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Systemic Resilience

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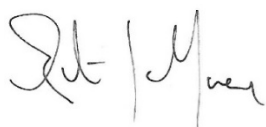
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Foreword

HM Inspectorate of Probation is committed to reviewing, developing and promoting the evidence base for high-quality probation and youth offending services. *Academic Insights* are aimed at all those with an interest in the evidence base. We commission leading academics to present their views on specific topics, assisting with informed debate and aiding understanding of what helps and what hinders probation and youth offending services.

This report was kindly produced by Dr Alex Chard, summarising the concept of Systemic Resilience which brings together systemic thinking and resilience theory. Moving beyond an individualised view that locates resilience as a requirement of the child, it recognises the importance of strengthening the protective factors around the child including within their family, their community, and in the services that are available. Seeing resilience as systemic facilitates a clear link between practice with individual children and strategic responses/frameworks to prevent crime/offending and address structural factors such as poverty and social exclusion. Implications for youth justice include: (i) developing services that place a meaningful empathetic relationship with the child and their family at the heart of service provision; (ii) understanding that risk is multi-dimensional and needs to be understood within the overall context of a child's life; (iii) promoting positive relationships for the child in their families, schools and communities; and (iv) enabling engagement with community resources. Through multi-agency working and through the development of highly resilient, skilled and well-resourced multi-disciplinary teams, youth offending services are well placed to deliver such an approach.



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Head of Research

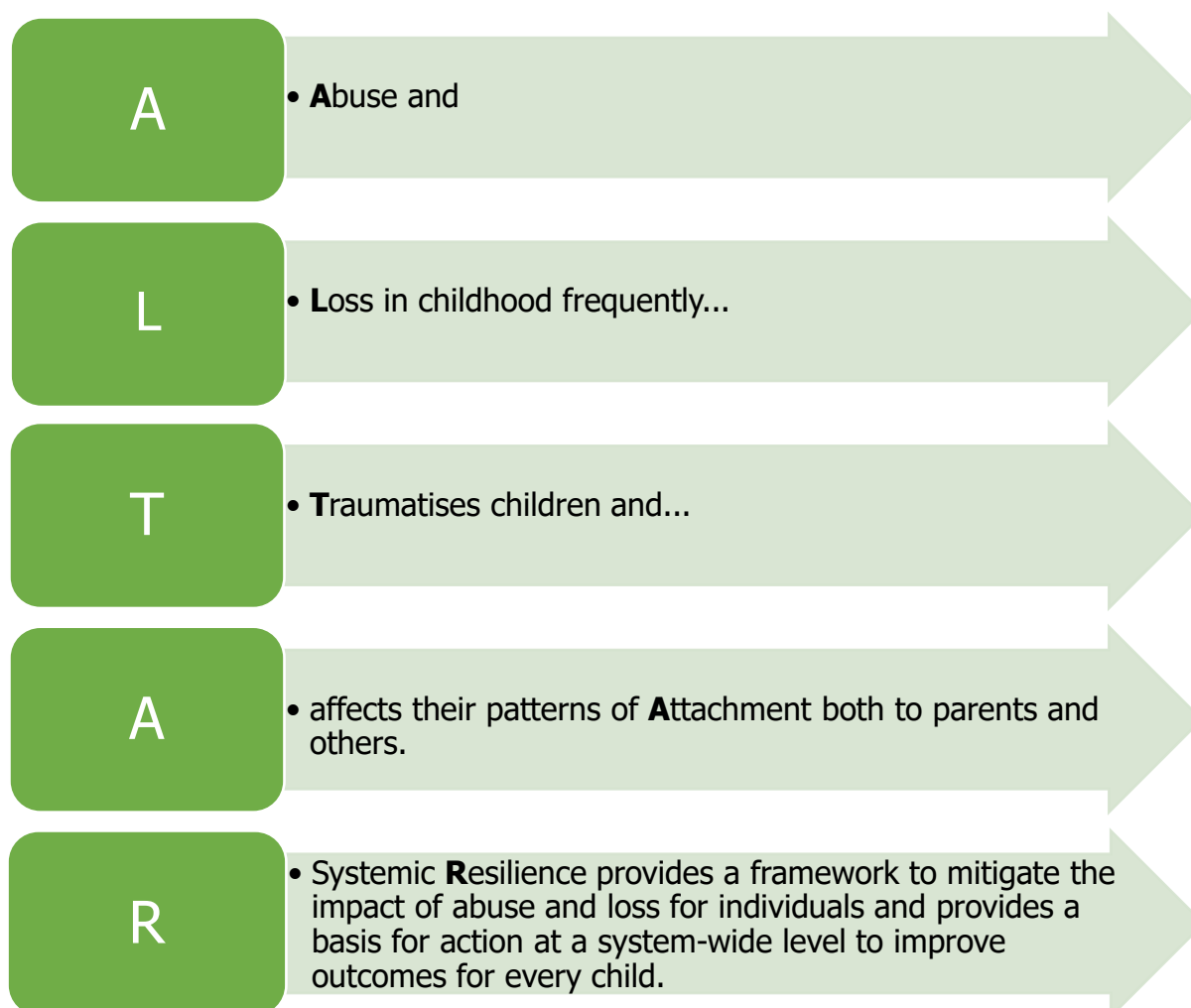
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Dr Alex Chard is an independent academic and author. His published work includes criminal and childcare law and the effectiveness of public policy on children's services. He has also authored case reviews, national guidance on working with young people, and practice improvement guidance for children's services. His most recent publication is *Punishing Abuse*, a detailed study of children in the West Midlands Criminal Justice System. In the early years of his career he established some of the first community-based projects designed as direct alternatives to custodial sentences. He also has over 30 years consultancy experience in criminal justice and other public services.

The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the policy position of HM Inspectorate of Probation.

1. Introduction

Punishing Abuse (Chard, 2021) was a research report written for the West Midlands Combined Authority and the Police and Crime Commissioner regarding eighty children known to West Midlands Youth Offending Teams (YOTs). The research project applied ALTAR™, a research framework based on an understanding that:



The research within the West Midlands involved YOT practitioners accessing multi-agency records, including education, health, social care, and YOT records. This approach generated an extensive dataset providing both qualitative and quantitative evidence of very high levels of adversity for the majority of the children studied. While this group was likely to be weighted towards more complex cases (as it reflected the interests of practitioners and included those known or suspected to be gang involved), it included children from eleven authorities and from urban and rural areas. The adversities included significant levels of abuse and loss, as well as structural issues related to poverty, social exclusion, and educational exclusion.

The ALTAR™ framework is predicated on an understanding that risk of harm and risk of offending, and in particular serious offending, has to be understood within the overall context of a child's life. Risk is not just based upon individual risk factors but is also located within the family history and the experience of the child. An evidence review from Northern Ireland related to trauma-informed systems of care (Bunting et al., 2019) comments as follows:

'There is a robust and growing body of research, which indicates that severe or chronic adversity in childhood has a significant, negative impact on a child's development, health, and life chances across their life course. Integrating awareness of childhood adversity into the public health agenda and cross-system service delivery (education, health, social care, justice) is therefore essential to prevent, recognise and mitigate the impact of trauma on children. This body of research also points to the importance of understanding parental/caregiver histories, who may also be impacted by early adversity.'

Punishing Abuse included a detailed review of a wide range of academic literature from a range of disciplines. In summary, the academic evidence showed that children's offending behaviours may be attributable to changes in their neurological systems and cognitive processes caused by toxic stress; this led to the title of the report *Punishing Abuse*. Children who have suffered abuse and loss are more likely to engage in higher levels of risky behaviour, and early abuse and loss can impact on a child's ability to form positive relationships (Brown and Ward, 2013). One of the likely underlying reasons for the troubled behaviours of children in the justice system is the impact on their patterns of attachment, and *Punishing Abuse* presented evidence of disorganised attachment for nearly half (44%) of the group.

The concept of Systemic Resilience was developed from the recognition that improving outcomes for children who have been harmed is not principally about developing the resilience of the child, but that creating resilience for a child is intrinsically linked to broader resilience within the child's family and community which is also affected by resilience in broader local and national systems. Adopting Systemic Resilience as an approach also addresses the following requirement in article 39 of the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNICEF 2022):

'Children who have experienced neglect, abuse, exploitation, torture or who are victims of war must receive special support to help them recover their health, dignity, self-respect and social life.'

For children in the youth justice system, it is always important to recognise that the risks that need to be managed are multi-dimensional. They include the risk of the child reoffending and of harming others but also include the risk that the child may come to harm. Harm may be caused to the child either as a consequence of their own behaviours or because of harm by others either within their family or more widely. Applying Systemic Resilience enables all of these dimensions to be addressed.

2. Considering Systemic Resilience

The term resilience is applied across many disciplines and consequently there are different understandings of the term. A broadly accepted term is 'the capacity of a dynamic system to adapt successfully to disturbances that threaten systemic function, viability or development' (Masten, 2014a). Ann Masten comments in her book *Ordinary Magic: Resilience in Development* (2014b) that:

'There is growing recognition that resilience in children is interconnected with the resilience of families, communities, governments, economies, and ecologies.'

Michael Ungur (2021) argues that bringing together systemic thinking and resilience theory allows new ways of understanding both human and non-human systems:

'In the area of trauma research, for example, we now understand the need to stop asking individuals who have been traumatised "what is wrong with you?" And instead ask, What happened to you that is causing you to behave in the way that you do? This second question shifts attention away from a single system's (i.e. the individual) responsibility for recovery, adaption or transformation and focuses instead on the environmental triggers that influence patterns of change ...'

Positive personal relationships with an adult other than a parent are very broadly recognised as being a core aspect of recovery from trauma and for developing resilience. Judith Jordan considers *relational resilience* and contends that in building resilience, we 'can no longer look only at factors within the individual that facilitate adjustment; we must examine the relational dynamics which encourage the capacity for connection' (Jordan, 1992). This systemic perspective considers resilience as an attribute that exists in the relationships that the child has with others.

In line with such thinking, Systemic Resilience is not about an individualised view that locates resilience as a quality and requirement of the child. Systemic Resilience requires seeing that development of resilience for the child is dependent on putting the child at the centre and strengthening the protective factors around the child including within their family, their community and in the services that are available to support the child (see also the earlier [Academic Insights paper 2020/07 on contextual safeguarding](#) by Carlene Firmin). This includes, for all children, ensuring that they do not live in poverty and have access to fulfilling education and employment opportunities. They should have access to high-quality mental and physical health and social care services whenever these are required to address specific needs.

A key recognition within systemic thinking is that we need to respond to complexity with complexity. Like resilience, trauma is usually pathologised as an individual phenomena, but families, communities and societies can be traumatised. In a paper entitled *Systemic Trauma*, Goldsmith et al. (2014) make the following comments:

'Substantial theoretical, empirical, and clinical work examines trauma as it relates to individual victims and perpetrators. As trauma professionals, it is necessary to acknowledge facets of institutions, cultures, and communities that contribute to trauma and subsequent outcomes.'

'A systemic trauma perspective offers the possibility of expanding trauma prevention and treatment efforts. It is in line with multidisciplinary, ecological approaches to public health

rather than narrow scholarly lenses ... A systemic trauma framework involves noticing how our own institutions and practices contribute to trauma and its outcomes.'

Understanding trauma systemically then allows us to see how we need to respond to the systemic factors of trauma including in our own practice and institutions. Seeing resilience as a systemic response also enables a clear link to be created between practice with individual children and both strategic responses and frameworks to prevent crime and offending and to address structural factors such as poverty and social exclusion that create adversity and vulnerability to involvement in crime.

2.1 Considering the needs of children in the youth justice system

"I have consistently called for the recognition that childhood trauma can leave a lasting harmful effect on children, which in some cases can render them vulnerable to falling into the criminal justice system. This comprehensive and harrowing report is a powerful reinforcement of the need to support all children who have suffered, to give them the very best chance of a happy life; lives free of trauma, free of crime and experiences that help children achieve their talents and potential."

Anne Longfield, Children's Commissioner for England (Foreword to *Punishing Abuse*)

Commissioning of the *Punishing Abuse* research was motivated by a recognition that there is significant complexity in the lives of children in the justice system. It was also recognised that there was limited research that had considered this complexity. Furthermore, the development of services to better meet the needs of children required greater understanding of the lives of children in the justice system.

In brief, the *Punishing Abuse* findings were deeply troubling. Some of the key statistics were as follows:

- over three-quarters (79%) of the children were confirmed as experiencing family violence or abuse
- for more than two thirds of the children, fathers were not part of their daily lives; there were only six children (7.5% of 80) still living with both birth parents
- sixty-one (79% of 77) had attended two or more secondary schools
- eight in ten children (79%) had a diagnosed or suspected issue related to physical or mental health, neurodivergence or learning disability
- Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) referrals (56%) suggest five times the national rate of mental health issues
- the vast majority of the children (90%) had received a social care intervention
- over half (57%) had a parent with known or suspected previous or current mental health issues
- more than two in five had parent(s) with criminality; one in five (22%) had a parent who had been to prison.

Whilst not an intentional aspect of the sampling criteria, the majority (59%) of the children were Black, Asian or other minority group. Psychologist Guilaine Kinouni (2021) considers how racism and trauma affects those who are Black:

'Those who have experienced more adversities in life tend to be more distressed when faced with racism and social injustice. ... Racial trauma, which as a framework aims to make visible the harm of racism, must be considered beyond the individual. The

intergenerational transmission of trauma that may take place via various mechanisms is likely to contribute to the excess of psychological distress in Black groups.'

This perspective is significant when we consider the disproportionality that exists throughout the justice system and the potential impact of racism on Black and other racialised children.

Some of the conclusions in *Punishing Abuse* highlighted the significant societal burden of high harm and high social and financial cost. The analysis revealed the underlying systemic issues escalating children into the justice system, including:

- that poverty had impacted powerfully and detrimentally on the majority of these children
- the vast majority had suffered abuse or family violence, some having suffered extreme abuse over apparently long periods of time
- potential discrimination and issues of inequality related to a range of factors, including gender, ethnic origin, neurodiversity and migration
- the majority had known or suspected mental or physical health issues; their needs had not always been met
- for the majority of children, the issues they were facing were inter-generational located in the past experiences of their families and communities
- being known to a range of services from a young age, their collective profile across agencies showed systemic failure to meet their needs
- there was clear evidence of educational disenfranchisement and potential lifelong social exclusion
- the underlying causes of the behaviours of many of these children was likely to be child abuse, loss and other adversity and trauma.

Whilst initiatives such as trauma-informed practice and recognising the impact of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) in the youth justice system are very welcome developments, it was argued in *Punishing Abuse* that there was a need for a broader and more radical approach including fundamentally changed ways of working with children, families and communities, alongside system-wide prevention, diversion and decriminalisation of children (see also the earlier Academic Insights papers on [trauma-informed practice](#) by McCartan and on [serious youth violence and ACEs](#) by Gray et al.).

It was against the overwhelming evidence of abuse, loss, adversity and probable trauma that *Punishing Abuse* argued for the need for applying Systemic Resilience both to develop work with individual children and to address the underlying systemic and societal issues that escalate vulnerable children into the youth justice system.

2.2 Enabling Systemic Resilience

Ann Masten (2014b) identified the following as widely reported factors associated with resilience:

- effective care giving and parenting quality
- close relationships with other capable adults
- close friends and romantic partners
- intelligence and problem solving skills
- self control, emotion regulation, planfulness

- motivation to succeed
- self efficacy and self belief
- faith, hope, belief life has meaning
- effective schools
- effective neighbourhoods and collective efficacy.

For many children in the justice system, key elements of the above have either never been present in their lives or have been lost or taken away. Developing Systemic Resilience is about putting the child at the centre and either creating, strengthening or maintaining all elements of the above in ways that build hope and aspiration for the child. At a strategic and policy level, adopting the building of systemic resilience has implications that span a range of services including:

Pre-natal, anti-natal and early years services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • to help foster effective caregiving and help parents develop children's attachment
Education services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • to develop schools and other provision that effectively engages and supports children who have suffered abuse and loss
Health and education programmes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • to help abused and traumatised children develop their learning and thinking systems, emotional regulation and motivation to succeed
Community resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • to help children to develop spiritual and cultural beliefs promoting a sense of self and a sense of community
Neighbourhood resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • to support vulnerable children through relationships with capable adults

The implications for youth justice of adopting a systemic resilience led approach include:

- developing services that place a meaningful relationship with the child and their family at the heart of service provision
- developing the capacity of parents (or carers) to effectively parent the child
- promoting positive relationships for the child in their families, schools and communities
- ensuring the child has access to effective, meaningful and engaging education
- developing the child's self control and emotional regulation
- promoting the child's self belief, self worth and sense of purpose and ambition
- enabling engagement with community resources that promote all of the above.

The very complex needs of this group of children and their families also strongly indicates that any effective response has to be delivered on an inter-agency basis including through a highly resilient, skilled and well-resourced multi-disciplinary team. YOTs are well placed to

develop and respond to this approach. In developing services for children, practitioners need to consider:

- the likely impact on children of abuse, loss and adversity, including on their mental and physical health, access to education and employment, their behaviour, relationships, and ability to engage with services
- the implications of the extent to which the issues for the majority of children are likely to be intergenerational in nature
- that improving outcomes for children is intrinsically linked with improving outcomes for their immediate family.

A key question to reflect upon and consider with the child is: *"What needs to change to enable the child to move forward positively and begin to behave differently?"* Such reflection provides an opportunity to think in a very broad way about the child and the factors in their life that are limiting their opportunities and the changes that need to be made by others including institutions to enable the child to change. It is important to consider the child's understanding of their own situation and what may be limiting or inhibiting their ability to comprehend the wider changes required. The child's own horizons may be limited by their circumstances and it is likely that they will need skilled and sustained help to lift those horizons.

2.3 Exploited and gang-involved children

The majority of children (60%) in *Punishing Abuse* were known or were suspected of having gang involvement, and nearly a third (31%) had been subject to multi-agency referrals as potential victims of child sexual exploitation, including all thirteen girls (see also the earlier [Academic Insights paper 2021/12 on girls and gangs](#) by Jump and Horan).

Gang involvement and criminal and sexual exploitation will almost certainly traumatise or further traumatise a child. Furthermore, the negative impact of exploitative relationships seems to be very likely to reduce resilience by disconnecting children from mutually empowering and mutually empathic relationships (Jordan, 1992). Developing relational resilience is significant for all children but seems to have a particular relevance for children who are exploited. Consequently it can be seen that:

- key risk and protective factors for children outside of their home exist within the exploitative or positive relationships children form with others; this is the case both for risks to the child and risks the child may pose to others
- these relationships may be affected both by the motivations and also the affiliations that the child and those they are in relationship with have with groups and ideologies
- these relationships and the individual and group affiliations change dynamically over time as may ideological affiliations
- promoting systemic resilience and safeguarding children outside their home requires an ongoing assessment of the relationships between the individuals and groups who either pose a risk to the child or provide protective relationships.

Consequently, when thinking about building resilience for children who are being exploited, including through gang involvement, interventions need to be targeted at reducing or removing the negative influence of exploiters and increasing positive protective relationships to increase relational resilience and decrease systemic trauma. This challenge occurs within the complex and shifting dynamic of individuals and groups.

3. Conclusion

Children's offending behaviours may be attributable to the likely changes in their neurological systems and cognitive processes caused by toxic stress from sources such as child abuse or loss of loved ones. Systemic Resilience provides a framework to mitigate the impact of abuse and loss for individual children, and provides a basis for action at a system-wide level to improve outcomes for every child.

Risk of harm and risk of offending, particularly serious offending, have to be understood within the overall context of a child's life. Risk assessment should not simply be based upon immediately identifiable risk factors but should be located within the history of the family and the experiences of the child, as well as within structural issues related to poverty, educational and social exclusion, and the availability and ability to access services.

For the majority of children who are known to YOTs, the issues that they face are likely to be intergenerational in nature. Practitioners always need to consider the likely impact on children of abuse, loss and adversity, including in terms of:

- mental and physical health
- access to education and employment
- behaviours
- relationships
- factors that may affect their ability to engage with services.

Systemic Resilience recognises that the development of resilience is dependent on strengthening the protective factors around the child including within their family, their community, and in the services that are available. Seeing resilience as a systemic response enables a clear link to be created between practice with individual children and both strategic responses and frameworks to prevent crime and offending and address structural factors such as poverty and social exclusion that can traumatise children and create vulnerability to involvement in crime.

Positive personal relationships with an adult other than a parent are a core aspect of recovery from trauma and developing resilience. Exploitative relationships can be seen to be a central feature both for children who have become involved in gangs through criminal exploitation and also children who are being sexually exploited. When thinking about building resilience for children who are being exploited, interventions need to be targeted at reducing or removing the negative influence of exploiters and increasing positive protective and empathic relationships.

The very complex needs of children and their families, evidenced in *Punishing Abuse*, strongly indicates that any effective response has to be delivered on an inter-agency basis through a highly resilient, skilled and well resourced multi-disciplinary team, such as a YOT.

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