USER VOICE
ONLY OFFENDERS CAN STOP RE-OFFENDING

HMICFRS
His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services

Care not criminalisation

Young people's experiences of serious youth violence

Contents

Summary 1

Methodology 3

Our findings 8

- Factors young people believe make them vulnerable to serious youth violence 8
- The impact 16
- Young people's experiences of reporting, safeguarding, interventions and support from police and other services 17

Solutions 26

- Lived experience 26
- Care not criminalisation 27
- Alternatives to violence 28
- Further research 28

Case studies 30

Conclusion 33

Summary

This report presents the voices of young people who have experienced serious youth violence. The principal objectives of this project were to understand young people's experiences of reporting to the police, safeguarding, interventions, and the support they receive from the police and other services. We examined the factors that made the young people vulnerable to serious youth violence and the facilitators and barriers they experience when it comes to accessing support.

User Voice spoke to 13 young people aged between the ages of 18 and 24 who were in prison, in young offender institutions or on probation. Overall, we found that the young people we spoke to had extensive experience, both as the perpetrators and targets of serious violence.

Between the ages of 14 and 17, many of the young people we spoke to had been stabbed on numerous occasions, shot, attacked with hammers, assaulted with baseball bats, and run over.

They had often been the target first, and had then often become involved in crime and violence. Some spoke of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), but most didn't want to talk about the effect these incidents had had on them.

Many of the young people we spoke to had faced many challenges in early life. The majority were poor, had been surrounded by crime and violence, lived in social care, and been criminalised as children. Many of them described feeling let down repeatedly by the people and systems that were meant to care for them.

They said that their friends are like family and offer the protection and support they need. Serious violent incidents often relate to earning respect, drugs or money, or to gaining control in specific postcode areas occupied by other gangs or groups.

The young people we surveyed have no confidence in the police and other services. Through numerous negative experiences with these systems, they believe that the police can't protect or help them. There were several accounts of manipulative practices, blame, assault, and police putting them in danger, for example, by dropping them in their 'enemy's' area.

There were mixed views on the support offered by the youth offending teams (YOTs). And some of the young people we spoke to said that YOTs, prison services and probation services all failed to consider the life-threatening nature of living in, or passing through, the wrong area.

The young people told us they weren't always offered or didn't always accept support. They felt that those with 'perfect lives' couldn't understand them and therefore couldn't help them. Some courses offered were considered tick-box exercises offering unrealistic solutions to complex problems.

They stated that they felt set up to fail. They also said that they thought that initiatives led by those with lived experience of serious youth violence, care rather than criminalisation, and alternative means to earn a living would prevent them from committing crime or help them more.

Methodology

User Voice

User Voice is a nationwide UK charity created and run by people with lived experience of the criminal justice system. We exist to reduce offending by working with the most marginalised people in prisons and on probation. We make sure they have the opportunity to be heard, and to influence change.

User Voice conducts peer-led research across the prison and probation service throughout the UK. We give a voice to over 40,000 people per year, including nearly 23,000 in 2020/2021 despite restrictions imposed during the pandemic.

Our values are:

- **Democratic** – engaging large numbers and representing the diversity of people on probation.
- **User-led** – facilitated and led by people with lived experience of being on probation.
- **Independent** – as we do not deliver services, we don't have an agenda to filter what we hear.
- **Solution-focused** – we support people not only to raise problems, but to present solutions.

We are proud to help young people to voice their experiences and put forward their own solutions.

The project

In 2018, the Government issued a *Serious Violence Strategy* based on four key elements: "Tackling county lines and misuse of drugs, early intervention and prevention, supporting communities and partnerships, and an effective law enforcement and criminal justice response."

His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) independently assesses the effectiveness and efficiency of police forces and fire and rescue services, in the public interest. They use their expertise to interpret the evidence and make recommendations for improvement. HMICFRS was asked to carry out an inspection on how well police forces address serious youth violence.

In January 2022, HMICFRS commissioned User Voice to conduct research on the lived experience of those who have committed, and been on the receiving end, of serious youth violence.

In particular HMICFRS wanted to know:

- What factors young people believe make them vulnerable to serious youth violence?
- What are young people's experiences of reporting incidents of serious youth violence, safeguarding, interventions and support from the police and other services?
- What facilitators and barriers have young people experienced in receiving or seeking support?
- What are young people's experiences and perceptions of racial disproportionality in relation to police approaches to serious youth violence?

This research defines serious youth violence in terms of individuals under the age of 25 perpetrating and/or being on the receiving end of the crimes in the *Serious Violence Strategy*, including homicide, knife crime, gun crime and areas of criminality where serious violence or its threat is inherent, such as in gangs and county lines drug dealing. The strategy also includes emerging crime threats faced in some areas of the country such as the use of corrosive substances as a weapon.

The findings from this research have contributed to the HMICFRS inspection report, *An inspection of how well the police tackle serious youth violence*.

How we gave young people a voice

Because User Voice staff have had experience of the criminal justice system, and many of them have had direct experience of dealing with youth offending services, they are able to quickly and effectively build trusting relationships with service users. Through peer research, we can gain the perspective of young people and get their honest and full opinions.

How we found participants

User Voice used snowball sampling and purposive sampling approaches. We gained access to three prisons and young offender institutions and handed out leaflets and information sheets on the wings. User Voice speaks to thousands of people on probation each year. When we spoke to someone aged 18 to 24, we gave them an information sheet and established if they met the correct criteria to be included in this piece of research.

We also contacted User Voice council members throughout the country and used our networks of volunteers and staff, as well as our relationships with third parties to access potential participants.

We specifically spoke to young people aged 18 to 24 about their experiences of serious youth violence. We didn't speak to anyone under the age of 18 because of ethical implications.

Our interviews with young people

We conducted semi-structured face-to-face interviews with young people. Trained peer researchers held conversations with young people and recorded their responses.

We believe it was vital to adopt a conversational interview approach, as it made it easier for our staff to discuss this very serious and complex topic with young people. This approach meant that rich, high-quality data was collected in a way that accommodated the specific needs of the young people we spoke to.

The interviews took place in the young person's cell or a meeting room, without a prison officer or probation officer present.

Who we spoke to

We spoke to 13 young people. Of those, 11 were currently in custody and 2 were on probation.

The young people we spoke to described extensive experiences of serious violence. Most had been on the receiving end and had also been the aggressor on multiple occasions.

All but one young person had stabbed someone and most had been stabbed themselves. Half reported shooting someone and the majority spoke of having firearms or of firearms being used in altercations. One young person discussed the use of petrol bombs and another explained that he had been run over many times.

Some of the young people we spoke to couldn't always recall the most violent events they had experienced. This was because they had experienced so many of them:

> "My right hand [friend]'s been shot once and stabbed 23 times on separate occasions."
> **(Male, 24)**

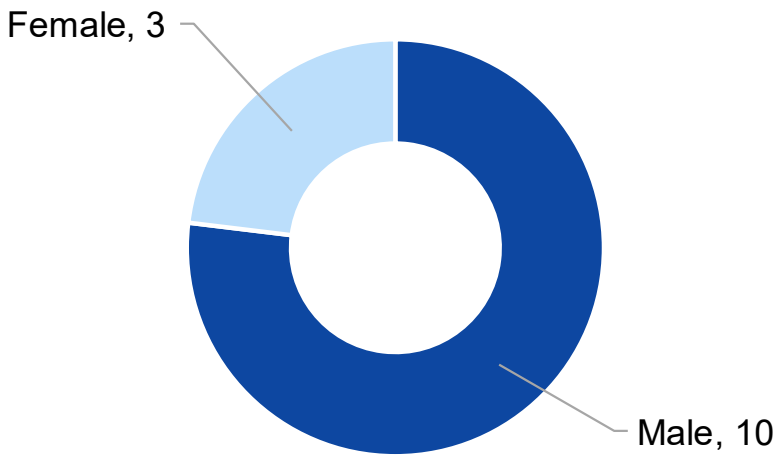
> "First time we got stabbed was when I was 14 next time was 17, I got shot when I was 17, next time he got shot he was 19."
> **(Male, 24)**

> "There's loads of things happen all the time. Obviously when I turned 15, I got stabbed twice, I got scars all on my legs and my a**. I got stabbed on my a**."
> **(Male, 18)**

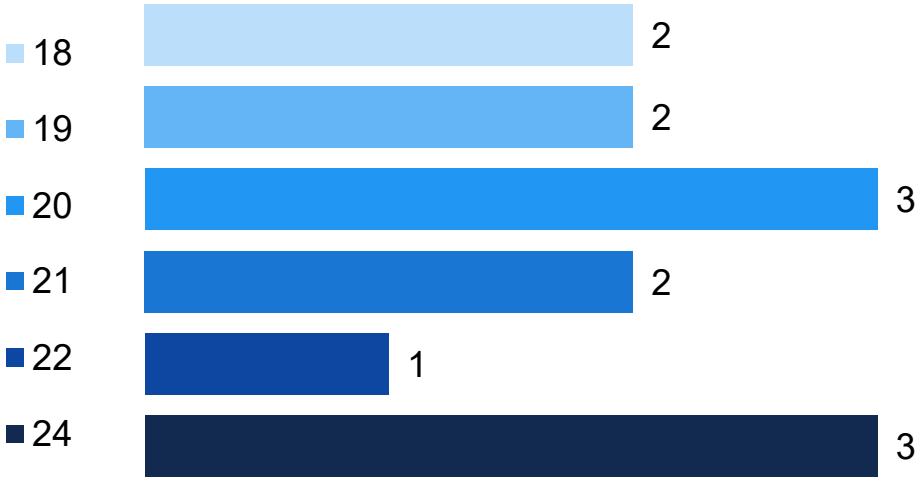
"Yeah, they're the main ones I can remember, like getting stabbed." **(Male, 18)**

Demographics of who we spoke to

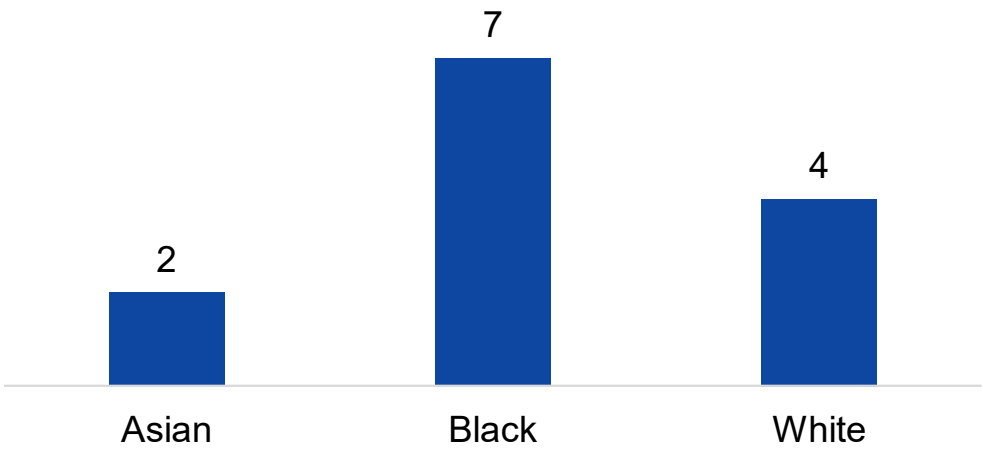
Gender



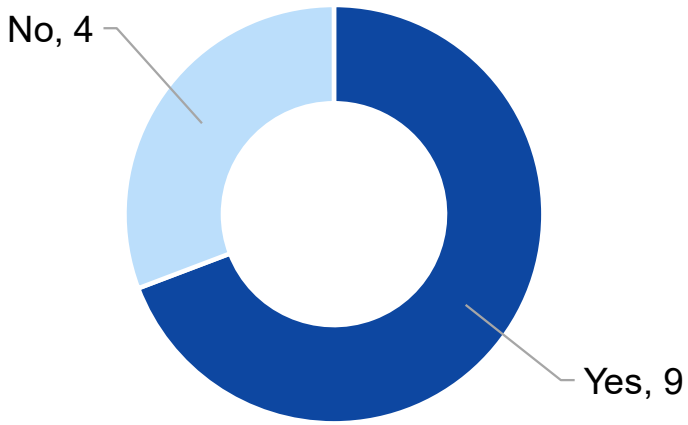
Age



Ethnicity



Have been in a care home



Our findings

Factors young people believe make them vulnerable to serious youth violence

Postcodes, poverty, community and crime

Most of the young people we spoke to were from disadvantaged areas where crime and postcode wars were considered the norm. Many spoke of family members who were involved in crime or in prison:

> "It was a gang thing, the people that came were the people that had issues with the people from where I'm from. I was like the weak link where I've got family members that are well known in the area. For me, being like my brothers' little sister, that's like a point to them, to the people that beef my brothers it's like 'cool we got your little sister', so I feel like I was like the bait, the example that they was trying to prove. It wasn't even like I specifically had done anything to them."
> **(Female, 20)**

> "It was two different sides, when I was young the postcode and that. He's from one side, I'm on the other side."
> **(Male, 22)**

> "My brother got convicted for selling drugs … the one younger than him started doing knife crime robberies … third brother on the run."
> **(Male, 20)**

Many described themselves as poor, and spoke of needing money and of the embarrassment of being poor. Some described seeing others make good money selling drugs and noted that there weren't any options for them to get a job:

> "You will do anything at 13 for money … amongst kids then you will take the … out of the poorest person. It's embarrassing. It's not nice. It sounds bad to say, no one wants to feel embarrassed, embarrassed of their own family."
> **(Male, 24)**

> "People come from poverty they don't know how to get a job, you know what I mean? Sometimes they get roped into it."
> **(Male, 22)**

> “Like out of town, like out of county lines basically. So yeah, I’ll do that. I was like ‘yeah, I’ll have clothes on my back, nice clothes on my back’. I’ve known people do county lines that come back with three, four grand innit. And I’m there like ‘yeah, that could be me’. So, I went and done it, that’s happened innit.”
> **(Male, 18)**

> “I used to look up the road out the window and there’s loads of people in nice cars and listening to music, nice clothes and motorbikes and I would say, ‘I want to be like that one day innit’. And then I’ve done it.”
> **(Male, 21)**

One young person spoke explicitly about how society looked down on her community and this prevented her from gaining employment:

> “Society look down on that side of life. High morality do you know what I mean? Like you’re just a piece of … They don’t see how you’re living in that lifestyle. Nobody else understands me, they’re all we’ve got, we have to stick together, but that’s not true. There’s certain guys who can’t go to an interview up town because they’re going to look down on them, so their only thing is ‘let me go make some money’, so I think there’s so many different things.”
> **(Female, 18)**

You’re a target

Some of the young people we spoke to described themselves as being initially targeted in school or in their communities. Some said this led them to becoming more seriously involved in violence and crime. Others described being set up by people who they thought were their friends or acquaintances. They said that this pushed them into “not caring” anymore and becoming more involved in violent and criminal activities.

One young person described being set up by his employer so that he would be indebted to him:

> “I got robbed and I was like 15 or something, by some like seven foot, big Somalian guy innit. I got robbed by him, I got stabbed in my like chest thing innit … I was in the house, I reckon, because I went to county lines for a Somalian and in the area that I was at, there was no Somalians in the area. And I somehow got robbed by a Somalian. You know what I mean? I reckon he got me robbed so I’d work for him more and more and more, you know what I mean? Like, yo, you’re in debt now. You’re not getting paid innit.”
> **(Male, 18, who was 14 at the time of the incident)**

Others described a general threat of violence in their area that meant they were always a potential target:

> "Yeah, yeah if I'm being honest yeah, I did actually yeah probably at school when I was young, getting picked on when I was young and obviously it's turned me into a horrible person, I was a horrible person."
> **(Male, 22)**

> "The first ever time but not serious time was when I was a kid, obviously I was a kid, I think I was 7 or 8, a couple boys on the estate well obviously they were from school, a couple of them done me with a baseball bat and then yeah growing up I turned violent when I was 15."
> **(Male, 20)**

> "If you're walking on the streets, you're a target, that's what it is, you're a target, you're either a target for the police or you're a target for these gang members."
> **(Female, 20)**

> "So, it was my friend and we was alright and she set me up, so the situation was we'd been from a specific area so she started messing with people who we had issues with. So yeah, like she called me one day and we was close, so I thought 'yeah it's alright'. She told me to come link her, come meet up with her, so I did and when I did there was like 40 people there and they literally just jumped me, some girls had like a hammer. I literally got battered, I got my arm broke. Bare … happened ummm … they robbed me and yeah like [in] that situation I thought, do you know what, I had this … this mentality. I didn't really care anymore. I was just trying to get anything because before then I wasn't so involved, do you know what I mean? Like I was around people but it was more of a friendship thing. I wasn't really taking it on like this is what I need to do the gang mentality or whatever, it weren't even like that. I was just there but because I was there, she just drawn me into that situation and set me up, do you know what I mean? So yeah."
> **(Female, 20, who was 14 at the time of the incident)**

Care doesn't care

Of the young people we spoke to, 9 out of 13 had been in care. All recounted negative experiences, describing a system that didn't care for their emotional wellbeing. They had been taken away and alienated from their families and moved across the country to areas that were hostile or foreign to them. They were placed with people who had no understanding of their lives and couldn't, or didn't want to, connect with them. By the age of 16, at least 3 were in semi-independent accommodation, living alongside 18-to-80-year-olds who were heavily involved in drugs and crime. Others moved between relatives, friends, care homes, hostels, and prison:

> “100 percent you lot took me off my mum when I was 14, banned me going to my area so I couldn’t see my mum for ages. Then when I turned 18, I was in jail when I turned 18 so when I got home there was no support, no structure and I didn’t have a relationship with my parents no more.”
> **(Male, 24)**

> “So, I went into care when I was 15 because, long story short, I went missing. So, through that, me going missing, it basically turned into I got held [in a] hostage situation, I was gone for eight weeks, nobody knew where I was … the police had turned up they took me into care, they didn’t let me see my family. After everything that happened, they took me into care because they felt like my behaviour was too reckless, I been involved in too much stuff, I weren’t going to school for the fear of being exploited.”
> **(Female, 20)**

> “I don’t know innit, I don’t really know. I felt like it was prison just to be away from anyone. They don’t speak English basically they speak Welsh, the first six months I was there I spoke a tiny bit of English … I don’t think they let me out for a really long time.”
> **(Male, 20)**

> “I was in a hostel at 15 that was age 18 to 80 with all smoke heads, drug dealers and no support, no structure, nothing to do, nowhere to go, no school, no nothing, just me here and oh because you got a bed and you can lock your door you can make it happen.”
> **(Male, 24)**

> “Here’s an old lady with a full fridge, someone you cannot relate to.”
> **(Male, 21)**

The level of care the nine young people received from social care workers ranged from being described as “pointless” to reported incidents of abusive behaviour. Two young people noted that social care workers simply stopped engaging with them:

> “My care worker used to take me to McDonalds and buy me cigarettes, talk nonsense for five minutes, then leave.”
> **(Male, 21)**

> “Yeah one of the … see if I was to hit one of them, like a carer, ‘cause I was in a care home innit. I’ve hit one of them before and then they’ll hit you as well and I was like 13 or 12. And if you spat on one of them or something or slapped one of them they’d like punch you and … I don’t think you should do that to a 14-year-old.”
> **(Male, 20)**

> “I didn’t even, with care, I didn’t stop engaging with them, they stopped engaging with me. When I was in prison, for a while I used to get letters and £50 a month or something like that. I used to get letters like ‘hello I’m your new care worker’ and something like that and six months later I get another one and in that time I’d get like £20 a week and that was sent to my account. God knows from who and where. Then I got home on Monday had a meeting with my care worker and it was to tell me he was no longer engaging with me and that I’m fine.”
> **(Male, 20)**

Young criminals

By 12 years of age, most of the people we spoke to felt criminalised and had built up a bank of negative interactions with the police that would fuel their distrust and aversion to police into young adulthood. These negative interactions became more frequent as they moved into their mid-teens and became more involved in crime and violence:

> “100 percent, 100 percent in their head I was made that way. How old was I? Fourteen, so I could get my paperwork out, now they’ve got attempted murder on there from when I was a 14-year-old kid. I was never convicted of it so why have you got attempted murder on there? You actually feel like I was out here trying to kill people at 14 years old, I wasn’t. It’s not what was going on, there was lots going on in the area and lots was happening.”
> **(Male, 22)**

One young person said that this early criminalisation followed him throughout his life and, regardless of guilt or convictions, the offender assessment system would negatively affect his future:

> “Yeah, because I’ve been arrested since I was a kid and it just gets worse over the years, more violent.”
> **(Male, 20)**

Almost all had been with YOTs and there were some mixed views on whether YOTs were helpful or not. A number of the young people noted that they were taken out by a YOT or did activities in their early teens, such as boxing:

> “I’ve always been on a youth offending team. I’ve never not been on one. Since the age of like 13, I’ve been with 30 youth offending teams.”
> **(Male, 20)**

> “No, the only thing I can think of as support, yeah but it’s not really support, yeah is the punishment from youth offending team but it was more of a punishment really.”
> **(Male, 21)**

However, one young person recounted that the YOT had put his life in danger by enforcing orders that put him in locations that he couldn't safely go to:

> "Yeah, all of that don't punish people for being broke, if you can actually take in that there's so much going on in people's lives you're just adding to the stress. You start sending people to YOT and giving them 25 orders and forcing them to go to school, you don't know you're forcing them to go to a school where they've got 100 problems and every time they walk back from school they got to go through an area they don't want to be in, instead of going, 'alright what's actually the problem, let's move you over here, this is where you go to school, here's a bus card this is how you get here this is what you do'."
> **(Male, 24)**

This wasn't isolated to YOTs – some young people described how the police, prisons, probation, social care, or schools didn't consider the life-threatening nature of putting these young people in rival areas:

> "How can you make me live here [enemy's area] … I'm a high-ranking gang member … you have risked my life for three months."
> **(Male, 24)**

> "You send me to prisons where there's 16 of my enemies and act like it's not a problem. Put me on wings with people who on the streets will shoot and stab at each other but in here I'm supposed to believe you're going to keep me safe because there's a nicking being threatened when the reality is, I keep myself safe."
> **(Male, 22)**

The young people we spoke to believed that children should be diverted from the criminal justice system, authorities should establish the root cause of the behaviour and they should develop a better approach to deal with it. They feel the root cause of their behaviour is never questioned or addressed because "no one cares."

> "Pay more attention at that age and not bundle people into these young criminals because when you're 10 or you're 16, you can still be a kid. When you're 10, diverting yourself into better ways is a lot easier than when you're 16 and you've been doing the stuff for 6 years and the only thing you know is yourself, and the police mean nothing to you other than stop and searches and arrests."
> **(Male, 24)**

That's my family

While the young people often had fractured relationships with their family, they felt their friends had their back and acted as a proxy family. Their friends offered a level of security and a means to earn the money that their parents didn't have. Some described their group as "like a family" or noted how their friends had been there for them when their parents hadn't:

> “My dad wants me to move to Scotland with him when I come out of jail but [what] I said to him was, ‘I don’t really want to put my dad before my friends’, because my, my dad’s not really been there for me.”
> **(Male, 21)**

> “If my mum and dad [had] given me that stable life that I needed you never know maybe I wouldn’t be here right now.”
> **(Male, 22)**

> “Need some proper attention, way I treat my young G’s, you need money, electric, can phone my phone and I’ll sort it out, proper older brother, someone who can actually deal with it rather than superficially.”
> **(Male, 24)**

> “They can’t protect me, they can’t protect my family, and the same people they’re asking me to snitch on are the same people that look after me, do you know what I mean? To me, gang isn’t this thing everyone thinks it is, when you grow up in a certain area it’s culture, it’s the way you live, so as an area you’re a community so the people who they would say is a gang they’re like my brothers, do you know what I’m saying? So, it’s beyond this label of gang, that’s my family. So yeah, it’s just never a situation where I’d put anyone in.”
> **(Female, 18)**

> “I didn’t need to carry a knife … I was looking at my older friends and I was thinking like ‘yeah everyone’s got this’, like them lot all had like their guns and … and I thought oh the closest thing to that was a knife so I’ll carry this instead.”
> **(Male, 19)**

They offered each other a ‘no explanation needed’ type of support, throwing themselves into fights with little knowledge of why or who they were fighting.

> “Don’t even know what really sparked in the club, to this day I don’t really know. I’ve never really enquired, just there’s problems. I don’t really know much more than that when the altercation started, I just got myself involved straight away … I was drunk and that the lot tried to attack me, I had my knife on me got my knife out and I cut two of them.”
> **(Male, 24)**

> “I’ve got friends that have created serious violence and not once been touched in their lives but they do it on the back of us, like I got stabbed so bro went over and kicked it or he got stabbed so I went over and whatever. It’s nothing to do with what happened to me it’s just our moral code, ‘you can’t do that to my brother’, you feel me, but my personal agreement about this personal situation.”
> **(Male, 24)**

> “I’ll do whatever I have to do for them over helping anyone else, so I don’t know, it’s just like, I don’t know, it’s kind of loyalty.”
> **(Male, 20)**

Money and respect

Much of the violence in the lives of the young people that we spoke to revolves around gaining or not losing respect. Living in volatile environments, and not having the option to walk away without losing face or their life, some of the young people didn’t feel like they had a choice.

Some of the young people shared their experiences of serious violence with us:

> Young person: “Those that are higher up, they don’t need respect, they just do ya dirty ‘cause they want to. It was an altercation innit, I got off the bus walking to this hotel thing and he just started an altercation.”
> **(Male, 21)**

> User Voice: “What was it [the violence] over?”
> Young person: “Was stupid, I think I barged into him or something by accident and he started saying stuff to me and I started saying stuff to him and turned it into a bit of a fight and then I stabbed him, it was stupid innit.”
> **(Male, 21)**

> Young person: “No, do you know what, too much things have happened in my life, I’ve lost a lot. As much as people may look at [it] like bruv what’s straps on the street that’s all you earn is respect, but respect don’t buy you a yard, do you know what I mean? You’ll sit in jail with respect, but for me I’m already respected as a person. I don’t need to earn respect on the streets, I’ve lost so much being in jail and on the streets over the years and what’s happened to me. I just want to move on with my life but it’s difficult and it’s so hard and this is where society needs to change like their approach on how they view gangs and certain areas because for me it’s where I grew up.”
> **(Female, 20)**

Beyond respect, violence is motivated by money, drugs, postcodes and the need to remove competition. Several of the young people had been attacked and robbed and had attacked and robbed people they were in competition with. One young person noted that they only targeted those involved in crime as they knew they wouldn’t or couldn’t go to police:

> “I was just, I wasn’t going to take his car. I wasn’t intended to shoot him. I didn’t mean to shoot him innit, I just wanted to take his weed and his phone so there’s one less shotter on the streets innit. You know what I mean?”
> **(Male, 21)**

"Selling crack, you know that's what I'm in prison for now, so obviously let's say you're one side and I don't know you're from [location] but I'm from [same location] too and I've done business down there and we've end up crossing paths, you're making more money than me and I'm not happy about it so…"
(Male, 20)

"Yeah, like you say, like when you were younger, you know, when you sold weed to someone else, there's a little bit of a rival there innit, I've ordered the box from him and obviously I've met him. Okay. I box off your honour. He came in his car and that and I told him, I pulled a gun out on him and I told him to get out of his car or not. He said 'no'. So, I shot him and dragged him out of the car. And I stamped on his hand a couple of times and that obviously my co-d [co-defendant] jumped in with me and then he just drove off and yeah."
(Male, 18, who was 16 at the time of the incident)

"Yeah, for nothing but it escalates when you've tried to stab him and he's tried to stab you and you've tried to shoot him and he's tried to shoot you, doesn't matter what it's about no more it's just on."
(Male, 24)

"I just used to think like 'I know it's bad, but if I want something I'll get it', like, obviously I've never like, see like, rob people. I don't rob civilians, I just like, see like, drug dealers, I rob them because they're not going to ring the police."
(Male, 22)

The impact

According to the young people we spoke to, the level of violence experienced, as either the perpetrator or the target, has a significant impact on the young person. A number of the young people discussed PTSD or extreme paranoia. However, most didn't want to talk about these types of problems. One young person said that young boys and men don't talk to anyone, so it "builds up inside them":

"That was like where the real, my PTSD came from, like do you know what I'm saying? I used to fight, I used to scrap, I used to use things, but I never stabbed nobody, do you know what I'm saying? But that was like where it got real and where I thought 'yeah this is going to get real' because now you've actively, like, I've been jumped before and you lot used hammers and … but now it's like, you stabbed me so it's more serious now."
(Female, 20)

"To be honest, yeah, I suffer with severe paranoia, yeah, so I've only been touched a couple of times. But I wouldn't even talk about the times I've suffered serious violence. I'll talk about times when I'm making it very clear that the potential for me to die is imminent."
(Male, 24)

Young people's experiences of reporting, safeguarding, interventions and support from police and other services

No comment

Following a serious violent incident, whether the young person committed the act or was on the receiving end of it, the young people told us they don't speak to police and reported they felt they don't receive any support:

> "They've done the opposite, not even just in the context of my life. People I know have been burgled and have nothing good to say about the police, people have been raped have nothing good to say about the police, people I know have been abused as kids have had nothing good to say about the police, their protocols and their systems are structured tick boxes, they're not structured to actually help individuals."
> **(Male, 24)**

From the young people's experience, there was no point or benefit to reporting and co-operating with police as the issue was often 'bigger than them'. The only possible outcome was being labelled a 'snitch' and becoming a target:

> "Nothing, in all honesty, nothing, because the real, like, what can they do? Even if they came and arrested people there's still a thousand other people who would of came back and retaliated. It's not an isolated incident, do you know what I'm saying? Because it could stem into so many different things. They're not going to take me and my family away because of that situation. Even if they did other people would still get the brunt of it so it's an issue that is bigger than just me and the people who done it so…"
> **(Female, 20)**

> "Safety and rehab mean nothing to them I promise you. I've gone home before and you've made me live in my enemy's area."
> **(Male, 24)**

> "Because like, pffttt, obviously I can't go to the police and say to them this happened because everything else behind it is like I'm bringing other things into it, so, like, the core of the issue is postcode beef, you see what I'm saying? I'm not going to them to go snitch on guys. The issue would've got bigger than what happened to me so, yeah, it just, I never really had that mentality, I literally just rode out the injuries, got on with it."
> **(Female, 18)**

> “You know from the minute I was arrested, yeah, if you get arrested or something and if you tell the truth you’re going to get called a grass and if I said anything at the police station, yeah, I would’ve been called a grass, then I could be in custody and being terrorised all my life in jail, if they had some sort of like, that, yeah it would have helped everyone in general. Like nowadays all these young people are getting stabbed there’s growing violence for every business.”
> **(Male, 21)**

As the perpetrator, ‘no comment’ was always the only option taken. If they were violently attacked, they didn’t report it because they simply had no confidence in the police’s ability or desire to protect and help them:

> “Yeah, my whole life yeah, yeah, my whole life [it’s been no comment] unless it’s just me, yeah, that’s been arrested, just me on a case and it’s not involving other people then I could do a prepared thing.”
> **(Male, 22)**

> “Yeah, it’s bigger than that at this point, it’s bigger than the two people actively done something, there’s thousands of them. Same thing as there’s bigger than me as the victim and the few people that’s involved, it’s bigger than that so regardless [of] whether I go to the police or not, they can’t protect no one, and so it just makes the situation worse.”
> **(Female, 20)**

The reasons expressed for the lack of confidence in the police are based on prior experience and having witnessed how the police have treated other people. The young people described how they felt manipulated, blamed, put in danger and assaulted.

Manipulated

Some felt that the police were always trying to trick them: they said that they didn’t think the police were after them but wanted to get information out of them on other people. This put the young person in serious danger and made them suspicious of everything the police were doing:

> “Yeah, um, to be honest, like, at the police station it’s always been ‘we know who you’re involved with we know your links’. Like, it’s never been me and I feel like they’ve never tried to come, it’s never been them trying to come for me. I feel like they’re always trying to use me as the bait, do you know what I’m saying? ‘So tell us a bit about this person’ and every time it’s been incidents, majority of the times it’s not just me and every time I’ve been arrested it’s been fights, like violent things like gang violent.”
> **(Female, 20)**

> “Yeah, like, but they’re manipulating me but luckily for me I was kinda headstrong and I didn’t because I could’ve end up losing my life a million times if I sang to the police. Nobody would’ve saved me or protected me, but for me it’s not in me to do that.”
> **(Female, 18)**

> “[Police] tell us ‘don’t worry it wouldn’t come onto you everything will be anonymous’, but it’s a lie … but then they’ll threaten you, like, if you don’t it’s all going to come on to you.”
> **(Male, 21)**

Blamed

The young people we spoke to described many instances when they were treated as guilty, arrested after they were attacked, or blamed when they showed signs of PTSD:

> “Well, I asked the same thing to a firearms squad unit when they were on our street and do you know what they said? ‘Innocent people don’t get shot’. That was his words, ‘innocent people don’t get shot’.”
> **(Male, 19)**

> “They’ve not given me a chance to hear me out they’ve just believed off evidence, evidence is okay but if you’ve not tagged the evidence to the right person then that evidence is … you got to get to the right person that’s how the shoe fits.”
> **(Male, 24)**

> “Everyone around me recognised … that I was being weird, it wasn’t right. That was the PTSD, the doctors and stuff, they just tell you it’s your fault.”
> **(Female, 20)**

> “They put me like under that umbrella to be, like, ‘oh trouble’ so they never took it serious when that was happening.”
> **(Male, 20)**

We asked young people about their experience of police investigations:

> User Voice: “What was your experience of the police investigation?”
> Young person: “Useless … they didn’t look into it at all. They had me covered in blood that was it.”
> **(Male, 24)**

> User Voice: “And that was it because the other lot didn’t get arrested at all.”
> Young person: “They didn’t get arrested at all, they took victim statements from the other lot, they made their mind up on the situation straight away, there was no point of innocence at any point.”
> **(Male, 24)**

"I remember obviously I used to go visit my mum and that, as I say, was for a weekend, but there was this like a, a gang revenge sort of thing came to my mum's yard innit … and obviously they ran to my mum's house, grabbed a baseball bat, the others he had a machete innit. They was young, like four or five people innit, and I was, I've just run out the back door, jumped over the fence and that and now, I'm not gonna lie to you, I got beat up innit. Obviously the police was called and that, and I got arrested for it."
(Male, 19)

"I know one kid that grow up from school and his lifestyle is totally different now. He's a good boy, yeah. I'm close with him, yeah. He's one of my pals but he don't do what I do, yeah. He got both his legs snapped because of his older brother and when the police come and see him they basically said it's your own fault because he's your brother duh duh duh duh duh and they [the police were] saying to him 'you want to help' so cool they're in the hospital being around them [him] and when he's getting discharged he's going straight back to where he lives so it could happen to him again."
(Male, 22)

Abuse of power

Most of the young people we interviewed felt that the police used too much force or abused their power in some way. There were numerous accounts of being beaten up by police and one young person was allowed to provide a statement after stabbing someone in self-defence while underage, highly intoxicated and without the presence of an adult:

"Yeah, [I was] very drunk when I gave the statement. Yeah, I reckon I could've got not guilty on the whole thing but 'cause of the way the statement was made because I was drunk … I was bang to right on two attempted murders or two section 18s at least, which is a lot of years, so I was just trying to put mitigation forward because I wasn't in my right mind. As soon as I got sober and realised you can't just attack me, attack people. Everyone has the right to defend themselves. My only offence was carrying an offensive weapon. Using the offensive weapon in my opinion shouldn't have been a crime because otherwise a person is free, you can die for a punch."
(Male, 24)

"Honest it was bad, I was asking for meals yeah, and they just gave me some kind of … I was there for like two days yeah. I could not stay there because of my head injury yeah, but they didn't do anything about it."
(Male, 19)

"Being in the police station, getting beat up in the police station … I've left the police station with a black eye before."
(Male, 20)

"I've done it back in on my 18th birthday, I put one in actually on my 18th birthday. I got arrested on a night out. Next day I got, I come out with, double black eyes and that, and I tried getting my solicitor to run reports innit and it never could get reported 'cause something like the camera was down."
(Male, 22, incidents at age 18)

"I'd say, like, the way I see violence is, like, they weren't in my face, they were pretty chilled out but I think the abuse is abuse of the investigation."
(Male, 24)

Stop and search

Some of the young people described extensive stop-and-search activities targeting people from ethnic minority backgrounds. Others said that the police force was largely from the area and didn't discriminate, while two young people believed that they were mostly targeted due to their lifestyles:

"They stop me because of how I look."
(Male, 20)

"When a White person gets stabbed by a Black man omg it's on the news, it's out of control … if a White man was to kill a Black man yeah, they'll probably say omg he's got mental health and that or he needs to get sectioned."
(Female, 20)

"This stop and search thing would help to be honest, if they do it properly though, not just pick on Black people or pick on Asian people or just pick on this, like, if you do it properly though, it would've helped."
(Male, 20)

"Most of the time you get a racist police officer who [does] stop and search because of your skin colour."
(Male, 19)

"I don't think your identity affects you because south police are used to south people, they [are] used to young Black people getting rowdy [and] moving with gangs … Brixton police are literally, Brixton mandem [people] are police now."
(Female, 18)

"Yeah like stop and search is mad. Like, in fact this didn't happen to me but … he was on a bike and he weren't tryna stop because every single time they're trying to stop and search and it's for no reason, like he didn't have anything on him so he carried on going. They licked him off his bike and he went flying into a bus windscreen. He now has plastic surgery, they fractured his spine. He was in a wheelchair for a year and a half and even after that. And even though half of his head is, like, on the bus, they still tried to search him and now there's this whole enquiry where they've had to refer themselves to whatever investigation but

that's just because you've seen a guy, a Black male, in an area, he looks a certain type of way but they have no reason to fly him off his bike. It's a stop and search, cool, but they've actively now messed up his life, he's now got plastic surgery. He's my age. He's only 20, this happened when he was 17."
(Male, 18)

"Yeah, even my sister. She's a female but if people just think it's just guys, it's not just guys [who get-stop-and-searched]. My sister gets pulled over like four times a day. Just because she's a Black woman in south."
(Male, 21)

One young person spoke about the "humiliating" nature of public stop-and-searches.

"The way they deal with is like you're a piece of … they don't even do it discrete. I think this whole stop and search in the middle of the street, you got people in the street who don't look like you, who will embarrass you, and make you look like some freak show in the middle of the street. I feel like if you want to stop and search someone, I don't think it should be out in public, it's humiliating."
(Female, 20)

Put in danger

Some of the young people we spoke to described being put in danger in prison and in the community. They recounted experiences where they were dropped into an opposing gang's area, and where they were expected to mix with their enemies in prison, and where their lives were at risk for short periods of time to meet a requirement of their probation. This led them to believe that they were being set up to fail.

"Safety and rehab mean nothing to them, I promise you. I've gone home before and you've made me live in my enemy's area."
(Male, 20)

"I go back to probation in my area. I'm going to see the people I don't get on with, and then what, I'm going to fight to protect myself. Sorry, X, you're going back to jail mate. So what, I've been out of jail for a day and now because you put me in a place where you know I got people I can't [be safe]."
(Male, 24)

"The police have never tried to keep me safe in my opinion, I've actually been through experiences where the police have picked me up under false pretences of arrest then dropped me into the opposing gang area, yeah, the police at no time have kept me or my friends safe."
(Male, 24)

Box ticking

Support, interventions and programmes were almost unanimously considered tick-box exercises. The list of support and programmes that the young people were offered or took part in includes:

- A–Z programmes;
- No Limits;
- Kaizen courses;
- mental health support in prison;
- anger management;
- drug and alcohol support;
- knife awareness courses; and
- thinking skills.

The young people we surveyed said that some of the courses offered unrealistic solutions or alternatives and that they were designed by people who had no understanding of serious youth violence. One young person, for example, explained the unrealistic nature of ringing the police if their house was broken into. They also said that the courses wouldn't help their employment opportunities as the qualifications weren't recognised and therefore there was no reason to do them other than to complete a certain number of hours of study as part of the rehabilitation activity requirement:

> "Courses and stuff, they offered me courses, but I don't, like I said, your system is flawed right now. I want to get my parole so I'm doing everything I can to get my parole just ticking hella boxes, but during my normal sentence what I just come home from, they wanted me to do the Kai[zen]course for serious violence. I'm not doing that, if you do something to me I will do something back … no the police aren't going to help me I'll just sit in a cell."
> **(Male, 24)**

> "I could go and do the thinking skills programme and sit in there and say 'yes, when I hear a noise in my house I'll believe it's a ghost or I'll phone the police and let them know'. No, I'm going to go get the biggest knife in my house and find out if there's anybody in my house that's the reality of the situation. I'm going to pick up the bat and make sure nobody's there. It doesn't make sense to have these courses that are designed by people who have no idea what this life is like and then expect me to tick these boxes because I won't do it, I don't want your d-cat [D category prison transfer]. I don't want anything from you, I'll sit in my cell until I go home."
> **(Male, 24)**

> "It doesn't benefit me. You want me to do this silly course, as you say, it's a qualification. These qualifications mean nothing, you're not getting employed. You could have 20 of them and this kid could be fresh out of school with a GCSE."
> **(Male, 22)**

Some explained that they hadn't been offered any support because they wouldn't engage with the police or other services. And even if they had been offered support, they wouldn't accept it:

> "Nah to be fair they did ask me about my drug and alcohol advice … they do it every time tho innit, it's just something they have to do innit. Like when you first go in there, they're like 'do you want an appropriate adult or a phone call?' and then 'do you want help with drugs?' And that's what they asked me."
> **(Male, 20)**

> "They start getting involved and doing interventions like that when it's way too late. I'm already knees deep in the s***. He's cut me, I've cut him. Whatever's gone on, what, you think a conversation's going to stop this? I'd do a conversation with you if you want, but the next time I see him I'm going to balls his head."
> **(Male, 24)**

Two young people said they found the anger management courses helpful:

> "Police can't offer you support, it's about what you do for yourself. Police didn't, the prison does, you can work on anger management. With me I retaliate, I plot on people now I'm in prison. I need to make sure I'm not going to go out and do the same thing, I've got to work on myself still."
> **(Female, 18)**

Set up to fail

A number of young people explained that they felt like probation was setting them up to fail. Although one highlighted that "probation does work if you talk to them [the supervising officer]", others felt that the conditions and approach meant they were being prevented from gaining employment:

> "What I'd want to do is start again somewhere myself, go and get my own flat, go and build my own structures. I got conditions on my licence that says I'm not able to get employed, [that you're] not to get paid employment without contacting your supervising officer, but when you contact your supervising officer they tell you 'no'. So I got a job to do this, they're like 'nah, we need you to sign on, we need your risk lowered'."
> **(Male, 24)**

> “I’m saying ‘I’ve got a job’ they’re saying ‘nah we need you to sign on this time and this time’, I’m saying are you lot being serious I’ve got paid employment an opportunity to change my life, this has happened multiple times.”
> **(Male, 22)**

One young person detailed the stringent recall process for what he considered minor infractions:

> “Yeah, well you do let me talk but you’re sat there, you’re nodding, you’re saying it sounds good, then I’m going to leave and you’re going to tell your mate ‘he’ll be back in a minute’. The worst thing is, the reason I’ll be back in a minute is because of you lot, because of the times you need me to be places I’m not supposed to be, perfectly timing because I’ve been to prison. It doesn’t make sense, you send me back for being two minutes late. Little things become big things: I get stopped and searched because I’ve got a bit of weed on me, this person doesn’t even get a caution, me, I’m going back to jail instantly and we’re going to talk about the bit of weed a year from now.”
> **(Male, 24)**

Solutions

Many of the young people said that support services, courses and interventions were run by people that didn't understand them and therefore couldn't help them. Some young people really couldn't give an answer to what would have prevented them from getting involved in serious youth violence. This is understandable, as the group we spoke to hadn't navigated out of the criminal justice system yet. Those who did offer solutions explained the importance of lived experience.

The young people also discussed the importance of being allowed to move on with their lives. If the system can't support them, it should at least not stop them making progress. To prevent young people from being involved in crime and serious violence, the root causes of their offending need to be addressed first. Young people also need to be given the right support, rather than being treated as criminals and put into the criminal justice system.

Lived experience

Lived experience was the most frequent solution suggested. The young people expressed that they needed people they could relate to and who understood what they were going through. Two mentioned youth clubs run by people who had lived experience of serious youth violence, although they explained that these were different from conventional youth clubs and that they gave young people a place to go. Others noted that the support, interventions and programmes on offer needed to be designed by people who had experienced serious youth violence and the criminal justice system:

> "Do you understand, [it] doesn't make any sense when you do it like that, you need to get proper people involved and I know they probably got people involved forever, but I don't see on my side of things, like one of my friends actually does this thing right now where kids are getting involved in gang crime and knife crime they involve him and he's a boss on the streets but it's not like they sort out the problem it's like if you do anything to each other I'm going to get involved, it might sound silly but that helps because you don't want him to be involved you don't want to be the person who did something to him now he's involved."
> **(Male, 24)**

"A need like some type of lived experience you couldn't just decide you've came from this great life and that you can edit people's lives to make it be like yours when you have no idea what my life's like, you have no idea what's gone on in my world in the slightest, you have no idea what I go through on a day to day basis and you think you can pop up on me on a fortnightly basis, and you're going to benefit my life, you're not."
(Female, 20)

"Yeah, literally my opinion to sort the system out, or to sort any of the system out whether it be care, early interventions, involvement in serious crime, serious violence, you'd have to restructure the whole outlook on it really, get a focus group on it like you do when you're doing a big business. You get them together and you don't make any moves until the focus group agrees, get a focus group with people who actually know what they're talking about, not people who are supposed to know what they're talking about who have a degree in what they're talking about."
(Male, 22)

"Needed proper guidance and speak to someone who is where I am now, not 40 or 50 and some old man, someone like me, when I speak to young ones on the wing, they have to listen to what I'm saying and I'm not too far gone."
(Male, 24)

Care not criminalisation

The young people stressed the importance of not criminalising children. Many believed that the root cause of the behaviour should be established and dealt with. They expressed that early criminal activity could be addressed by care; that is to say, someone taking the time to really ask what was going on in their lives and trying to help them.

Young person: "Some proper attention some actual attention, it's … up but the way I treat my young G's there's no comparison, my little … love me there's no in-betweens, no left or rights, you need money I got money, you need time to chat to me, there's a problem at your yard, you need electric, anything that's going on in your life, you can phone my phone when I'm on the road and I will sort it out."
(Male, 22)

User Voice: "Aren't you describing what you would see as a proper parent?"
Young person: "The last port of call, the biggest thing, the way you can stop all of those things, is really caring about children and I mean kids 11, 12, 13, 14, 15. Actually pay attention. What is your actual problem? You feel like you have no money, you feel like you broke? Now you feel like you have to get involved in this type of stuff. Alright, let me show you how you don't get involved in this type of stuff. Reality is, most of these kids that are going to work for people, some people I know have got workers that work for less than minimum wage, it makes no sense in reality. They know no other reality. All they know is this and it makes

sense to do this, to be like this, because this is going to gain me this, then I'll be like him."
(Male, 24)

Alternatives to violence

The young people wanted alternatives to violence. While their records posed a challenge to employment, licence conditions also prevented them from taking control of their lives and moving on. They felt the system was setting them up to fail. More needs to be done to make sure that young people have alternatives by removing roadblocks to employment or other well-documented routes to rehabilitation:

> "Yeah, when I come out, I'll just, I'll be honest with you, if I want to get a job if I want to work in a warehouse or something, do nights in the warehouse, you get, get paid good money for that. Yeah. I just need someone at work, trying to employ me innit because obviously my charge and that."
> **(Male, 24)**

> "What, I'm going to go home sign on get £50 to £60 a week? I can't live on that, let me look for employment. Let me be free. Don't mollycoddle me when you don't know how to mollycoddle."
> **(Male, 22)**

Further research

The objectives of this project were to understand:

- what makes young people vulnerable to serious youth violence;
- what their experiences of reporting incidents of serious youth violence, safeguarding and interventions were; and
- the facilitators and barriers they face when seeking or receiving support.

While the young people we spoke to offered some solutions to serious youth violence, this wasn't the focus our research and as such, we didn't examine them. We therefore recommend further peer-led research into the solutions for serious youth violence, which are co-designed with young people who have perpetrated serious youth violence.

Further, the young people we spoke to were largely still in prison on long sentences. While asking for solutions, it must be noted that they haven't navigated out of the system yet. Therefore, they are offering solutions to their younger selves, which they can see with hindsight. This means that they may not be able to offer all the solutions, particularly for older teens and those in their early twenties. We also recommend speaking to those who are no longer in the criminal justice system to understand their journeys and the facilitators and barriers to rehabilitation.

Finally, some of the young people we spoke to explained the effects of serious youth violence on their mental health. These include PTSD, severe paranoia and depression. They also described a lack of understanding from police and other services. Considering the levels of violence and trauma that they had been subjected to, and had perpetrated, we believe that this is another area that would benefit from further consideration.

Case studies

Case study: young person with a lack of trust in the police

Young person A is a 24-year-old man. He suffers from paranoia and has been a perpetrator and on the receiving end of serious, life-threatening violence. He has been in care since he was 14 and has been involved in gangs since he was 11 years old. Young person A was taken away from his mum when he was banned from going to a certain area. His first encounter with the police was at age ten. He believes they hate him because they have labelled him as a gang member. He feels that they aren't there to help him and aren't designed to help people like him. Young person A stated that:

> "The police have never tried to keep me safe in my opinion. I've actually been through experiences where the police have picked me up under false pretences of arrest then dropped me into the opposing gang area, yeah, the police at no time have kept me or my friends safe."

This lack of trust prevents him from wanting to speak with the police. At the age of 15, young person A was moved to a hostel for adults and reported living with "smoke heads and drug dealers", having nothing to do and nowhere to go, not even to school. At the age of 16, he lived in semi-independent supported accommodation, where he had no contact from a support worker. At most, he would get a text and some money in the post.

At 18, young person A was told that he no longer needed to engage with a care worker as he was too old. When young person A left jail he reported that when he returned home there was "no support, no structure and I didn't have a relationship with my parents no more" due to his time in care and prison. He blames this on the care system.

At the age of 22, young person A perpetrated violence. He was drunk and was attacked by another group of young people. Young person A had his knife on him and used it to cut two people. Young person A got arrested at the scene. He gave his statement while still drunk. The police didn't take this into consideration.

Young person A describes his experience of the police investigation as "abusive" and feels that they had decided what had happened before receiving the proper information. The information they took was not coherent and they didn't give young person A an opportunity to give an accurate statement: "even until now the way it's written in my OAS [offender assessment system] and stuff it's all muddled and flipped and switched to make it look like I've gone out on some violent attack and been drunk and hurt people when that is factually not the case." He feels the police labelled him as a perpetrator straight away and took advantage of him being drunk.

He says, "I wasn't in my right mind. As soon as I got sober and realised you can't just attack me, attack people. Everyone has the right to defend themselves. My only offence was carrying an offensive weapon." After this, young person A never spoke to the police again.

He was sentenced to four-and-a-half years in prison for this incident.
Young person A doesn't believe that any service can keep him safe or give him the correct structure he needs. Young person A says he wants to start over again, get himself a flat and build his own structures. However, when given paid employment opportunities, he reports not being able to take these offers as his supervising officer will not sign him off:

> "I'm not able to get employed, not to get paid employment without contacting your supervising officer, but when you contact your supervising officer they tell you 'no'. So I got a job to do this, they're like 'nah, we need you to sign on, we need your risk lowered'."

Case study: young person feeling uncared for

Young person B is a 20-year-old woman who was subject to violence at the age of 14. She was set up by a friend, and she was seriously assaulted by a large group of people.

Young person B went into care at the age of 15. By this point she had dropped out of school. Young person B reported that once she was taken into care, she wasn't allowed to see her family. She reported being treated like a criminal when taken into care and believed that they didn't care about her mental health. She felt the police tried to manipulate her and use her as bait:

> "Yeah, um, to be honest, like, at the police station it's always been 'we know who you're involved with we know your links'. Like, it's never been me and I feel like they've never tried to come, it's never been them trying to come for me. I feel like they're always trying to use me as the bait."

At the age of 17, young person B was actively involved in gangs. She wasn't in school and had a child to look after. At a private event she was stabbed and shot at but didn't report it to police as:

> "Once again what I'm not going to snitch on this guy, it's not really what we do where I come from so I went hospital, I had to, but I just said, like, I hurt myself."

The hospital were aware it was a stab wound and reported it, yet no police showed up.

Young person B thinks that there is not much that the police can do to keep her safe:

> "Even if they came and arrested people there's still a thousand other people who would of came back and retaliated. It's not an isolated incident, do you know what I'm saying? Because it could stem into so many different things."

Young person B reported experiencing PTSD from this incident and believes that the police and other services didn't care. When she was 18, young person B seriously attacked another woman in retaliation. This incident is the reason she is currently in prison.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the young people we spoke to described many factors that made them vulnerable to serious youth violence, including poverty, postcode wars and prevalent criminal activity in their communities, families and peer groups. The young people described a general threat of violence in their area that meant they were always a potential target. A number of the young people we spoke to considered early targeting in school and the community the direct precursor to becoming more heavily involved in serious youth violence.

Most of the young people we interviewed had fractured family relationships and the majority had been in the social care system. They described many negative interactions with care homes and care workers and felt completely uncared for. While their families and the social care system had let them down, their friends had their back and offered a level of security and a means to earn money. Some described their group as ‘like a family’ or noted how their friends had been there for them when their parents hadn’t. But this often meant that they were involved in serious violent incidents on behalf of their friends or the group. Some noted that a disrespectful act directly preceded a serious violent incident and many of the young people described how much they had lost while earning respect.

The young people portrayed a situation where there was no means of getting a job or making money without crime and some were enticed to crime by “nice cars and nice clothes”. Therefore, violence was often motivated by money, drugs and the need to remove competition.

The young people’s experiences of reporting incidents of serious youth violence, safeguarding, interventions and support from the police and other services were largely negative

Those we spoke to recounted early negative interactions with the police and felt that they were wrongly criminalised at young ages. They believed that diversion from the criminal justice system would have been a more appropriate response. This bank of negative interactions with the police has fuelled their distrust and aversion into young adulthood.

Following a serious violent incident, whether the young person committed the act or was on the receiving end of it, they don't speak to police. As the perpetrator, 'no comment' was the only option taken. If they were violently attacked, they didn't report it because they feared reprisals and had no confidence in the police's ability or desire to protect and help them. This was due to previous interactions with police where they had felt manipulated, blamed or put in danger. There were numerous accounts of abuse of power by the police and some of those from ethnic minority backgrounds relayed the extensive nature of stop-and-search activities in their area. However, views were mixed on whether police targeted those from ethnic minorities. There were no accounts from the young people of safeguarding by the police.

Courses and interventions were considered to be tick-box exercises. The young people said that some of the courses offered unrealistic solutions or alternatives and that they believed they were designed by people who had no understanding of serious youth violence.

The young people we spoke to reported a significant barrier to receiving or seeking support was their lack of confidence in the police and other services. Some noted that even if they were offered support, they wouldn't accept it. The young people we spoke to commented that they would be more likely to seek or accept support from those with lived experience of serious youth violence.

Overall, the young people described the need for care over criminalisation. That is to say, they need to have appropriate support and the root causes of their offending addressed rather than being treated as criminals and being put into the criminal justice system. Their only request was a willingness from the police and other services to take the time to understand and treat the causes of serious youth violence rather than the symptoms.

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