were out, while one young person said he had been arrested.

*“When I’ve been out with friends they just approached us to question why we were out.”*

*“I was out drinking with 10 other people during lockdown and got arrested.”*

Another young person said that the police had reminded them that they needed to social distance.

*“The police just came and told me and my friends to keep our distance.”*

Other young people had been approached for drinking in the park or in relation to parties/ social gatherings.

#### Police treatment of young people:

When asked how they thought the police had treated young people during COVID 19 crisis, 8 out of 21 young people thought the police had not treated young people fairly.

*“There have been lots of incidents in the last few weeks involving young people the the police.”*

*“Harassment.”*

*“They thought I was causing hassle when I was just waiting for a lift.”*

Several young people felt that the police should take more time to consider the individual circumstances of young people and not make assumptions or jump to conclusions.

*“They didn’t really take into consideration young people’s mental health and why they may have been out during COVID.”*

*“They don’t care to ask.”*

Other young people felt that the police had acted in a balanced and fair way with 5 young people saying that young people had been treated fairly while 8 expressed no opinion.

*“I believe they have treated everyone fairly because we all have been made to follow the COVID regulations and no-one was told to do anything differently for the safety of ourselves and others.”*

*“I think they were trying to respond and act fairly to everyone.”*

What are police doing well and what could be improved?

The young people were asked to identify what they thought the police were doing well. Several young people felt the police were doing everything they could to keep people safe.

*“Keeping an eye out.”*

*“Keeping people safe.”*

*“The police are patrolling the streets to make sure everyone is safe and following the safety guidelines to prevent people from coming in to close contact in case of another outbreak of COVID.”*

*“Trying to support the people social distancing and help others to respect the rules.”*

Other young people were less supportive of police actions and response.

*“I don’t think they are doing much.”*

*“Yelling at people to go home.”*

*“Sweet FA.”*

The young people were asked what they thought the police could do better to keep the community safe. Some thought the police needed to change their attitude and be more mindful of young people’s circumstances.

*“Be more understanding.”*

*“Be nicer.”*

Other young people wanted the police to ensure guidelines were adhered to.

*“Encourage others to social distance”.*

*“Keep strict rules.”*

Some young people referred to the need to keep young people safe, especially in relation to drugs.

*“Keep young people away from the bad people.”*

*“Catch the bad guys.”*

*“Go after the drug dealers.”*

One young person suggested that the police should engage in more educational awareness in schools.

*“Link in with schools like they do in England, to show kids they are there to help them from a young age. Also maybe try out Police Community Support Officers like they have in England.”*

Another young person expressed the view that the police have to ensure the safety of all of the community and not just focus on children and young people.

*“Nothing as we are all a priority to the community so they have to look out for their health and well being as well as ours.”*

### Spit and Bite Guards

The young people were asked a question about the introduction of spit and bite guards in response to COVID 19. They were asked ‘The PSNI have introduced spit and bite guards to prevent the risk of COVID if threatened by coughing or spitting. What do you think? Do you agree, disagree or have no opinion?’

11 out of 21 young people said they agreed with their introduction.

*“Some header could be infected and decide to spit on them.”*

*“It stops germs from someone who doesn’t take it seriously.”*

*“They (the police) need protection too.”*

*“If someone is gonna spit then the cops need protection cos the person could have coronavirus.”*

7 out of 21 young people had no opinion and 3 said they disagreed with their introduction.

*“Seems a bit too far.”*

*“People are just going mad over this.”*

While over half of the young people who answered this question agreed to the introduction to the of spit and bite guards, we would urge caution in interpreting this as a blanket approval from young people for the use of guards. The survey did not enable us to have further discussion with the young people or to have the opportunity to show them the use of a guard and expand the discussion. On reflection, we should have asked a number of supplementary questions to include how young people felt about the use of the guards in relation to children and young people, the use of guards on people with disabilities or mental health needs, and finally, the use of the guards post the COVID 19 crisis.

As an organisation IY remains opposed to the use of Spit and Bite Guards in relation to children and young people. We share the concerns of our colleagues in Children's Rights Alliance England (CRAE) who claim that "hooding children is distressing and dangerous" and an abuse of children's rights. <sup>1</sup>Evidence shows that children and young people who come into contact with the police are more likely to have experienced neglect, abuse, been in care, have language and learning difficulties or other vulnerabilities. Using spit and bite hoods is potentially traumatising for these children and young people and is likely to cause severe damage.

Further research by Kieran Kennedy et al has shown that the adverse effects of spit and bite guards include panic/emotional distress/suffocation/degradation and dehumanisation.<sup>2</sup> Kennedy's research examines how many officers have contracted diseases as a result of spitting and biting and considers the use of guards is more about restraint than protection. We are also concerned about the claims made by a recent Amnesty International report that the guards offer no significant protection from COVID 19 for officers and their use may actually increase risk of infection. <sup>3</sup>

Include Youth recommends a full assessment of the potential risk and danger of using guards on children and young people is taken and that a full account of the best interest of the child is central to this assessment. We are concerned that the use of these guards in relation to children and young people is in contradiction to the trauma informed practice which the PSNI has been seeking to implement. We would also welcome clarification on the current status of the use of spit and bite guards in relation to children and young people and what the proposals are for their use post COVID 19. Furthermore, we are keen to know what specific training officers have been provided with in relation to the use of the guards on children and young people. In addition, we would expect PSNI to engage in consultations with children and young people to ascertain their views on the use of guards.

## Concluding Comments

We hope that these findings will prove useful to the Board as they seek to gain an overview of how a number of young people have experienced policing during COVID 19. We are sure you will appreciate how difficult and challenging it has been for our

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.crae.org.uk/news/crae-responds-to-metropolitan-police-announcement-on-spit-hoods/>  
<https://www.cypnow.co.uk/News/article/concerns-over-use-of-potentially-fatal-spit-hoods-on-children>

<sup>2</sup> Kieran Kennedy et al, Use of Guards by Police in England, Wales and Northern Ireland to prevent transmission of infection or another form of restraint?, Journal of Forensic and Legal Medicine, 11 July 2019, 66:147-154.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/press-releases/northern-ireland-police-spit-hoods-may-increase-risks-spread-covid-19-psni-should>





young people in recent months as they come to terms with a changing environment. Include Youth has sought to bring stability and support to the young people we work with. While current regulations have eased somewhat, it remains a challenge to fully engage our young people with policy issues. Include Youth has always been committed to linking with the Policing Board and facilitating youth engagement when possible. We will continue to encourage our young people to have their voices heard in relation to policing and look forward to reading the Human Rights Advisor's completed review.