08 October 2026

Mr. Paul Frew,
Chair, Justice Committee
C/o Kathy O'Hanlon,
Clerk to the Committee for Justice

Via email: committee.justice@niassembly.gov.uk

Re: Additional information for Committee for Justice

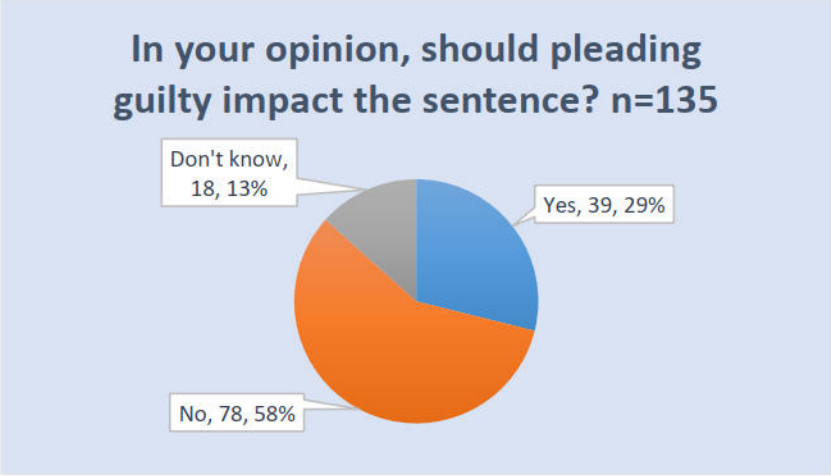
Dear Paul,

I am writing to follow up on our discussions at Committee recently to share some additional, pertinent information as the Committee continue their deliberations regarding the Criminal Justice (Sentencing etc) Bill.

We have this week launched our 2025 Victim Survey report and wanted to highlight some of the findings and feedback from victims on questions we asked in relation to both Early Guilty Pleas and Victim Personal Statements. We also procured a module in the Young Life & Times Survey (YLTS) earlier this year to gauge the views and experiences of young people with the criminal justice system broadly and more specifically with sentencing. We have recently received the findings of this survey from the ARK policy hub based in Queens University Belfast, who conduct the YLTS.

I believe these insights will help inform the Committee's thinking as it works through the existing provisions in the current Bill as well as those provisions that I and others would wish to see included.

Victims responding to our Victim Survey were asked for their views on guilty pleas and whether these should have an impact on sentencing. 29% (n=39) of respondents believe that pleading guilty should impact the sentence. 58% (n=78) believe that it should not impact



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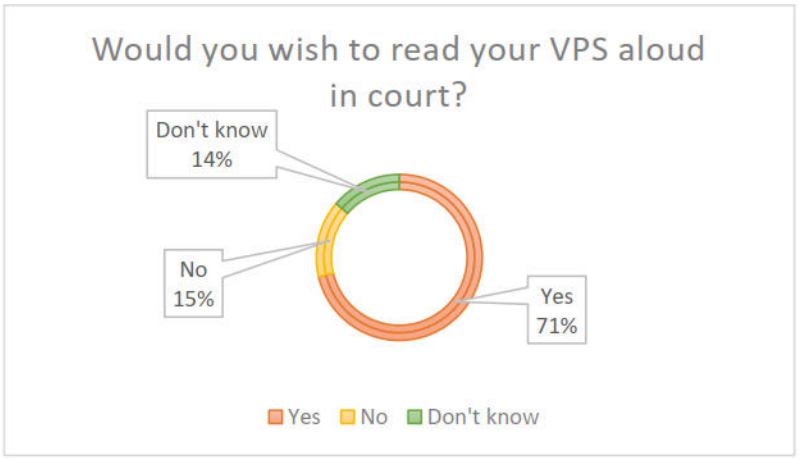
sentencing with 13% (n=18) not sure whether it should or not. Some respondents provided reasons for their response and a sample of these are provided in the Table below:

Victims that believe pleading guilty should impact the sentence	Victims that believe pleading guilty should not impact the sentence
I think a genuine guilty plea with some form of acknowledgement of the crime and the impact on the victim should be taken account of in sentencing. In my case the defendant initially pleaded not guilty and only changed their plea when the evidence against them was overwhelming. They have not demonstrated any real regret or acceptance of wrongdoing and I fine this unacceptable.	*They're either guilty or not guilty of whatever offence & should receive an appropriate sentence.*
Yes but only if they plead guilty at the first opportunity - ie when they're being interviewed by police	*They're guilty and that's that. Whether they plead not guilty or guilty, they're still found guilty. Letting people plead guilty for a lesser charge/less time - makes them feel like they're still in charge. I've had my ex plead guilty to one case then breached it and plead not guilty to the breach because they still felt like they could get away with stuff because that first guilty plea made them get away with it.*
Pleading guilty indicates acceptance that the perpetrator acknowledges the crime. It would have saved a lot of time and discomfort (the cross examination as a witness was particularly grizzly in my case) and these should be acknowledged by a reduction in sentence.	*Pleading guilty should not count as time off a sentence. Criminals plead guilty or not guilty in the advice of their legal teams not because they are remorseful or have a conscience.*
Yes if you plead guilty at the earliest opportunity. Not on the day of the hearings with all the expenses involved and the wasting of police time as they were also in attendance at court.	*In my case the defendant pleaded not guilty for over a year, he was told I was in court to give evidence and still didn't change his plea- he didn't believe I was strong enough to actually go through with it. He waited until the last second where he knew I was going to give my evidence then decided to change to guilty. I do not think he should have been rewarded for this.*

In the 2026 Young Life and Times Survey (YLTS), my office funded ARK to ask questions on young people's experiences of victimisation within the previous two years. In total, 933 16-year-olds completed the questions related to victimisation. These examined: extent and nature of victimisation; reporting and accessing

support; attitudes towards the criminal justice system; and awareness of Victim Charter. The responses provided some valuable insights from young people on the public sentiment towards sentencing. While 44% of young people believe sentences handed down to offenders are too lenient, this rises sharply to 61% among those who have been victims of crime. Three quarters of respondents (75%) see punishment as a key purpose of sentencing, while 64% believe sentencing should deter future offending. By contrast, only 34% see rehabilitation as the primary purpose of sentencing. I attach a complete research update developed by the QUB team based on analysis of the data along with this letter for the Committee's benefit.



Finally, in relation to Victim Personal Statements (VPS) our Victim Survey asked victims whether the Judge read out or referred to their VPS at sentencing. While 37% (n=30) of respondents stated that the Judge either read or referred to their statement, 63% (n=51) stated that the Judge did not do this or that they did not know if the judge did this or not. Victims were also asked whether they would wish to read their VPS aloud in court or have it read out. 71% (n=57) responded yes to this with only 15% (n=12) stating that they would not wish to do this.

I trust this information and insight will be of assistance to Committee members as they work through scrutiny of the Bill.

Kind Regards,

[redacted]

Geraldine Hanna
Commissioner Designate for Victims of Crime

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Research Update

Young People's Experiences of Victimisation

Mary-Louise Corr, Siobhán McAlister and Dirk Schubotz

Being a victim of crime has long-term impacts on children and young people (CYP). Many victims display several negative outcomes related to physical and mental health, reduced educational attainment and increased risk of later criminal engagement (Tura et al., 2026). CYP affected by crime also express concerns about becoming victims and, as a result, report increased anxiety and may change their behaviours to prevent victimisation (YEF, 2024).

A growing body of evidence suggests that CYP are at significant risk of being a victim of crime at some point in their lifetime (Jackson et al., 2016) and of polyvictimisation when multiple experiences of victimisation are reported within a particular timeframe (Tura et al., 2026). In Northern Ireland (NI) police crime records from 2024/25 demonstrated that of crimes where there was a victim, 13% of victims were aged under 18. Young victims were also more likely than adult victims to be victims of violence against the person or of a sexual offence, with 93% of victims aged under 18 having experienced one of these crimes (PSNI/NISRA, 2025).

Policy developments in NI, and elsewhere, increasingly address young people's experiences of victimisation with a focus on facilitating access to swifter justice, in addition to appropriate supports and services. Alongside the Victim Charter (Department of Justice, 2015), which sets out the entitlements and services that victims of crime in NI can expect to receive from a range of service providers, Pillar 5 of the Victims and Witness Strategy NI 2026-2032 (Department of Justice, 2025) focuses on 'Children and Young People'. The Pillar sets out key objectives related to assisting CYP to recover from the impacts of crime, participating in the criminal justice system and ensuring that their best interests and rights are met.

The Office of the Commissioner of Victims of Crime in NI (CVOCNI) funded ARK to ask questions on young people's experiences of victimisation within the previous two years in the 2026 Young Life and Times (YLT) survey. In total, 933 16-year-olds completed the questions related to victimisation. These examined: extent and nature of victimisation; reporting and accessing support; attitudes towards the criminal justice system; and awareness of Victim Charter. Whilst in some categories of victimisation young people may report experiences that may not meet the criteria of a 'crime' and, as such, fall outside of formal police records (e.g. some forms bullying), such experiences are important to measure as they may have long term impacts for children's wellbeing. Additionally, as young people were asked about experiences of victimisation within the previous two years only, we can assume that rates of lifetime victimisation among young people is higher.

Prevalence of crime victims

The majority of 16-year-olds (83%) reported that they had not been a victim of crime in the past two years. Seven per cent of young people had been a victim of crime in the previous two years, a further 8 per cent were unsure if they had been a victim of crime and 2 per cent did not wish to say. 16-year-olds with a disability or long-term illness, those from not financially well-off backgrounds and same-sex attracted 16-year-olds were all more likely to have been a victim of crime within the previous two years. For example, 16-year-olds with a disability or long-term illness were almost three times as likely to say that they had been a victim of crime as those without disability (14% and 5% respectively). However, there were no statistically significant differences between overall experiences of victimisation according to sex, living in a rural/town/urban area or belonging to a minority ethnic group.

Of those who had been a victim, over half had experienced more than one crime within the previous two years, with 36 per cent having been a victim two to three times and 22 per cent having been a victim more than five times (Table 1). It is notable that whilst a minority of young people report being a victim, of those who have been a victim the majority have experienced polyvictimisation within the previous two years. Polyvictimisation was also more likely among crime victims with a disability/long-term illness and same-sex-attracted crime victims.

Table 1: How many times have you been a victim of a crime in the last 2 years? (n; %)

Frequency	n	%
Once	27	30
2-3 times	33	36
4-5 times	11	12
More than 5 times	20	22

Note: Excludes those in the previous questions who said they had not experienced a crime or did not want to say whether they had experienced a crime

Types of crime experienced

Those who had been a victim of crime and those who were unsure if they had been a victim were asked what crime they had experienced (Table 2). Bullying and harassment was the most common crime reported, experienced by over one third (35%) of those who had been a victim of crime. Following bullying and harassment, in-person sexual crimes, hate crime and physical violence were all reported by about one in five of those who had been a victim of crime. All other crimes were reported by fewer than one in 10 of those who had been a victim of crime.

Table 2: Crimes reported by YLT respondents (n; %)

Type of crime experienced	n	%
Bullying or harassment, including cyber-bullying	47	35
In-person sexual offences (such as sexual assault, stalking, upskirting etc.)	28	21
Hate crime (such racism or sectarianism or homophobia)	27	20
Physical violence (e.g. being beaten, punched, pushed, kicked etc.)	25	19
Coercive control / psychological-emotional abuse	11	8
Online sexual abuse (sextortion or other exploitation)	10	7
Criminal damage to your or your family's property, such as damage to your house or your family car	8	6
Theft/burglary	7	5
Financial crimes, such as fraud	6	4
Domestic abuse	5	4
Something else	5	4
I prefer not to say	11	8
I don't think I have been a victim of a crime	33	24

Note: Excludes those in the previous questions who said they had not experienced a crime or did not want to say whether they had experienced a crime

There were some notable gender differences in terms of the crimes experienced. Females were significantly more likely than males to have been a victim of in-person sexual offences (31% and 5% respectively). They were also more likely to have experienced bullying or harassment (37% and 29% respectively), hate crime (22% and 14% respectively) and coercive control/ psychological-emotional abuse (11% and 4% respectively). Males, on the other hand, were significantly more likely than females to have been a victim of physical violence (27% and 12% respectively).

Notable differences were also found in the types of crimes reported by same-sex attracted youth and those with a disability. For example, both same-sex attracted 16-year-olds and those with disabilities were more likely to be a victim of bullying, harassment or cybercrimes as well as in-person sexual offences. Same-sex attracted respondents were almost three times as likely to experience hate crime than their opposite-sex attracted peers. Young people with a disability were four times more likely to report online coercive control/psychological-emotional abuse and three times more likely to report sexual abuse compared to young people without a disability. Those belonging to minority ethnic groups were more likely to report experiencing hate crimes compared to those not belonging to minority ethnic groups (44% compared to 18%).

Uncertainty about victimisation

As noted above, 8 per cent of young people were unsure whether they had been a victim of crime in the previous two years. Additionally, when those who initially reported they had been a victim of a crime and those who stated they were unsure were asked what crimes they had experienced, 24 per cent then stated that they did not think they had been a victim of crime (Table 2). Such responses may suggest a lack of awareness or understanding among young people about what constitutes criminal behaviour. It may also be that CYP do not appreciate behaviours as criminal until they are older or it may be that certain harmful behaviours have been normalized as part of everyday life, something which could be reinforced by adults and professionals in their lives (Children's Commissioner, 2024). Additionally, 16-year-olds who were a member of a minority ethnic group were much more likely to say they were not sure if they had been a victim of crime (11%) which may indicate additional barriers to recognising experiences of victimisation. This points towards a need for clarity and awareness raising among young people about victimisation and harm caused, particularly as a means to supporting them to report personal experiences of victimisation.

Reporting of crimes experienced

Those who had been a victim were asked first if they had reported the crime to the police and then whether they had told anyone else what had happened. Less than one third (32%) of victims reported the crime to the police. This may be due to a number of factors such as thinking that the crime was not serious enough, that they would not be believed or that they did not want to get themselves or someone else into trouble (Children's Commissioner, 2024). It could also be, as findings illustrated above, that young people were unclear about whether what they had experienced constituted a crime. Young victims were more likely to report their experiences to informal sources such as a close friend (62%), family members (58%), or their boy/girlfriend (25%) (Table 3). Around a fifth told a member of school staff what had happened, which may reflect the setting in which the victimisation took place. 10% stated that they had not told anyone what had happened.

Same-sex attracted respondents were much less likely to say they reported the crimes to the police. This suggests additional barriers to formally reporting victimisation for same-sex-attracted 16-year-olds which may be related to a lack of clarity on types of crime (e.g. hate crime), distrust in the police and societal normalisation of some forms of abuse (Russell et al., 2025).

Knowledge of and access to services and supports

The Victim Charter (Department of Justice, 2015) sets out a victims' right to 'expect high quality services' tailored to individuals' needs and aims to ensure that victims receive information, support and protection throughout their experiences of the criminal justice system. It focuses, therefore, on those victims who have reported a crime and whose victimisation is subject to criminal justice processes.

Following an explanation on the Victim Charter, only 3 per cent of all 16-year-olds reported that they had heard about the Charter and 6 per cent were not sure. Those who had been victims of crime, had been victimised multiple times and had reported their victimisation to the police were more likely to have heard about the Charter – although this still related to very few young people. Alongside this lack of awareness, young people rarely accessed supports when victimised. Only 10 per cent of 16-year-olds who had been a victim of crime sought support from organisations (including the police, Women's Aid, CAMHS, Nexus and Nationwide, the latter in the case of financial crime). This suggests a need to more actively communicate information about supports – in particular their relevance to young people, as well as those tailored specifically to young people – and to assist young people to overcome the barriers to accessing support.

Table 3: Respondents saying they told the following people what had happened (n, %)

Person reached out to for support	n	%
A family member	58	58
A close friend	62	62
My boyfriend/girlfriend	25	25
A charity or helpline	<5	*
A doctor or nurse	<5	*
A teacher or other staff member in your school or college	21	21
Someone you trust in your church or religious community	0	0
Other	<5	*
No, I did not report this to anyone	10	10

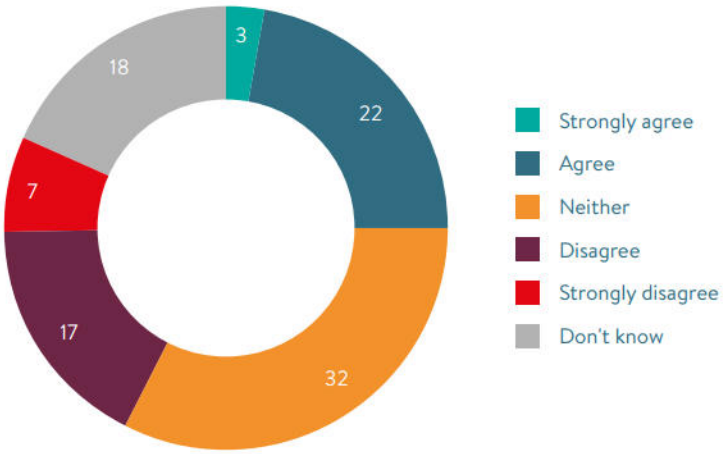
*Due to small sample sizes with these responses, percentages are not reported

Attitudes to the criminal justice system

A key aim of the Victims and Witness Strategy in NI is to increase confidence in the justice system. One quarter (25%) of 16-year-olds agreed or strongly agreed that the criminal justice system is very effective, whereas 26% disagreed or disagreed strongly (Figure 1). About half of young people neither agreed nor disagreed, or responded 'Don't know'. This is, perhaps, not surprising, given the majority of 16-year-olds will not have been in contact with the criminal justice system.

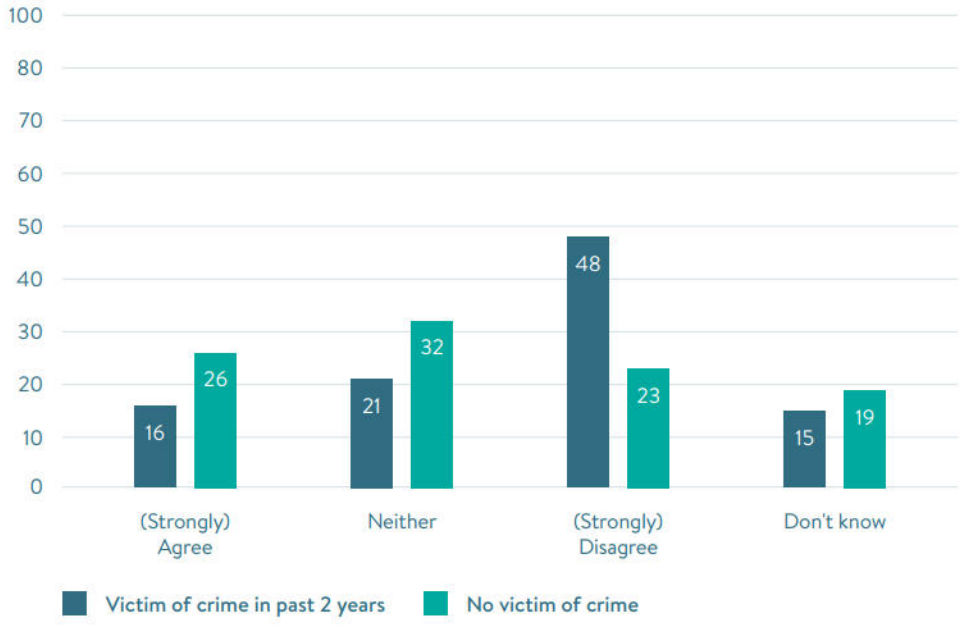
However, attitudes towards the criminal justice system were more negative among 16-year-olds who had been victims, and particularly those who had been a victim multiple times. For instance, nearly half of crime victims disagreed or strongly disagreed that the criminal justice system in NI is very effective compared to 23% of those who had not been a victim (Figure 2).

Figure 1: Respondents agreeing or disagreeing with the following statement: The criminal justice system in Northern Ireland is very effective (%)



Due to rounding, pie chart total does not equal 100%

Figure 2: Respondents agreeing or disagreeing that the criminal justice system in Northern Ireland is very effective, by crime experience (%)



Those who had been a victim were also more likely to disagree that the needs for victims of crimes are prioritised compared to those who had not been a victim (49% and 19% respectively) and those who had been a victim multiple times were even more likely to disagree with the statement. These findings raise questions as to whether contact with the system as a victim shapes negatives views and highlights the importance of engaging with victims to explore the reasons for their dissatisfaction.

Conclusion

The YLT survey provides important insights into the extent and nature of the victimisation of 16-year-olds in NI. Whilst it shows that the majority of 16-year-olds had not experienced a crime in the previous two years, those with a disability or long-term illness, those from not financially well-off backgrounds and same-sex attracted 16-year-olds were more likely to report they had been a victim. Victimisation was also experienced more frequently among those with a disability and same-sex attracted 16-year-olds.

Whilst most crimes young people reported experiencing might be considered everyday forms of victimisation, in-person sexual offences and physical violence were the second and third most frequently reported crimes. The survey findings also reveal some gendered patterns, with females more likely to be victims of sexual offences whilst males were much more likely to have been a victim of physical violence. Overall, people with a disability and same-sex-attracted 16-year-olds were significantly more likely to be exposed to bullying, harassment and cyber-bullying.

The findings demonstrate a level of uncertainty among 16-year-olds as to whether they had been a victim of crime, perhaps because they were unsure that what they experienced constituted a crime or that certain behaviours have become normalised. Reporting to the police was low, particularly among same-sex attracted 16-year-olds, and young people were more likely to seek out informal support rather than access relevant organisations. Young people's awareness of the Victims Charter, and thus their rights to support and services if victims, was relatively low. Perhaps such documents feel inaccessible and learning could be taken from the child-friendly version of the Victim Code in England and Wales.

Whilst half of young people did not indicate strong views towards the criminal justice system, those who had been a victim of crime were more likely to express negative views that the criminal justice system is ineffective and that the needs of victims are not prioritised. These findings suggest that young people require more support to recognise the victimisation which they may be experiencing. They highlight a need to further support young people to overcome barriers to reporting victimisation and accessing appropriate services. For those whose victimisation is subject to criminal investigation, it seems that more communication is required in relation to their rights and available supports.

Key Points:

- The majority of 16-year-olds had not been a victim of crime in the previous two years.
- Where young people had been a victim, it was more likely that they had been a victim more than once in-the previous two years.
- 16-year-olds with a disability or long-term illness, from a not financially well-off background and same-sex attracted 16-year-olds were more likely to be a victim.
- Bullying and harassment was the most commonly reported crime category but a fifth of victims also experienced in-person sexual offences, hate crime and physical violence.
- Levels of reporting a crime to police was low, particularly among same-sex attracted young people.
- Many young people were unsure if they had been a victim of crime. They were also unaware of the Victim Charter and few sought support via organisations.

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Authors

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The Young Life and Times (YLT) survey is carried out annually and records the opinions of 16-year-olds in Northern Ireland on a range of issues. YLT is a joint project of Queen's University Belfast and Ulster University, and provides an independent source of information on what young people think. In total 1,965 16-year olds took part in the 2026 YLT survey. For more information, visit the survey website at www.ark.ac.uk/ylt

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