Perceptions of serious youth violence in London – causes and remedies

Research report submitted to MOPAC
by the University of West London (UWL) and ARCS Ltd

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This Executive Summary provides key findings from our final report for the *Perceptions of Serious Youth Violence in London* research, funded by MOPAC. The research was designed and delivered by the University of West London (UWL), in partnership with ARCS Ltd.

The research was designed to focus on the perceptions of key stakeholder groups across London about issues including:

➢ *what they see as the key features of serious youth, gang or group violence and related offending in London, and what the impacts of that are;*

➢ *whether those key features have changed at all recently, and what the current trends and challenges are; and*

➢ *what is being done to address serious youth violence and related exploitation of vulnerable people, how effective people think those current efforts are, and what else might be done to improve or strengthen responses to these issues.*

The research involved several methods:

➢ **a programme of consultation with practitioners** and those working directly on issues concerning serious youth violence (involving direct interviews and wider online surveys),

➢ **area-focused research** involving collection of feedback from local residents and practitioners in a sample of areas experiencing high levels of serious youth violence, (via direct interviews and targeted online surveys),

➢ **collection of feedback from "gang-linked" and "gang-active" young people** (involving direct individual and group discussions),

➢ **collection of feedback from Designated Safeguarding Leads** at schools across London (via an online survey) about violence and victimisation among children and young people, and

➢ **collection of feedback from detached workers** involved in peer work with young people on the street (via two targeted online surveys), **and from young people connected to football and other clubs** across London (via 8 separate online surveys).

The final data-set includes feedback from 605 respondents, made up of 392 practitioners from across several sectors (including police, local authority, education/schools, and the voluntary sector), 160 young people, 47 local residents, and 6 substance misusers. The bulk of the key work took place between January and August 2021, with some further analysis and follow-up undertaken toward the end of 2021.

KEY FINDINGS

Perceptions of serious youth violence

For all respondent groups, it was clear that issues concerning serious youth violence and exploitation were regarded as having a significant presence and impact. It was generally felt that these issues have become worse, and many of our respondents also suggested that there have been increases in the *severity* of violence recently.

The feedback suggests that in many areas there are high levels of anxiety among young people regarding crime levels, risks and personal safety. In some areas young people discuss these issues on a daily basis, and share information through their own social and personal networks in order to manage and mitigate the perceived risks facing them.

Stakeholders working with young people also commented upon the personal impacts of all of this on young people, referring to mental health impacts such as increased sleeplessness, trauma, and increased self-medication on high-strength skunk or other substances.

Knife carrying for many young people in some areas now appears as being redefined and re-appraised as something that is a logical response to hostile landscapes, and these feelings of insecurity are matched as well by a perceived lack of safe spaces for young people.

Gang activity

The term 'gang' continues to generate controversy, but across the research the use of the term 'gang' was not as much of an issue for either stakeholders or young people as we expected. Some young people felt strongly the term 'gang' was negative towards young people in general, and some stakeholders also commented on the way in which the label can be applied much too readily to groups of young people who might just be gathering together in public. The term was also linked by some respondents to issues around disproportionality.

Street gangs were said to be very active in all of our case study areas (which was expected given that we chose to focus on high violence areas), but also in areas surrounding schools in some areas that we surveyed. Feedback from some of our gang-involved respondents highlighted recent tensions between older and younger gang affiliates, which can give rise to violence that is less predictable (and more severe) than it was previously (especially in relation to control of county lines). Some street gangs have also proved flexible in terms of methods during COVID, and more generally, have in some cases moved closer to OCGs (organised crime groups).

Feedback also suggested that a "survival" narrative or mode is now commonly expressed by those affiliated to street gangs and gang lifestyle - a sense that they will do whatever it takes to survive the streets and what life has given them. The feedback suggests that county lines are thought to equal employment for some young people. This is viewed as a realistic way of making money, as being viable, immediate and highly productive. Entry into county lines is easy, straightforward and quite normalised for some young people. Although it was noted above that money-making is an obvious key motivation for gang activity, some of the feedback that we received was more nuanced about what some young people actually "get" from

UNIVERSITY OF WEST LONDON / ARCS LTD

involvement in such activity, with reference being made to self-esteem for example, family-like relationships, and role models.

Respondents who work with gang-affiliated young people told us that engaging with some of these issues is difficult, although we were also given examples of good practice.

Girls and young women

Respondents often referred to the sense in which girls and young women are "invisible" in much of the discourse about gangs and serious youth violence. There is clearly a need for further examination of the role played by girls and young women (and trajectories into and out of such involvement), since that involvement is of key importance to the way in which gang-related activities (such as drug distribution and county lines, for example) operate.

Respondents commented on a range of issues concerning girls or young women affiliated with gangs – including the carrying or storing of firearms or drugs, sexual violence or exploitation, and engaging in violence – and most felt that these things took place fairly commonly, and that they now occurred more frequently than in previous years. There was a tension in the remarks made to us about the involvement of girls and young women in the activities of gangs, between perspectives that framed that involvement solely in terms of exploitation or coercion (framing their involvement purely as a safeguarding issue because most of them are traumatised and coerced into involvement), and those that attributed higher levels of agency to girls and young women who had such involvement.

More general issues also came up about the sexual harassment of girls and young women, with these issues being commented on both by female research respondents in our surveys and interviews, and by practitioners who worked with girls and young women directly.

The view from schools

Schools were regarded by practitioners as being of particular importance to efforts to address issues around violence and exploitation, due to their key safeguarding functions, their role in building individual resilience, and the way that they usually operate as places of safety for children and young people.

Feedback from the DSL survey highlighted a perception that some issues around violence and exploitation – i.e., bullying, child criminal exploitation, child sexual exploitation, involvement of young people in country lines, and missing children or young people - were fairly common in the areas where their schools were located. Along with most other practitioners, DSLs felt that levels of serious youth violence had generally increased in the area where their school was located, with about half claiming that levels had increased either a lot or a little over the previous 12 months.

In terms of contextual factors within families in the areas where their schools were located – such as child abuse or neglect, child/adolescent to parent violence, domestic violence, family mental illness, family substance misuse, and family members suffering from trauma or being involved in offending – over half of DSLs felt that these factors were either "very common" or "common" in the area of their schools, with 81% making such a claim in relation to families suffering from mental illness.

UNIVERSITY OF WEST LONDON / ARCS LTD

Over half DSLs felt that those issues had become worse in the last 12 months, with family mental illness and domestic violence in particular having got much worse (77% and 84%, respectively). The feedback from DSLs highlighted for us the way in which people in that role are in a unique position to watch young people's life trajectories play out in some cases over several years, within the same family. There appears to be significant under-reporting of crime in and around schools.

Feedback from case study areas

In our case study areas we found a level of distrust of "official" surveys into local experience, which they felt would never be acted on or result in any change for them. It was also felt that some local residents were tired of having their areas labelled in the media and elsewhere as "high crime areas". There were high levels of concern about violence, but also a strong sense of community at the same time in some areas.

The research also generated evidence to suggest that in some areas, residents are very concerned about the impact of co-locating groups of vulnerable people in houses in multiple occupation (HMOs) which in some areas we found were clustered together in large numbers in very small local areas.

That co-location of vulnerable groups in what are sometimes very geographically concentrated areas can create a dynamic critical mass of both drug dealers and users for example, which crystallises into a self-sustaining and resilient local drugs economy, but which also fuels a variety of forms of exploitation, and the violence which underpins those.

Key factors

Respondents' comments about the key drivers of violence ranged widely by level of focus, covering factors at individual, family, peer, school, community and societal levels, but also covering drivers that *span* these levels. Across all respondent groups, drugs were most commonly mentioned as being a key driver of violence in London, although the precise way in which drugs might be linked to violence was not always articulated.

A majority of respondents also made reference to wider factors such as deprivation, lack of opportunity, poor quality services or lack of access to services, family issues, social media, or the impacts of both individual and community trauma.

The feedback illustrated how further research to "map" key factors in the context of individuals' lives, and in the context of an individual's pathway through and across those different levels over time, could be very useful for the field.

Addressing violence

The majority of respondents felt that primary prevention (i.e., work delivered "upstream" to prevent violence from happening in the first place) is important, and many respondents made reference in this context to factors having to do with poverty, lack of opportunity, and young people living in circumstances where family and other violence is normalised.

Secondary prevention initiatives, which focus more specifically on groups that are at high risk of becoming involved in violence or exploitation, were also regarded as playing a key role in local violence reduction. Respondents also referred to measures that could be categorised as tertiary prevention, involving work with known

UNIVERSITY OF WEST LONDON / ARCS LTD

offenders to prevent further violence for example, or criminal justice measures to deter or sanction offenders.Many examples of preferred or "effective" interventions were provided by respondents, although views about the direction of future practice in how to reduce violence were also somewhat "downbeat". Views about the importance of different types of interventions were strongly related to sector.

Partnership working

Feedback about partnership working in relation to how to reduce violence suggested quite a mixed picture across all London boroughs, and that the quality of partnership working varies widely in terms of extent, profile, and efficiency. Although "silo working" was occasionally referred to, there were also examples of good practice, and responses to questions about the quality of partnership working were fairly positive overall.

Concerning the timescales for available funding, a majority of practitioners noted that short-term funding challenges are a real hindrance to local charities and projects, and it was also suggested that short-term funding eroded effectiveness.

Policing

Internal confidence amongst police staff appears to be quite variable. A view by many is that recent changes have diluted efficacy, efficiency and professionalism. Some longer serving officers felt that the MPS had changed significantly now and lost too many older, seasoned and knowledgeable staff above Inspector rank. It was noted by some police respondents that engagement with particular communities had suffered over the past couple of years in some boroughs.

Feedback from young people concerning their views about the police was mixed, but fairly negative overall (and somewhat more negative than findings from MOPAC's own survey of young people, for example). Among residents in our case study areas, confidence in the police also appears to be low, as reflected in both our direct interviews with residents and in feedback from our online surveys. Interview feedback and open-ended feedback from some residents who have responded to the survey, is quite negative in relation to experiences around reporting incidents of violence.

Some respondents drew connections between disproportionality, racism and trauma at community level when asked for their views about current policing. Our feedback was fairly consistent with findings from other research that has focused on levels of confidence in the police across London.

Perceptions of how to reduce violence

Levels of confidence were quite low among many respondents, about the scope to reduce violence in London to be effective in the future. Feedback from residents and professionals working in our case study areas reinforced that view, with residents in particular reporting low levels of confidence that future work to reduce violence in their areas will lead to real change.

In some residential areas, low levels of confidence about how to reduce violence was clearly related to a perceived history of authorities failing to act, and as many expressed it, failures to honour promises made to provide support or to regenerate areas and develop opportunities.

1 INTRODUCTION

This report summarises key findings from the "Perceptions of violence in London" research, funded by MOPAC. The research was delivered by the University of West London (UWL), in partnership with ARCS Ltd.

The research was commissioned against a background of ongoing public concern about violence and its impacts in London, and it has been a Mayoral priority to take steps to understand and address some of the complexity of those issues and possible interventions to address them. As part of that priority MOPAC and the Mayor of London's Violence Reduction Unit (VRU) have been overseeing a programme of research to try and address some of the gaps in knowledge that exist in the field.   New research has included studies focusing on violence at neighbourhood level (Kane et al., 2022), violence by children and adolescents against parents (Brennan et. al., 2022), and the recently published Serious Youth Violence Problem Profile (MOPAC, 2022). Our research was designed and delivered as part of that programme.

As described in the original specification for this research, MOPAC sought to "commission bespoke qualitative research to gather greater insight into all aspects of serious violence and criminality, and the multi-agency response by those most affected by it whether victims, offenders, community members or practitioners in the field."

So the research was intended to be wide-ranging in its focus, but also largely qualitative, and to collect and examine the perceptions of key stakeholder groups across London about issues including:

> ➢ what they see as the key features of serious youth, gang or group violence and related offending in London, and what the impacts of that are;

> ➢ whether those key features have changed at all recently, and what the current trends and challenges are;

> ➢ what is being done to address serious youth violence and related exploitation of vulnerable people, how effective people think those current efforts are, and what else might be done to improve or strengthen responses to these issues.

It is worth noting that the research was not designed to somehow test people's perceptions against what we know about violence from the official statistics – and to measure the distance between perceptions and "reality" (as complex and contested as the latter notion is in this field). We were interested in what people thought about violence and its impacts, about how serious they thought that some of the problems are and how they might have changed recently, and what they thought about the causes of violence and the effectiveness of measures to address it. Having said that, we do make reference to other research and official statistics where this seems appropriate, and where it can help us to understand and contextualise the feedback about perceptions.

The key research methods used are summarised in section 2 below, followed by a description of the final data-set for the research, in section 3. Findings from the research are detailed in section 4, drawing from across the range of data sources described in section 3.

2 METHODOLOGY

Although primarily qualitative, the research used a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods to gather feedback and other data. The study involved a number of key work strands, including:

- ➢ a programme of consultation with practitioners and those working directly on issues concerning serious youth violence (involving direct interviews and wider online surveys),

- ➢ area-focused research involving collection of feedback from local residents and practitioners in a sample of areas experiencing high levels of serious youth violence, (via direct interviews and targeted online surveys),

- ➢ collection of feedback from "gang-linked" and "gang-active" young people (involving direct individual and group discussions),

- ➢ collection of feedback from Designated Safeguarding Leads (DSLs) at schools across London (via an online survey), about violence and victimisation among children and young people, and

- ➢ collection of feedback from detached workers involved in peer work with young people on the street (via two targeted online surveys), and from young people connected to football and other clubs across London (via 8 separate online surveys).

Although the focus of the research was primarily on people's perceptions about key issues, the work also involved some collection and analysis of local and pan-London data and documentation concerning violence and related issues, and ongoing linkage of the work to the wider research and practice literature.

The research received ethical approval from the Ethics Panel at the University of West London, and this included a review of all of the data-collection tools and supporting documentation used by the research team.

2.1 Definitions

In our communications with stakeholders, residents and young people across London, we provided definitions both for the term 'gang' and for 'serious violence'.

Concerning the latter, although there is no standard definition of "serious youth violence", respondents were advised that when we use the term in our questionnaires, we have in mind interpersonal violence that involves actual or serious risk of physical harm, violence involving knives, firearms or other weapons (e.g., acid), but also the threat of these things by individuals to ensure the compliance of others.

We also made it clear that domestic violence was not a primary focus of our research, although it was obviously important to some of the issues that we did ask for feedback about (and we also did ask for feedback about this issue in our survey of Designated Safeguarding Leads, for example).

We acknowledged that the term 'gang' is contested and subject to wide variations in usage, but we adopted the often used Home Office definition below:

> *A relatively durable, predominantly street-based group of young people who (1) see themselves (and are seen by others) as a discernible group, and (2) engage in a range of criminal activity and violence. They may also have any or all of the following features: (3) identify with or lay claim over territory, (4) have some form of identifying structural feature, and (5) are in conflict with other similar gangs.*

We tended to use the term 'gang affiliate' rather than 'gang member' to refer to those connected to a street gang or offending group, while recognising that such affiliations are dynamic, changeable and might involve either a core or a loose connection.

3   FIELDWORK, FINAL DATA-SET

The bulk of the key work outlined in section 2 took place between January and August 2021, with some further analysis and follow-up undertaken toward the end of 2021.   Some further references to emerging literature were made during report drafting in 2022 prior to submission.

The interview strands of the research were implemented as a "rolling" programme throughout that period, and although there were some issues concerning our gaining access to contact details for practitioners (which did complicate matters somewhat), that part of the research generated a unique and rich set of data, and had low levels of refusals or repeated "failures to show" (less than 5%).   The impact of COVID19 during part of our work did mean that we were not always able to conduct in person interviews or discussion groups (except with some of the young people), but in our view this did not detract unduly from the quality of the material gathered.   We give further details about sector coverage later on in this section.

Implementation of the survey strands of the work took place mostly during the period from May – August 2021, with the practitioner survey being undertaken first, followed by the survey of Designated Safeguarding Leads (DSLs), the surveys of residents, and then the young people and "street worker" surveys.

The way in which the young people surveys were implemented had the disadvantage of not allowing us to calculate response rates, and it also limits what we can say about how generalizable the findings are, but it had the advantage of allowing us to tap into small groups of young people who would be less likely to respond to school-based surveys, for example – because many of the youth projects that assisted us, work with young people who have a "street presence", with some being regular truants, and others being already involved in gang activities. One strand of our young people surveys also focused on detached workers who do "peer to peer" street work with young people (in Southwark and in Waltham Forest), and this allowed us to tap into their views about the cohorts of young people that they work with (which number in the thousands according to sources).

For the area-focused part of the research, the team selected a sample of areas across London for undertaking more focused fieldwork, and those areas were chosen largely because current data suggested that they were high violence areas, and in some cases also areas where levels of serious youth violence were increasing. The interview component of our area-focused work did not present any significant difficulties, but implementation of the resident surveys was more difficult than it has been in the past. Our survey work in these case study areas ran into problems with non-response from residents (see the Appendix for further details).

In terms of primary data, the key interview strands outlined in section 3 generated a rich and useful spread of data, including transcriptions from:

- 97 interviews with practitioners/stakeholders from a range of public, voluntary, community and private sector bodies,
- two discussion groups with local multiagency teams (total of 17 participants),
- two group discussions with (6) substance misusers involved in treatment services,
- a group discussion of safety and violence with participants in a local "Youth Council" body (circa 25 participants),
- a group discussion with (6) young people connected with an "outreach" gym project, and
- 15 one-to-one interviews with young people involved in with local YOTs, or involved in local projects working with gang-affiliated or "at risk" young people.

In spite of some of the difficulties referred to, the surveys described above also generated a useful set of feedback, including:

- 97 responses to a survey of practitioners,
- 181 responses to a survey of Designated Safeguarding Leads (DSLs) in London schools,
- 37 responses from surveys of "Streetbase"[1] workers in Southwark and Waltham Forest,

---

[1] Streetbase is a peer to peer street outreach programme, delivered in Waltham Forest by members of the Waltham Forest Youth Independent Advisory Group (and Waltham Forest Young Advisors), and was funded by MOPAC and the Council to run for three years from January 2019 (see https://youngadvisors.org.uk/2020/01/11/streetbase-young-people-listening-and-learning-from-each-other/). The Waltham Forest scheme was based on the Southwark Youth Advisors model (which was

> ➢ 77 responses from a range of small group surveys implemented in youth clubs and at youth events, and
> ➢ 47 responses from residents in our selected case study areas.

The final primary data-set provided the kind of coverage or breadth that we were aiming for, in terms of respondent groups, sector (for the practitioner consultations in particular, although we would have preferred higher numbers from the health sector), and in terms of response from all London boroughs.

The final data-set includes feedback from 605 respondents, with that total being broken down by respondent group as summarised in Figure 1.

Figure 1 – Total number of research respondents, by group
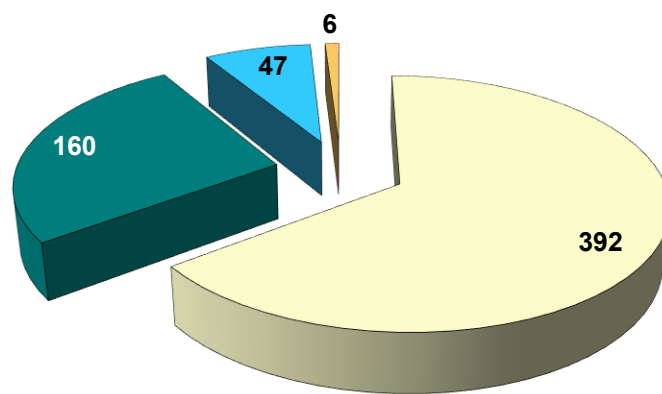
☐ Practitioners ■ Young people ☐ Local residents ☐ Substance misusers

In terms of practitioners specifically, across the survey, interview and discussion group strands, we gathered feedback from 392 individuals, across key sectors (see Figure 2).

---

developed in 2006; see https://youngadvisors.org.uk/southwark/). Our survey respondents included Advisors from each of these schemes.

Figure 2 – Practitioners consulted in total, by sector

- Education/schools
- Local Authority – Community safety
- Local Authority - Other
- Police
- Voluntary and community sector
- Other
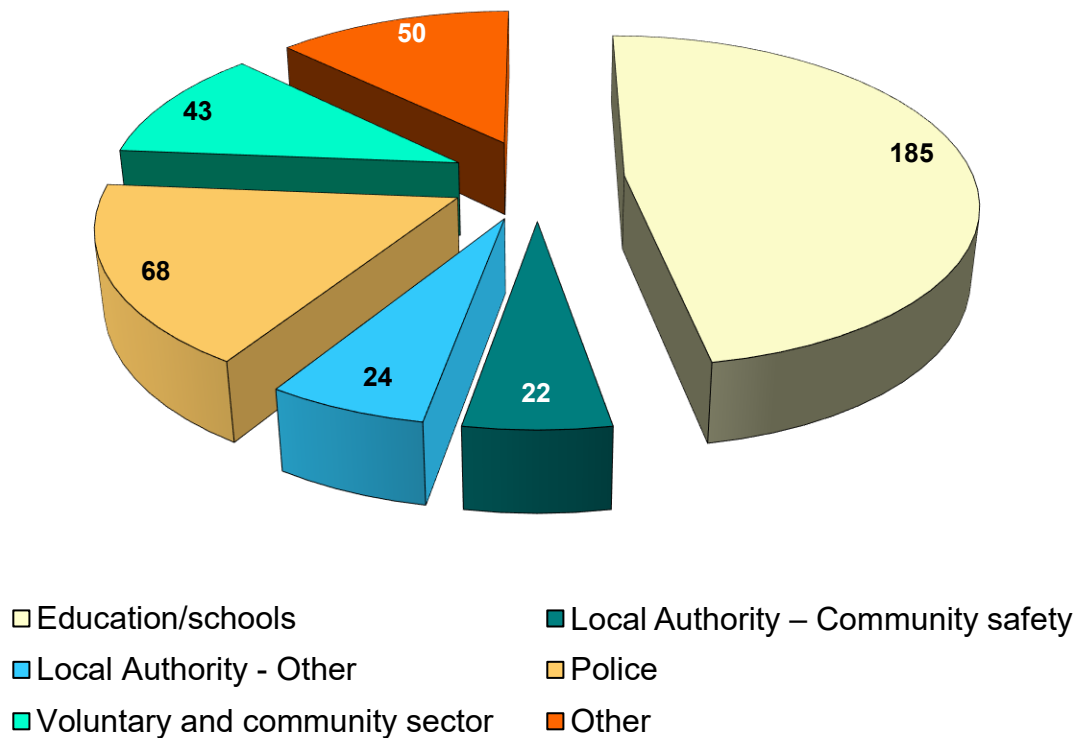
The 50 practitioners in the "Other" category were from a range of agencies/sectors, as summarised on the following figure.[2]

Figure 3 – Practitioners consulted: breakdown of "Other" (N=50)

---
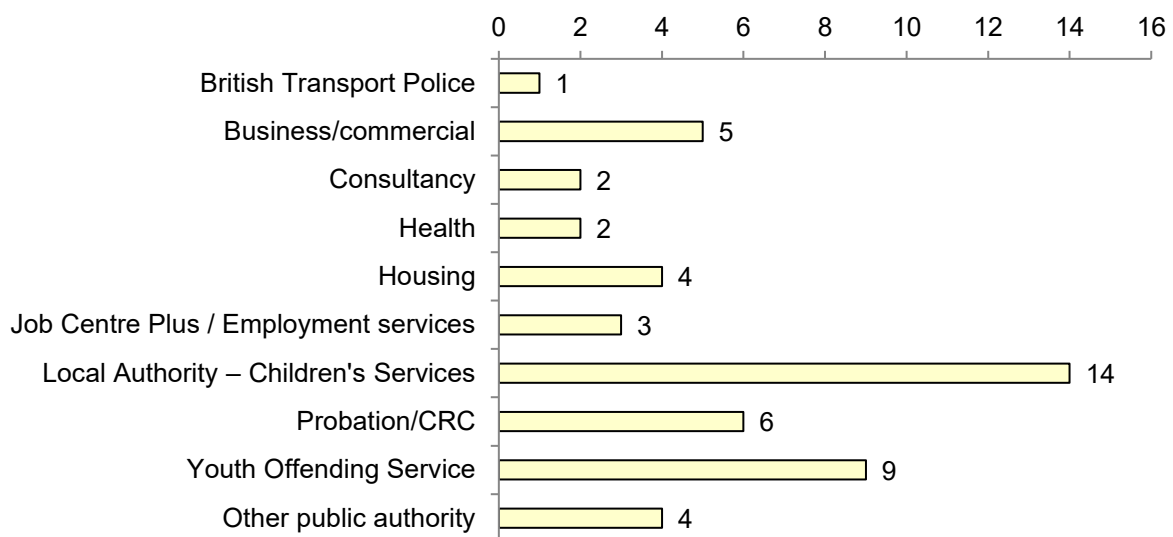
[2] The number for "Health" in Figure 3 is low, although 5 of our interview respondents recorded in the previous figure as "local authority – other" were in fact from Public Health.

The team also gathered a wide range of relevant documentation concerning violence and exploitation in London, and we were provided with some key data-sets that were not in the public domain (e.g., raw data-sets from violence-focused surveys conducted by other parties). All of this material was useful for us in understanding some of the issues discussed in this report (although we have not always made specific reference to them in the text).

All of our feedback/data and documentation from all of these sources was imported into a large NVIVO project, which made all of the material available for qualitative analysis using conceptual "nodes", for cross-tabulation with quantitative material (e.g., from surveys), and for the use of search, word mapping, and hypothesis-testing tools. Survey data-sets were analysed using SPSS as well. Further details are provided in the Appendix.

4 FINDINGS

Findings from the research are summarised below, under a set of headings linked to our key research questions and to those used in our data-collection tools.

4.1 Perceptions of serious youth violence

Across all strands of the research, we were interested in developing a picture of what particular respondent groups thought were the key issues concerning violence and exploitation in their own areas (or the key issues across London more generally), and also whether they thought that these issues had changed at all recently.

For all respondent groups, it was clear that issues concerning serious youth violence and exploitation were regarded as having a significant presence and impact. It was also generally felt that these issues had not improved recently, and in fact, most respondents across all groups felt that the issues had become worse.

For practitioner survey respondents for example, 72% (n=96) felt that levels of serious youth violence had increased either a lot or a little over the previous 12 months[3] (see Figure 4), and among those who felt that levels had either stayed the same or got slight better, most felt that this was only due to the impact of COVID restrictions (which had meant that there were fewer opportunities for public violence to occur).

---

[3] Responses to the surveys were received mostly during the period from May – August 2021, so the previous year for those respondents would have been the 12 months prior to that period. Part of that previous one year period included quite a complicated chronology of COVID restrictions across the country and in London specifically (for a useful graphic summarising all of these restrictions, see https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/2022-12/timeline-coronavirus-lockdown-december-2021.pdf). Those restrictions during some periods will have had some impact on offending and related issues (and also perceptions of recent trends that were communicated to us). We return to some of these issues in section 4.6.

Figure 4 – Practitioner survey: "Would you say that overall levels of serious youth violence over the last 12 months have:" (% by response category)
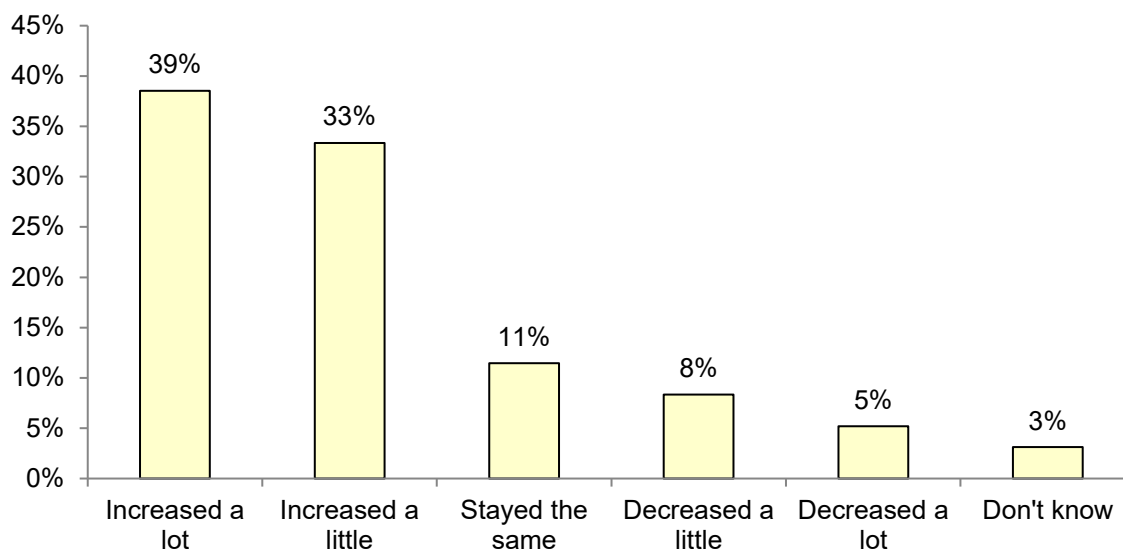
(N=96)

Responses to a similar question in our Streetbase survey provided something of a contrast, with just over a third (13 out of 37 who responded to this question) suggesting that levels of serious youth violence had "decreased a little" in the areas where they worked with young people. A similar number suggested that levels had either increased a little, or increased a lot.

Again, many of the respondents who felt that serious youth violence had decreased, noted that COVID restrictions during the period had been the cause of the reduction. Of the 12 respondents who commented on reasons for an apparent decrease, 8 attributed this reduction at last partly to the impact of COVID restrictions, as in the following comments:

> *I believe isolation and the simple act of keeping young people inside has limited the amount of incidents while I've been working*
>
> (SB-171797910)

> *I think* [during] *lockdown say incidents decrease but since the lifting of restrictions they have increased again slightly.*
>
> (SB-171366977)

> *Lockdown restrictions meaning less activity on the road.*
>
> (SB-171811326)

> *People haven't really been allowed to go out much with COVID-19 so as much as they are getting frustrated it is probably being taken out at home rather than outside.*
>
> (SB-171333732)

Also concerning recent trends, 36% of respondents to our aggregated young people surveys felt that levels of serious youth violence had either decreased a little or a lot during the previous 12 months[4], as compared with 31% who felt that levels had increased either a little or a lot.

Figure 5 –Young people survey: "Over the last 12 months, would you say that levels of violence in the area where you live have:" (% by response category)
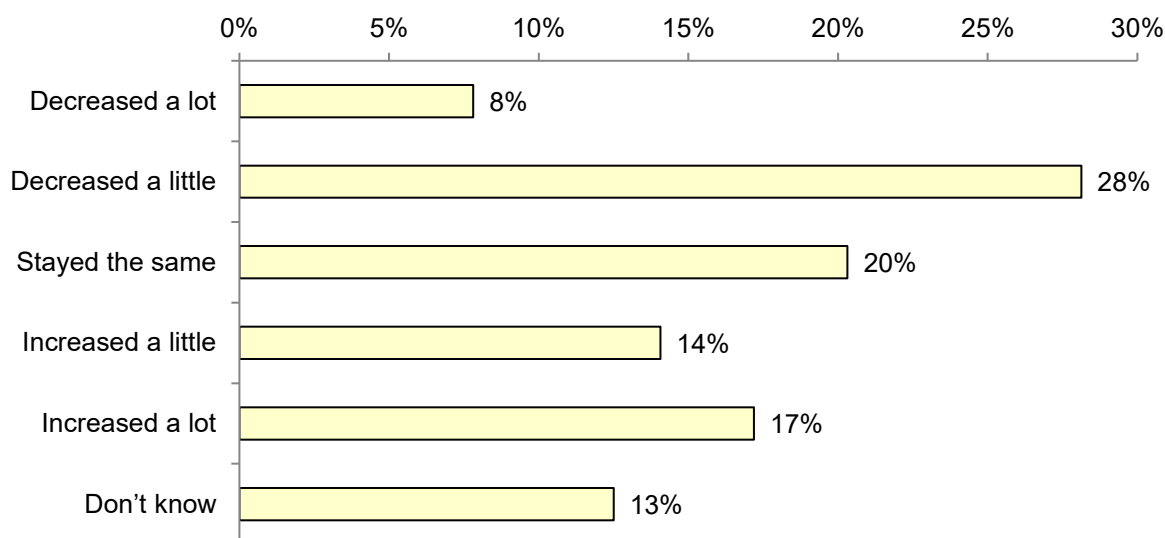
(N=64; not answered=13)

Many of our respondents also suggested that there have been increases in the *severity* of violence recently. The following practitioner survey respondents commented on this specifically:

> *The alarming aspects are the ages of those concerned and the ferocity and frequency of attacks.*
>
> (PRAC-79272177)

> *The amount of violence does not appear to have increased. It is the level of violence that has increased (more fights with weapons etc.).*
>
> (PRAC-79678632)

> *Those affected are increasingly younger, the violence is increasingly more serious or extreme.*
>
> (PRAC-80247515)

A similar view was taken by some of our young interview respondents. One described the trend in this way:

---

[4] See note 3, above.

> *Physical fighting is not really around anymore, it used to be a long time ago but I don't feel like now. People don't really fight with their fists now, it's all with weapons.*
>
> (A-YP03)

Concerning young people specifically, it was clear from all of the feedback that violence and related issues were of great interest and concern to many young people across London.

Although this did vary widely across areas, the feedback suggests that in many areas there are high levels of anxiety among young people regarding crime levels, risks and personal safety, especially among those of secondary school age and upwards. In some areas young people discuss these issues on a daily basis, and share information through their own social and personal networks in order to manage and mitigate the perceived risks facing them. Comments such as the following were often made by young survey respondents:

> *Very concerned. I fear for my life, friends and most importantly my family. My young brother and myself getting into the wrong group to make friends can lead us to fatality or nowhere in life.*
>
> (YP-168472057)

> *I have younger brothers and sisters and they could be a victim of crime. This concerns me a lot.*
>
> (YP-168472087)

> *I try to avoid certain roads in the evening. . . . I would never let female members of my family walk to places in the evening.*
>
> (YP-168351220)

Those day-to-day conversations that many young people engage in with their peers often involve the sharing of "war stories" about violence and crime, and again in some areas, there are many young people who claim to know someone who has died from a stabbing or other violence. There appeared to be a degree of bravado behind some of the remarks made to us by young people (perhaps especially by *groups* of young people), and it was not always possible to judge how exaggerated such claims might have been, but this does not detract from the fact that it was a key topic in day to day conversation (and that such conversations about violence took place in areas known to have high rates of serious violence).

Many young people interviewed reported that fear of crime restricts their movements throughout their community and determines the choices they make about routes home, socialising, engagement with friends and family, sports, and so on. Others made reference to the impact that concerns about violence had on them:

> *It makes me stressed. I feel that something could happen outside the house or if I'm walking home or leaving the house, something could happen, just random. Crime happens so you never feel 100% safe anyway.*
>
> (A-YP08)

Stakeholders working with young people also commented upon the personal impacts of all of this on young people, referring to mental health impacts such as increased sleeplessness, trauma, and increased self-medication on high-strength skunk or other substances.

Knife carrying for young people in some areas seemed to be regarded as being a logical response to hostile landscapes. It was seen to offer instant and real protection, but descriptions also suggested that it was seen as a method of empowerment, and something to rely upon. It was also thought to be a necessary and expected accessory which designated knowledge of the streets and that you must be taken seriously – implying that you are not vulnerable and should not be victimised for lack of awareness. For some it clearly provided a "passport to move around" different estates and parts of their borough.

The comments made by the following respondent were not uncommon in our interviews with young people, where we focused on concerns about violence, and about steps taken by young people to avoid violence or protect themselves:

> **Interviewer:** *So do people in this area carry weapons sometimes?*
> **Respondent:** *All the time, knives and that.*
> **Interviewer:** *And, do they actually use them?*
> **Respondent:** *Yes.*
> **Interviewer:** *Have you seen people using them apart from that one time that you saw, or do they threaten with them?*
> **Respondent:** *I've seen people get threatened with them, I've seen people get chased with them, I've seen people get stabbed with them.*
> **Interviewer:** *Would you carry one?*
> **Respondent:** *A weapon?*
> **Interviewer:** *Yes.*
> **Respondent:** *Yes, if I needed to.*
> **Interviewer:** *Have you ever felt you needed to?*
> **Respondent:** *At one point on the estate, yes, the estate was so bad everyone used to have a knife in their room just in case anyone ran up on the house.*
>
> (A-YP04)

Some of the evidence from other research also resonates with feedback of this kind. A recent review of the literature on knife crime suggested that there are several different groups of individuals who carry knives, and the authors describe the way in which knife carrying can be underpinned by a mixture of factors having to do with individual and social adversity (where the weighting of these is different for different sub-groups; Browne et al., 2022). They also note that only a small proportion of those who carry knives, actually use them to attack or threaten others.

The feelings of insecurity expressed in some of our feedback were matched as well by a perceived lack of safe spaces for young people, a situation that has been made worse by the closure of many youth clubs and other services for young people in recent years (and during a fairly significant period of austerity). Some interview

respondents commented at length on this lack of provision. As one voluntary sector representative put it:

> *I would try and reinstate some of the things that are missing or have been taken away from the borough. So there are very few safe use spaces left for young people in* [this borough]*, and so again, where possible, kind of collaborating with young people in the community to set up those spaces feels really important.*
>
> (B121)

It was noted by some respondents however that the provision of "safe spaces" would not on its own guarantee take up by young people, although the perceived safety of facilities and services is clearly a prerequisite for usage of those services. The provision also needs to resonate with the needs and interests of young people, and in particular to be age-appropriate. Some older teenagers noted that they would not be interested in attending a traditional "youth club" if it catered to the interests of younger people, for example.

Some young people articulated a sense of being on their own, and that there was an inevitability of outcomes, i.e., whatever you are thinking will probably happen to you as it is inevitable. For some, a sense of fate was reflected in their comments about their perceived life choices as well, with young people occasionally suggesting that they had no real opportunities, and that they had to survive as best they can in whatever way they can (which often includes illegal activity). Practitioners who work with young people pointed out how perceptions of this kind about "lack of choice" left some young people particularly vulnerable to exploitation.

That sense of fatalism was also conveyed in some of their comments to us when we asked them what they thought could be done against violence, for example, with many suggesting that there was nothing that could be done.

> *I don't know any more I think it's too late to stop it.*
>
> (YP-169767124)

> *I've not long lived here but there's nothing to do . . . but to be honest nothing will stop the violence.*
>
> (YP-169883901)

> *Nothing can be done there will always be a way around it or people who are affected in some way where the process of hate towards another kind will continue unless you can stop people from being jealous or hating others you can't stop crime or reduce it.*
>
> (YP-170745285)

There is a perception among some young people that adults do not understand the situation regarding crime, risks and street life, and the pressures regarding social media, county lines, drugs, knife crime and violence that form part of their own experience. The feedback suggests that young people often do not discuss such issues with their families and very seldom with teachers, although as noted elsewhere in the report, our consultations with young people tended to focus on

those in areas with high violence levels, or on forms of youth support that catered to more marginalised groups.

Some young people have felt their future lies more securely with criminal behaviour as this is a life that is known to them and has clear and understandable rules which are familiar to them. It can also bring in fast monetary returns which are untaxed and undeclared - although some of the feedback from young people suggested that their expectations about this were quite unrealistic – a fact that is sometimes focused on by projects that try to promote better informed decision-making among young people about involvement in gang activity (e.g., school-based awareness-raising interventions delivered by groups such as Growing Against Violence, and street-based work delivered by staff members who have "lived experience" in relation to offending groups and violence).

Some of those young people who are involved in criminal activity and have been for a while have obviously travelled some distance from ordinary or "normal" society, and the way that they speak about themselves and their lives illustrates both that level of disassociation, and a sense that there is little or no scope (or interest) in developing such ties.

This immersion or embeddedness demonstrates commitment to a chosen career path whilst reducing the stress of switching between the criminal lifestyle and "normal" society, i.e., they simply stay embedded in the rules, manners and presentation of gang life or criminal life on a permanent basis and no longer seek to play a role or participate in wider civic society. This process of "going deeper" or "staying true" can enhance trust amongst criminal associates by displaying dedication to the criminal world.

This orientation towards crime, drugs and gangs also seems aspirational for some young people – they see few opportunities in wider society for themselves. Others have aspirations of college and work but this is often said to be "long".

Findings from our survey of detached street workers (the "Streetbase" survey) also suggested the presence of concern about violence among young people worked with on the street. We asked workers about levels of concern about violence that there might be among the young people that they engage with, and just over two thirds of them (25 out of 37) answered either "most of them" or "some of them".

Street workers told us that this concern can be gauged both in terms of what participants actually say to them on the street, and in terms of the way in which the young people actually change their behaviour as a result of such concerns (in other words, we were not inviting respondents simply to guess about what project participants might be thinking about). In relation to the latter, we also asked the workers what they thought the impact of concerns about violence might be, and they (27 respondents) offered a range of useful comments. Four respondents commented specifically on the carrying of weapons, for example, making comments of the following sort:

> *Some young people become very paranoid of people they see and the surroundings they place themselves in. This often causes them to carry illegal weapons due to the feeling of being unsafe.*
>
> (SB-169106890)

> *They have to carry a weapon to feel safe.*
>
> (SB-171865444)

> *Changing routes to/from school etc. Carrying weapons for safety. No attendance of public spaces: parks/schools. Lack of trust in services.*
>
> (SB-171709318)

Feedback from practitioners who work directly with young people confirmed the widespread presence of those kinds of concerns about safety, with some also linking them to specific reactive behaviours by young people.

While most of our young respondents commented on the more negative impacts of violence on themselves or on people close to them, some commented more broadly on the relative acceptability of violence and its potential role in their everyday lives. One of our interview respondents (a 14 year old girl at a youth project in one borough) expressed a view of violence which was striking for its apparent balance:

> *Violence, I think it's a very necessary thing, people think it's stupid and they don't think it's necessary but I think it is. I think it's important to have a little bit of violence sometimes because I think violence can be used in the right way. If someone is taking the piss out of you, you should be able to retaliate, and if someone is bullying you or if someone is fighting you, you should fight back, you have the right to fight back. But I think it's stupid when you're fighting over postcodes and things like that and you're hurting innocent people or pedestrians, civilians, people who aren't involved in things or people's family members, that's when it gets too far.*
>
> (A-YP-04)

It was also clear from the feedback that in many areas, young people's "threshold of tolerance" for violent incidents was quite high, and that violence was normalised in their perceptions of community (and family) life.

4.2 Gang activity

As noted in the introduction we did question our respondents about gangs specifically, and as noted in section 2 we did use a fairly standard definition of the term in our documents and questionnaires.

The term has always generated controversy (and a prodigious literature concerning the term and its use has also developed)[5], but across the research the use of the term 'gang' was not as much of an issue for either stakeholders or young people as we expected. Whilst young people have a range of alternative slang names or street

---

[5] Some useful reviews of this literature can be found in Francis and Wilcox (2013), Paoli (2014) and Andell and Pitts (2023).

names they often accepted and recognised that they were affiliated to such groups. Some young people preferred 'Fam' implying a family-like bond of trust. Older Gang Consultants[6] and some stakeholders noted that whilst 'Fam' was often used, the street groups or gangs seldom operated like families as allegiances and relationships were often short-lived, variable and usually motivated by money.

Some young people felt strongly the term 'gang' was negative towards young people in general, and some stakeholders also commented on the way in which the label can be applied much too readily to groups of young people who might just be gathering together in public.

In general, the term 'street gang' or 'gang' is widely used by young people, practitioners and residents, but there is often some ambivalence about such usage. Some voluntary organisations that work with young people advise caution about such usage, even where they might use the terms themselves in their own work. Abianda, for example – an organisation that offers support to girls and young women affected by gangs and county line activity – advises professionals to use the term "cautiously, being mindful of its history, classist and racist connotations" (Abianda, 2021:2). They do however use the definition of 'gang' adapted by the Children's Commissioner, which is almost identical to the one that we have used in the research (provided above, in section 2.1).

Ethnicity of gangs and groups was occasionally raised with the generalised comment that street gangs can involve any ethnicity or group and was certainly not just about "Black people". Some stakeholders working with young people noted that young people were far less likely to exclude on the basis of race or ethnicity and that some of the street gangs had affiliates from a range of different ethnic groups. Some also felt that street gangs were becoming much more multi-cultural and that this possibly reflected local changes with the arrival of immigrants or new arrivals from Europe and elsewhere.

In terms of other feedback we did ask Designated Safeguarding Leads (DSLs) to comment on whether "street gangs" or organised offending groups operated in the areas where their schools were located, and two thirds of respondents had a view on this, as summarised on the following figure.

---

[6] We use that term to refer to gang-linked individuals already known to NCGR (the National Centre for Gang Research, at the University of West London), who we consult about key issues on a regular basis in connection with a range of research projects that we are involved in. These individuals are usually compensated for discussing these issues with us, and feedback sessions are not always recorded.

Figure 6 – DSL survey: Do "street gangs" or organised offending groups currently operate in the area where your school is?" (% by response category)

(N=180)
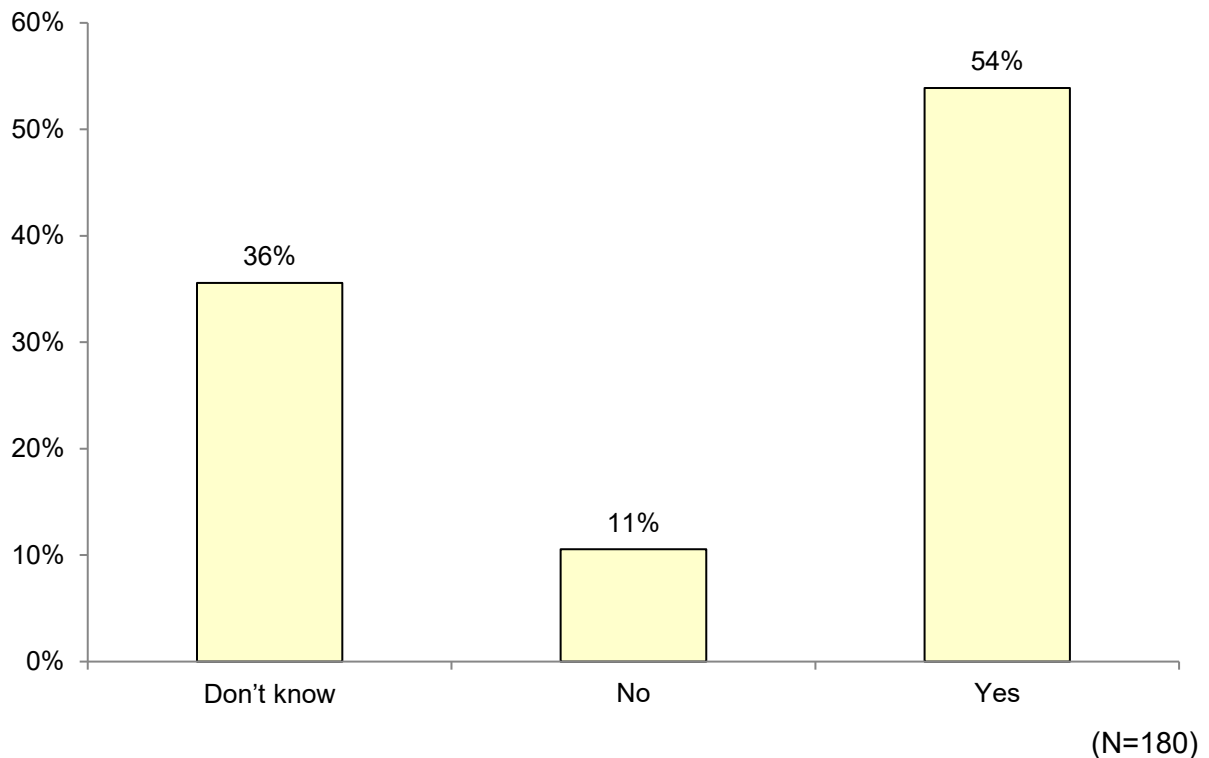
DSLs were further asked about the extent to which more specific issues related to gangs took place in their areas – such as young people being used to carry or store weapons or drugs for others, for example - but it was clear that their level of knowledge about such activities was fairly low (with from 40-90% of respondents answering "don't know" to those questions).

Feedback from some of our Gang Consultants and other young people suggested that a "survival" narrative or mode is now commonly expressed by those affiliated to street gangs and gang lifestyle - a sense that they will do whatever it takes to survive the streets and what life has given them. Under this survival narrative, almost anything can be accepted as permissible or forgivable "on Road". In this way the threshold of what is a credible action to take seems to be lowered, although judgements about this are obviously highly subjective and variable. This narrative also acts as a technique of neutralisation of criminal behaviour.

Several Gang Consultants talked about why street and youth violence had changed and become more vicious and more present. They all mentioned that Youngers are often seen by Elders and Olders[7] as being "out of control", i.e., they will no longer be told what to do by Olders and will act on their own or actively defy the line taken by Olders. Violence can erupt as a result of this. Their actions are at times more instantaneous, less thought-through, and more impulsive. As such, violence can be more eruptive and fierce (and also less predictable).

---

[7] There is some variability in the usage of these terms across areas, but Youngers are generally referred to as being aged 12-16, with Olders being aged from 16 to about 23, and Elders over about 23.

As one respondent put it:

> *It's more of a lawless society where the Youngers now have taken over. . . .The Elders have no control anymore. They don't have control anymore. The Youngers are on our streets. The Elders are very, very cautious before they jump in their vehicles, before they go to the shops, before they go splashing out. The Elders are not people who now broadcast their purchases. They're not out there showing off their Rolex watch in the same way that they used to. . . .The fear of being attacked by Youngers who don't respect their credibility or merit.*

(A-FG-PROJ3-01)

High levels of stress/trauma/drug use/anxiety are now identifiable and prevalent amongst many young people who are involved in or adjacent to these lifestyles. For some young people they address this by slowly withdrawing from their family or from wider society and increasing their social isolation.

The feedback suggests that county lines are thought to equal employment for some young people. This is viewed as a realistic way of making money, as being viable, immediate and highly productive. Entry into county lines is easy, straightforward and quite normalised for some young people.

Some young people reported that street gangs are now less focussed on their "patch", "turf" or territory than before and more focussed on their drug dealing "line" or business. Youth workers often report a shift towards making money as opposed to "defending the turf".

Urban street gangs operating across the capital were said by many young people and by stakeholders to be highly flexible in their dealing, links, their MO, their success and their operations, and some said that they have also increased links and closer links to OCGs (Organised Crime Groups). That "flexibility" was illustrated by rapid shifts in tactics seen during COVID restrictions for example (see 4.6). Profit margins (which may have increased at some points during COVID restrictions) appear to have become more closely protected and monitored. [8]

Tighter control of county lines and localised drug dealing was identified as a driver for violence with Olders and Elders keen to keep Youngers in line. Similarly, debt was a major concern for young people as this was almost a guarantee of potential violence (we return to issues concerning debt in section 4.7.4).

Increased levels of fraud were noted with young people being actively and regularly pressured into holding illegal funds (from criminal gains) in their bank accounts. This can often amount to thousands of pounds in one go. Again, this scenario can generate stress but also increased violence. Such financial transactions take place

---

[8] It was suggested to us by several respondents who work in the drugs field that COVID restrictions did lead to some drug supply shortages over the short term, and that this led in turn to some price increases.

without the knowledge of parents or teachers and remain hidden and exclusive to young people.

Although it was noted above that money-making is an obvious key motivation for gang activity, some of the feedback that we received was more nuanced about what some young people actually "get" from involvement in such activity. One respondent (the leader of a local voluntary sector project working with marginalised young people) described an individual case that they were aware of:

> *You know, that, I knew a young person that was a good kid and I told him, "Why are you hanging around with these negative Olders?" And he was like, "Oh* [named worker]*, I'm just out here man, just trying to make money". But he's not really trying to make money, he found self-esteem, he found like family, he found a role model, he found like a father figure, that's what he found, he didn't find money. Because and then he – I told him, "You can't be out with these guys".*

(B-014)

Other practitioners working with gang-affiliated young people raised similar issues to those expressed by the respondent above, concerning cases where although a young person might be involved in offending or other gang activities, they seemed to be prospering in many key respects, including having a sense of pride in having what they (i.e., the young people) perceived to be effective skillsets, being respected and watched out for by peers, and even having a sense of achievement and inclusion. A few respondents who described these kinds of cases to us also expressed uncertainty about how to proceed and to engage with such people – one asked for example, what his project could offer to compete with those kinds of benefits. Others who mentioned such cases adopted an approach focusing on longer term possible futures, and workers who themselves had "lived experience" of gang activities described how they would work with gang-affiliated young people to help them think about where their current pathway might lead them to be in 5 or 10 years for example. Since the answer to that question is often "dead or in prison", as one worker put it, either the young person will be attentive to those more negative possible outcomes and make decisions to do something about it now, or they will simply not engage with such interventions – although they may well do so later on, as that sort of change is not usually linear.

Feedback of that kind does raise important practice issues about approaches to take when interventions are intended to extricate young people from gang involvement. Interventions that simply take a "gangs are bad" kind of approach without dealing with some of the complexities of gang involvement are probably less likely to engage with people in a way that has much scope for effecting change or transition.[9]

---

[9] An analogue here can be found in the drugs education field, where awareness-raising programmes that focus only on harms that drug users may experience - and ignore the fact that some drugs can provide positive experiences which young people are aware of and which they might value – are less likely to be effective either in terms of prevention or harm reduction (see ACMD, 2015, for a useful overview of the evidence).

On the other hand, the work of some of our practitioner respondents (especially a few in the voluntary sector who work directly with young people involved in violence or exploitation) does illustrate that it is possible to adopt a nuanced and flexible approach to these issues in spite of such difficulties, although our feedback also makes it clear that even the most effective approaches to engagement will not be successful with everyone.[10]

4.2.1 *Girls and young women*

Respondents often referred to the sense in which girls and young women are "invisible" in much of the discourse about gangs and serious youth violence, and the way in which there are often no obvious referral routes for interventions with girls and young women who are gang-affiliated. As one respondent from Probation put it:

> *I think, I mean throughout when we were still, and as we are still slightly stuck in the old gangs narrative, we saw very few girls that were being flagged as, you know, part of a street culture, or violent street culture, sort of set up. . . So I think they remain pretty invisible, and I think whilst we focus, you know, we have this focus on this young man who is the bearer of all risk, we focus on him because we're in the business of offender management.*

> *So the challenge is, isn't it, that we're all working on is to widen the focus out to sisters, girlfriends, nieces, children. So we, I don't feel I have a very, much visibility, actually, about how the borough's women and girls may be networked in with the young men we supervise. I'm certainly not aware of any specific referral pathways for 18 - 25-year-old women for example, beyond generic services.*

(B-008)

Although we found pockets of expertise in London in terms of knowledge about this area, there is a clearly a need for further examination of the role played by girls and young women (and trajectories into and out of such involvement), since that involvement is of key importance to the way in which gang-related activities (such as drug distribution and county lines, for example) operate.[11] One local authority gangs analyst highlighted some of the issues in his own borough:

> *Yeah, so in* [this borough]*, I don't think we have what I would describe as a single female gang member. For the most part, what we're witnessing is girls being exploited. So we've never seen girls being treated as equals in the gang. So I've been, so if we ever girls in the music videos, not being, like, not*

---

[10] An example of a balanced approach to some of these issues is the multi-faceted intervention described in Davies and Dawson (2022), in their evaluation of the London Gang Exit project led by Safer London.

[11] A useful recent discussion of the "invisibility" of young women and girls' involvement in street gangs and county lines activity in a London context has been offered by Havard et al. (2021). The authors outline a range of tactics used by street gangs to maintain "coercive control" of young women and girls in physical and digital space. They argue that vulnerability to exploitation needs to be understood contextually, and as involving a more nuanced notion of individual agency than is usually adopted in more traditional enforcement-led responses to gangs and county lines.

being exploited for their bodies but actually maybe rapping at the front of the group or they're actually actively involved in controlling a drug line or something. Then I say yes, we can call these girls gang members and consider them equals to their male counterparts. At the moment, I think they're just more victims of exploitation by the slightly older male gang members within that gang or group. I don't know if that stretches to other parts of the borough but for [this borough]*, I think that's definitely the case.*

(A-091)

It was also noted that the involvement of women and girls in gang activities was quite variable across London by borough or smaller area, and that in some cases this was at least for reasons having to do with culture or ethnicity:

[Women and girls are] *completely absent. This is all young men. And again I think that's a cultural thing because young men have lots and lots of freedom, young girls don't. One of my very best lifelong friends is Bangladeshi female, and she's got six brothers and one sister, and she always says like, you know, they could just do what they wanted, whereas her and her sister were absolutely, you know, locked up. And that's a cultural thing that men are able to have more autonomy.*

And I think that plays a part, if you're talking about the demographic, that certainly plays a part in why we don't see girls involved, like we do in Hackney or Brixton, girls are involved in gangs. And, you know, in some situations are seen in very senior roles. But you just don't see that [in this borough].

(A-078)

Our practitioner survey also asked respondents to comment on the extent to which a range of more specific activities involving girls and young women affiliated with gangs took place. A total of 69 practitioners responded to this question; responses are summarised at Figure 7.

Figure 7 – Practitioner survey: "To what extent do the following take place in relation to street gangs/offending groups in your area?" (% by response category)
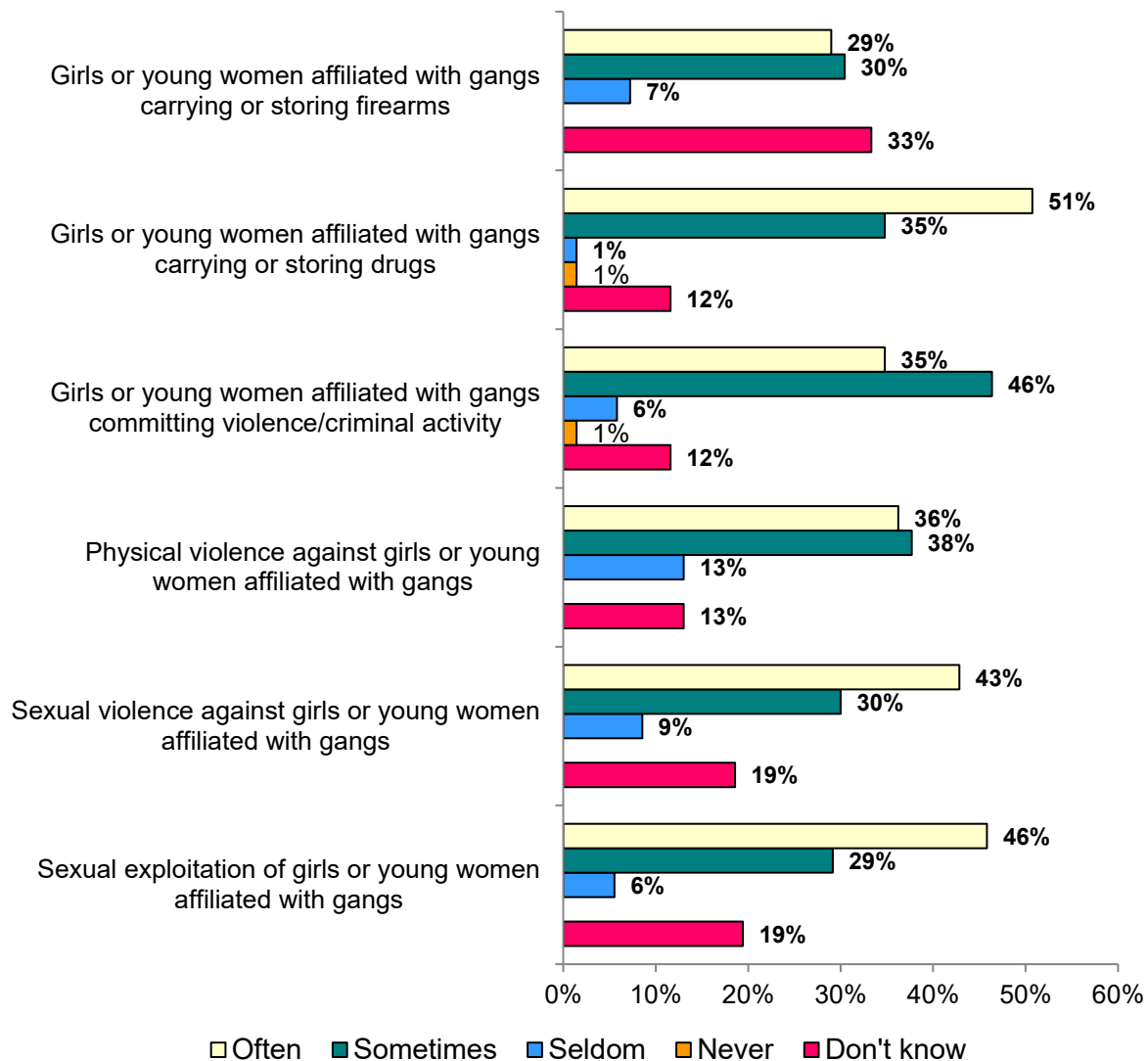
(N=69; percentages of zero are not shown in the Figure)

The feedback summarised in the above figure suggests that practitioners tend to think that girls and young women are in fact involved in gang activities in a range of ways, but this is not necessarily inconsistent with the view that was also commonly expressed, about the "invisibility" of such involvement. Part of the overall point made by some respondents was that gangs are traditionally viewed through a "male offender" lens, and that it might be more useful to adopt a focus on gender more broadly when looking at gangs and when addressing issues concerning gang activity.

Practitioners were also asked whether they thought that there had been any changes in the involvement of women and girls in the activities of street gangs or offending groups over the last 12 months[12], and 70 practitioners responded. Just under half of

---

[12] See note 3, above.

those respondents were not sure whether there had been any changes, but 16% claimed that there had not, with 37% claiming that there had.

Those respondents who felt that there had been a change were then asked to comment on that change and the possible reasons for it, and all of them offered some comment on this (N=26). *All* of these respondents felt that at least some of the issues listed in the main question had become worse over the past year, and cross-tabulations showed that these respondents were involved directly in work focusing on exploitation or gang activities (with the majority being experienced police officers having those roles). Hence, they were in a position to comment from an experienced standpoint, although they obviously did not all comment on the same trends.

About a third of them felt that females were becoming involved in gang activities more often than previously and that they were also starting to do so at a younger age.

In the DSL survey, respondents were given the opportunity to skip the section on girls and young women, and 72% did so. Among those who did respond, there were still high levels of "don't knows", and so we have not included a table such as the above one for practitioner respondents. Some of the DSLs did offer useful open-ended comments on the involvement of girls and young women in the area where there school was located however.

Fourteen DSL respondents suggested that there had been changes in these issues over the last 12 months, and 12 of those respondents provided further feedback about those perceived changes. About half of them referred to increased levels of risk, to an increase in numbers of cases where exploitation was an issue, or to a decrease in the age of girls who were becoming involved in either CSE or CCE.

One suggested that female parents in the area were gang-affiliated, and another suggested that there had been an increase of female on female violence in the area.

As some of the above comments already suggest, there was a tension in the remarks made to us about the involvement of girls and young women in the activities of gangs, between perspectives that framed that involvement solely in terms of exploitation or coercion (framing their involvement purely as a safeguarding issue because most of them are traumatised and coerced into involvement), and those that attributed higher levels of agency to girls and young women who had such involvement (they actually know what they are doing, and they make their own autonomous decisions about whether and how to be involved).

Issues concerning the problematic nature of "consent" among women and girls involved in gang activity have also come up in previous research, where those involved might talk about their involvement as if it is a result of their own autonomous decision-making, but where an outside practitioner might see it as survival in a context of coercion.[13] As one police respondent expressed it:

---

[13] Some of the examples provided by respondents are quite similar to those uncovered in previous research – e.g., in some of the feedback provided by practitioners involved in previous work under the Ending Gangs and Youth Violence initiative, as reported in Disley and Liddle (2016).

> *It is a really tricky situation for the police to protect these females as they often do not feel like they are victims and pick up on anti-police sentiment from the older males. I think more joint working with charities/more education needs to be done around this. A lot of (male) police officers are drawn into the thinking that if the girls appear to be consenting to the activities then they are suspects and it is all through their own choice and this should really be addressed.*

(PRAC-79200356)

More general issues also came up about the sexual harassment of girls and young women, with these issues being commented on both by female research respondents in our surveys and interviews, and by practitioners who worked with girls and young women directly. As is the case nationally (and as recent events such as the murder of Sarah Everard have brought sharply into the foreground for many)[14], this kind of regular harassment was felt to be very common – even a daily experience for some girls and young women. It was also felt that the issue was seldom addressed directly, and that there was little sense of any accountability.

One of our young interview respondents described her own experience being "cat-called" by construction workers, for example:

> *Yes, because those construction workers are so creepy, I literally walk this way to school now, they're so creepy, they're always watching me and I don't like it, it's so uncomfortable. And, the amount of times I get catcalled, even when I'm dressed and completely covered I still get catcalled, even on the days I feel my most ugliest I still get catcalled, it does not make sense and it just shows you it does not matter what you wear, it can happen to anyone. But, yes, I have felt the need to carry a weapon but not all the time.*

(A-YP06)

The idea that it *can happen to anyone* resonates with findings from other research about the pervasiveness of women's experiences of harassment across categories of class, ethnicity and age, but it was also highlighted in the remarks that we gathered, that there is often a sense of fatalism about such behaviour – a sense that it's not worth complaining about, because it's always happening and it's going to continue happening anyway.

4.3 The view from schools

Schools were regarded by practitioners as being of particular importance to efforts to address issues around violence and exploitation, for several key reasons:

First, schools provide opportunities for qualified staff to identify young people who are being victimised or exploited, and to liaise with key authorities about

---

[14] And also perhaps the Child Q case (see (Gamble and McCallum, 2022, for an overview), which highlighted issues not only about the safety of young women and girls, but about ethnicity and the "adultification" of young Black girls – which involves taking a view of them as possible offenders and suspects, rather than as children for whom a safeguarding approach might seem more justified.

interventions to enhance and support children's safety. Second, schools were described by practitioners as being key sites for delivering interventions that can build individual resilience among children and young people, which can allow them to resist factors that otherwise threaten to pull them into activities that threaten their safety and wellbeing.

Third, it was felt that schools can function as places of safety for young people, and particularly for young people whose concern for their own safety is chronic and linked to hypervigilance which in turn is linked to previous adverse experience. A few respondents also commented on how sustained hypervigilance and related impacts from previous trauma or victimisation can have profound developmental implications for young people, and can also have adverse effects on behaviour and attitudes over time – comments which also resonate with what we know from other research about these impacts.

Because of this significance, the research team felt it would add value to the study to gather feedback about some of the key issues from Designated Safeguarding Leads (DSLs) at schools across London, as referred to in Section 2.

We also felt that feedback concerning (and from) schools should be presented in a separate section, even though there are obvious overlaps with issues presented in other sections.

Our survey of DSLs provided a unique strand of data for the research, and involved useful coverage across areas of London and by school type. Further details concerning the survey and responses to it are provided in the Appendix.[15]

In terms of the current context, feedback from the DSL survey highlighted a perception that some issues around violence and exploitation were fairly common in the areas where their schools were located, although this obviously varied considerably by issue (and by each respondent's level of knowledge about that issue, with many respondents for some issues answering "don't know").

---

[15] A national survey of DSLs in providers in the post-16 education and skills sector is reported on in Education and Training Foundation (2021), which did focus on some of the issues that we asked about in our own survey. A national survey of DSLs in schools was also undertaken while we were writing up our own research, and it focused largely on workload, policies, training, and the perceived effectiveness of ICT usage monitoring (a brief summary can be found at: https://www.judiciumeducation.co.uk/news/Newsflash-Schools-find-key-safeguarding-areas-highly-challenging-according-to-new-Judicium-survey). Our own survey is unique in having a specific focus on London DSLs from primary and secondary establishments (along with a few post-secondary), and also focusing on perceptions of both key safeguarding issues and their occurrence, and key local "drivers".

Figure 8 – DSL survey – "Regarding violence and exploitation, how often do the following incidents normally take place in your school or surrounding area?" (% by response category)

Often ▢   Sometimes ■   Seldom ■   Never ■   Don't know ■
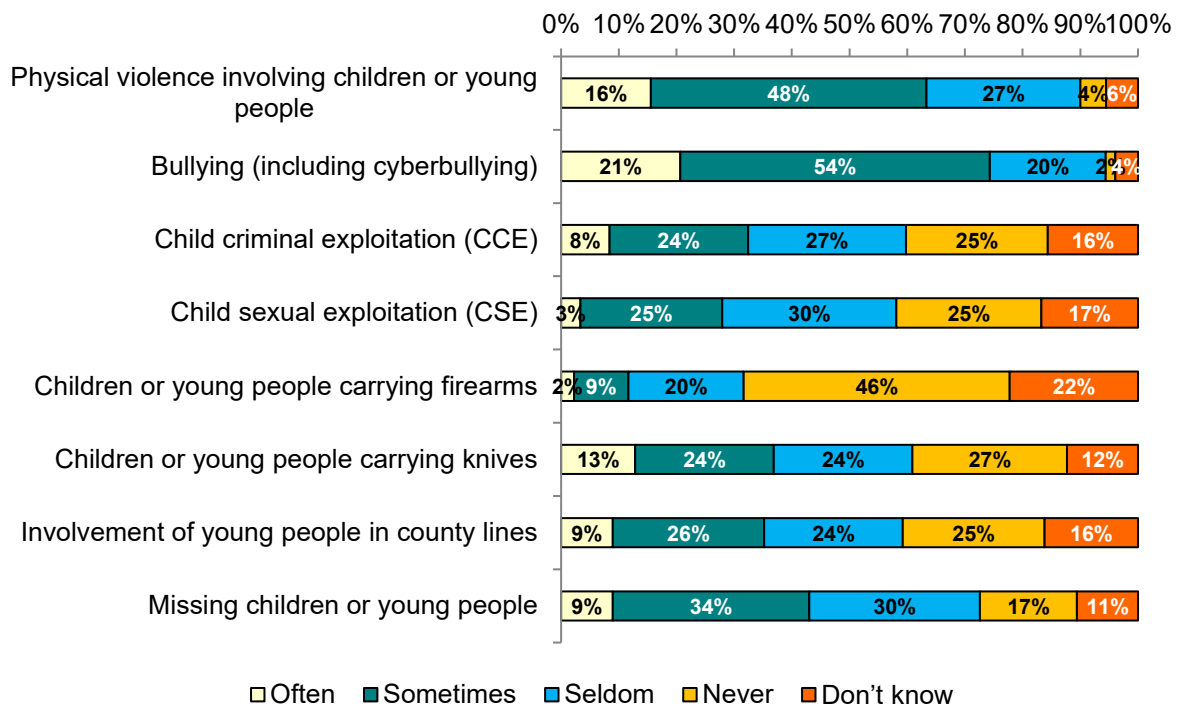
(n=181)

DSL were also asked for feedback about changes in a range of more specific violence and exploitation issues, but there were high levels of "don't know"s in their responses, so we have not reproduced the figure here. A quarter of the items had more than 50% of respondents answering "don't know", and for several of these the level was above 90%.

DSLs also felt that levels of serious youth violence had generally increased in the area where their school was located, with 50% claiming that levels had increased either a lot or a little over the last 12 months, and 26% claiming that levels had stayed much the same (and 21% claiming that they did not know).

Figure 9 –DSL survey: "Over the last 12 months, would you say that overall levels of serious youth violence in the area where your school is have . . . " (% by response category)
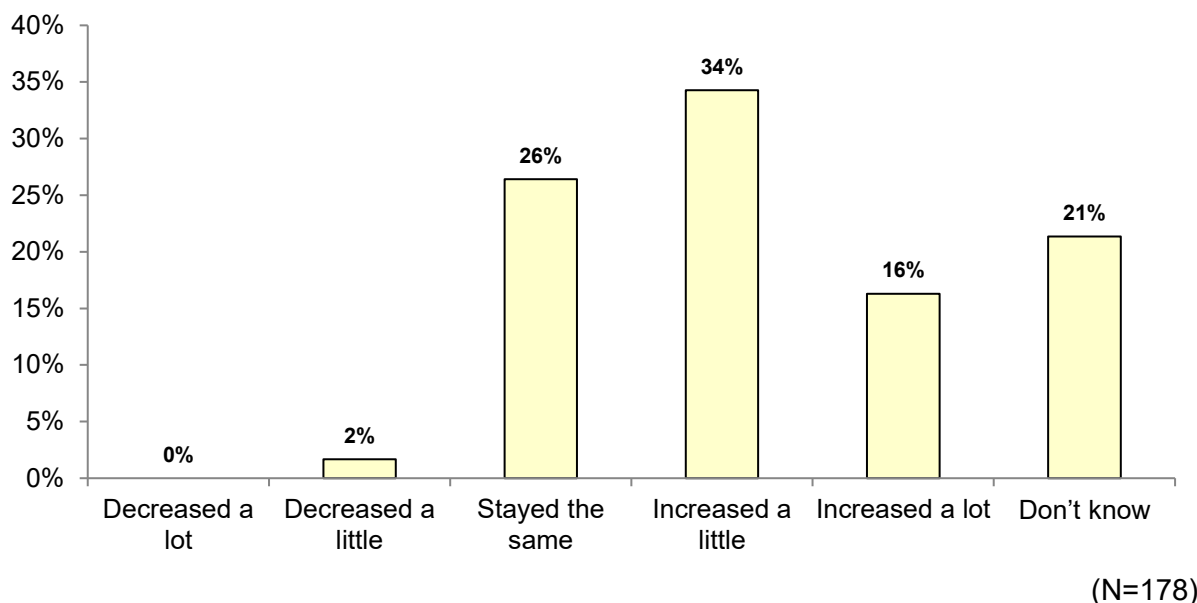
(N=178)

In terms of contextual factors within families in the areas where their schools were located, DSLs were asked to comment on how common or otherwise some of these factors are. Their responses to those questions are summarised at Figure 10.

Figure 10 – DSL survey – "How common are the following issues, in relation to families in the catchment area of your school?" (% by response category)

☐ Very common ■ Common ■ Uncommon ■ Rare ■ Very rare ■ Don't know
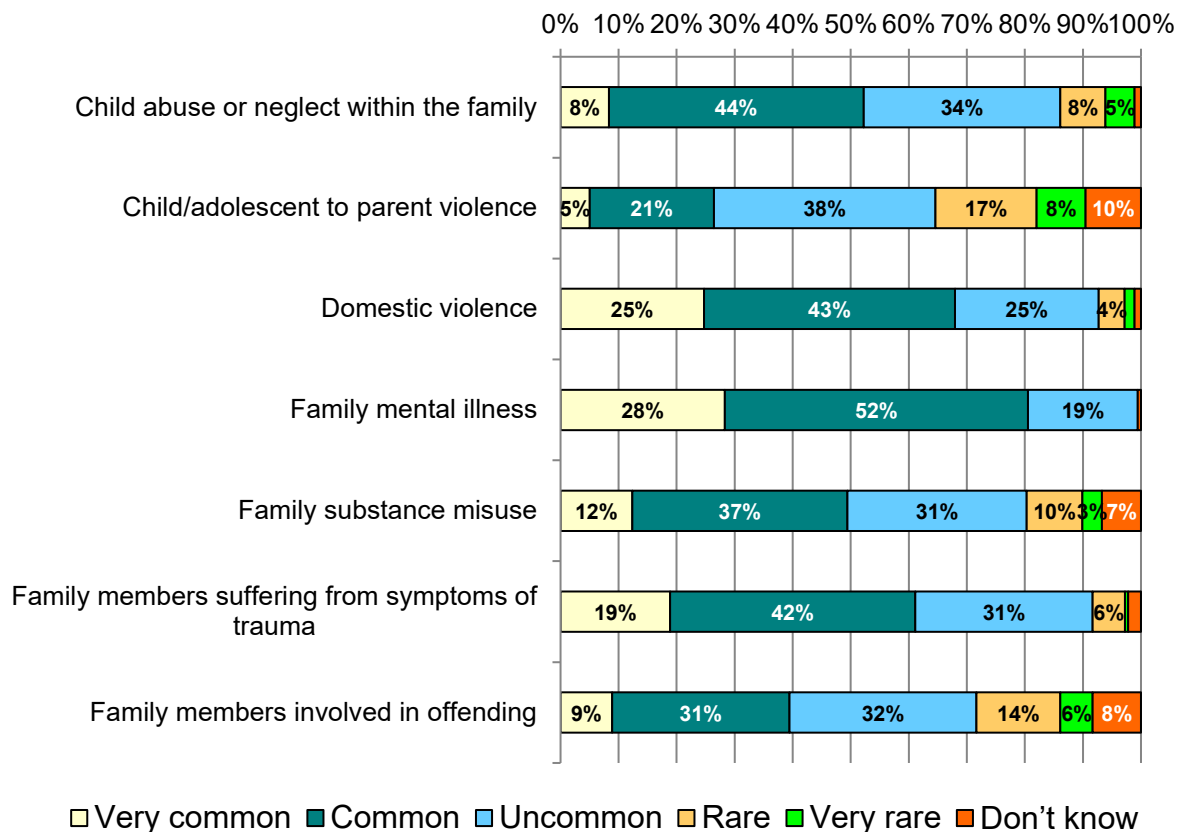
(n=180; not answered=1; data labels for values of 2% or less have not been included on graphic)

This feedback concerning contextual issues is obviously concerning, with some issues – e.g., family mental illness, family trauma, and domestic violence – having quite high proportions of respondents reporting that they are either common or very common in their areas. Because the survey was anonymous (and could not be linked to a specific named school, for example) it was quite difficult to access official estimates for some of these issues, although these estimates themselves are often quite speculative and do not focus on very small areas.[16]

They were also asked to comment on whether these issues had changed at all over the last 12 months, and respondents largely indicated that a range of such issues had got worse rather than better. The open-ended comments suggest that respondents knew this because they already knew many of the families in question, and some also tried to keep in touch even during lockdown). Responses are summarised at Figure 11.

---

[16] A useful discussion of some of the issues around estimating the prevalence of such problems can be found in Bywaters et al. (2022), where they discuss estimating levels of child abuse and neglect in circumstances of multiple disadvantage.

Broadly speaking the feedback about increases are consistent with what we know from other research and from media reports, suggesting that both violence within the family and mental health issues within the family increased during the whole period of intermittent COVID restrictions. It is interesting that DSL reported that child/adolescent violence to parents also increased during the period specified (with 73% of respondents claiming that that issue got either slightly worse or a lot worse), although it seems likely that all forms of violence within the family could worsen in circumstances were familial proximity was unbroken by school attendance, and where financial stress was also added into the mix.

Figure 11 –DSL survey – "For each of the following issues, do you think it has changed at all in your area in the last 12 months: " (% by response category)

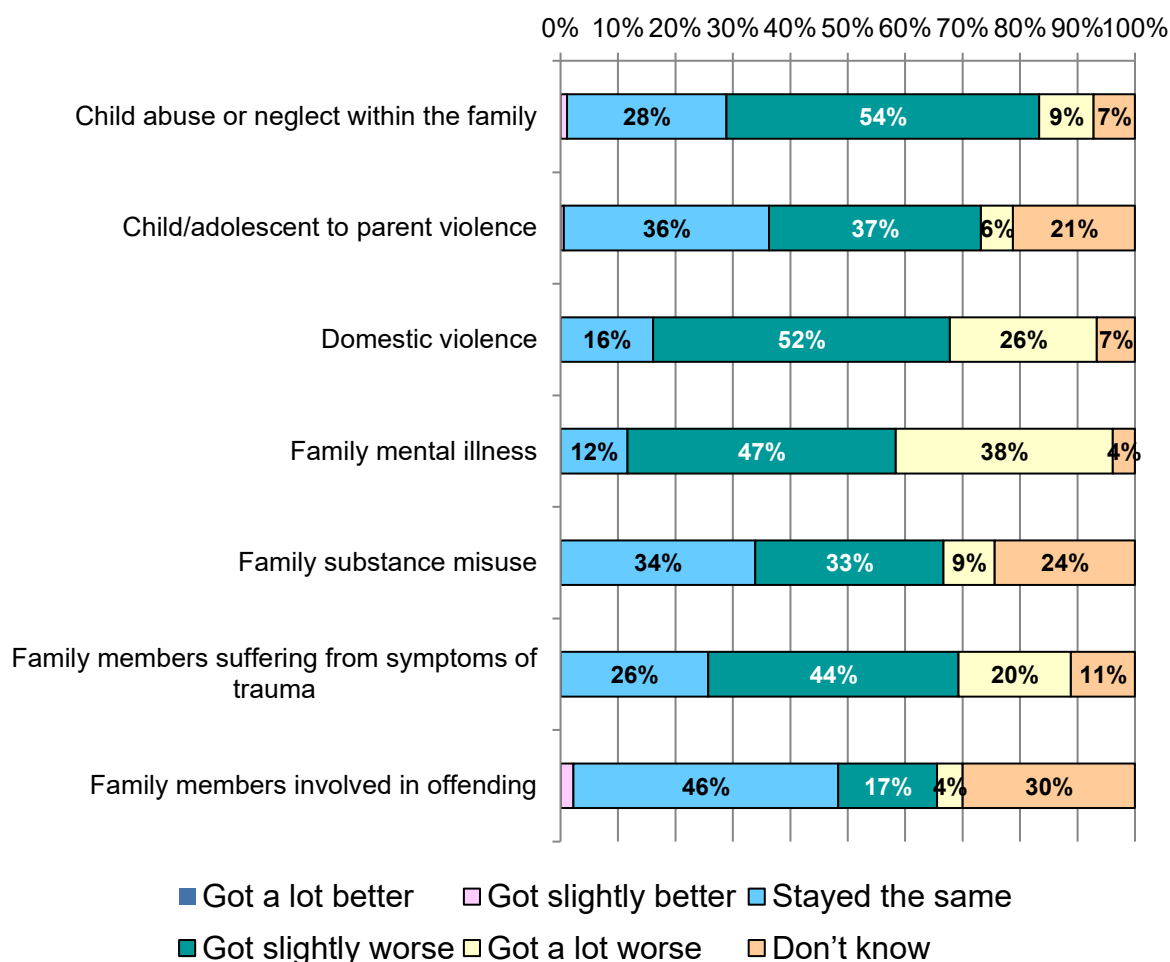(n=180; not answered=1; data labels for values of 2% or less have not been included on graphic)

DSLs are in a real sense "at the coalface" in relation to some of these issues, and many expressed frustration to us, that the scope for them to take steps that will actually result in improvements for young people is quite narrow in some areas – even when the issues include serious victimisation. Examples of the following sort were provided to us by DSLs.

> *Safeguarding Partners do share information well but responses can be poor. One of the most frustrating things is short-term interventions so you don't see impact, changes in personnel (social workers in particular). Poor and ineffective Early Help work. Recent experience with children going missing suggests that this is an area for much improved joined up work with Police and social care and improved communication.*
>
> (DSL-78505169)

Others commented on "repeated meetings" that seemed not to end in any effective action:

> *Sadly, often the only outcome of initiatives is a series of meetings and their respective minutes circulated to a list of well-meaning people. The only way to*

make a positive difference for these young people is to have a genuine alternative available to them. Sports clubs, social clubs, cadet/military fitness training, mental health walk-ins etc. In short, a huge amount of money, but far less that it costs to try and paper over these issues later in life.

(DSL-79209434)

I do not think the current cooperative system is designed to provide active help to vulnerable young people. Instead, it seems to generate repeated meetings, often with lots of people present, that repeatedly rehash the same information. There seems to then be no change to the situation.

(DSL-78505405)

The feedback from DSLs highlighted for us the way in which people in that role are in a unique position to watch young people's life trajectories play out in some cases over several years. One respondent commented on the kinds of "cycles" that are witnessed, for example:

I know and can personally recognise adults in local gangs as ex pupils of my school. I can name many future gang members/criminals that are currently only primary school pupils. We are not doing enough to prevent this cycle repeating. Poverty and ineffective parenting is entrenched. An 8 year old boy just follows his older role models already and repeats their behaviours.

(DSL-79519886)

As noted earlier DSL comments on gangs and violence in the area of their schools varied considerably, but it was clear that in some schools, those issues affected a majority of the young people attending. One DSL made reference to a "straw poll" undertaken on these issues which reinforced that perception:

As a PS [primary school] *we are seeing the impact on younger siblings in relation to older siblings involvement in gangs/ violence due to them being exploited by elders. At a recent assembly over 75% of Y6 and Y5 children acknowledged either knowing someone or having a relative involved in gangs.*[17]

(DSL-78156600)

Feedback suggests that some schools were not thought to be safe spaces for some young people, however, because of bullying for example (which just under 70% of DSLs felt had got either slightly worse, or a lot worse over the last 12 months). Travel to and from school also appeared to be a source of considerable anxiety for some young people. There appears to be significant under-reporting of crime in and around schools with many crimes not being reported at all (particularly crimes that

---

[17] It is worth noting that although this figure seems high, it should be regarded as broadly indicative at best. Many of those who responded to that effect (presumably by a show of hands, which is not always a very reliable feedback method) may have known or known about even a very small number of such individuals. Also, while a "relative" is obviously defined at some level, "know someone" is not. Still, the point that the respondent was making is that in their area, gangs are very much in people's perceptions.

concern young people travelling to and from school, which were referred to in feedback both from young people and DSL respondents).

In at least one borough, it was reported that changes to school catchment areas had meant significant changes to such bonded group affiliations as now two brothers or two neighbours might go to different schools miles apart. This was said by local gang workers to have changed the dynamics for some local gangs bringing in new unexpected affiliations which were less pronounced simply by shared experience at school. It was also said to have increased the risk of violence for some young people as they now have further to travel to get to school and they must travel across other estates to reach there.

However, most DSLs did characterise the quality of their partnership working in a fairly positive manner, as they did in relation to questions about the role and resourcing of safeguarding activity in their own schools. Responses to some questions do illustrate a small "U-shaped" distribution however, which shows that there is variability across areas of London (as we would expect)[18]. (See Figure 15 in section 4.9.2 for DSL views on safeguarding partnerships more generally.)

---

[18] There can also be variations in responses both within particular boroughs (i.e. between different schools in the same borough), and even within a single school (in cases where staff teams are divided in their views about a particular issue).

Figure 12 – DSL survey: "To what extent would you agree or disagree with the following statements:" (% by response category)
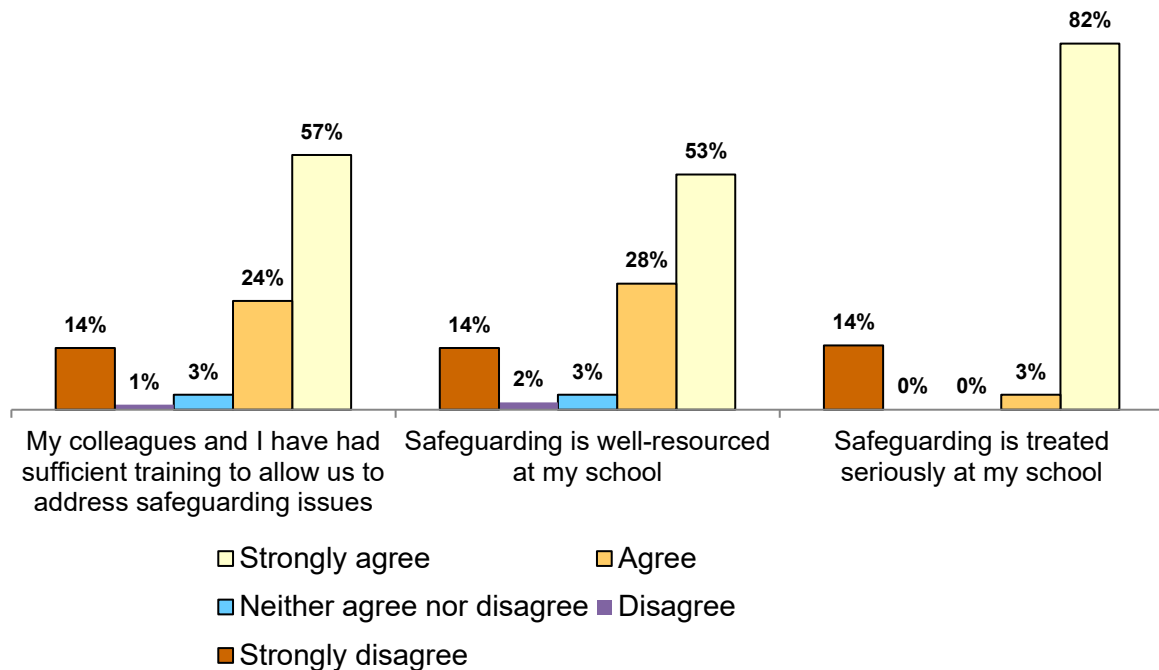
(n=180; not answered=1)

Feedback about schools from some of our young respondents highlights a perception that they do not get the full set of information regarding their safety from their schools – for example there are high levels of street robbery around some schools but this is seldom raised according to some pupils.

Some young people said that "honest conversations were not had at school" – meaning that issues such the reality of crime, drugs and violence were ignored, downplayed, minimised regularly. Many young people felt talked down to or patronised by staff and adults, when it was the adults who were out of touch, or who "couldn't handle the truth" about everyday violence and its impact on young people.

Some young people commented to us that DSLs were there for the school and not so much for them - acting for the school to help protect and safeguard school reputations – and also criticised DSLs as being too remote, detached, middle-class and not from the area they work in, but parachuted in. Thus, it was felt that some DSLs had a poor or limited grasp of the local pressures and lived experience of the pupils, and this seemed to be linked to an expressed reluctance to report or disclose.

Some Older Gang Consultants working with young people felt that DSLs were reactive to what they were told by young people and were not in any way proactive. Nor did they foster a proactive safeguarding environment within the school and the community, possibly through under-resourcing or a lack of direction, but possibly that their role was designated and thus boxed-off as opposed to mainstreamed across all staff.

One respondent went much further, suggesting that:

> *[T]he safeguarding leads, the people that are in responsible positions to safeguard our young people are very, very blind, deaf and dumb to the issues. They have to be spoon-fed these issues through training, literally, that's the only way they're going to learn it. And that's something that we've understood, that's a really, really big issue. All of these schools in this area, and all of the places locally, all the safeguarding leads, the majority of them are white. And they don't like to learn from ethnic minorities like myself. . . .We could see that there is a huge disparity and it's very much perpetuated by white people given positions of power.*
>
> (A-FG-PROJ3-01)

The reference to "spoon-feeding" is obviously derogatory and underlies a broader perspective on disproportionality which was held by a small minority, but which was expressed to us now and again during the research.

In terms of safeguarding young people more generally, several respondents (and DSLs) made reference to the need for a broader and more critical view of safeguarding itself – one which moved beyond a focus only on the immediate family for example. "Contextual safeguarding" was sometimes referred to in this context, as being a useful example of such a broader focus. That approach involves risk assessing the environment above and beyond that of the domestic environment, and in particular focusing on potential risks associated with peer groups, neighbourhoods and public space, schools, and also online space.[19]

---

[19] Carlene Firmin at the University of Bedfordshire has pioneered the development of contextual safeguarding frameworks – see in particular Firmin (2020) for a detailed discussion and background. Evaluation evidence concerning contextual safeguarding approaches is still accumulating, although recent studies include Lefevre et al. (2020) which focused on a contextual safeguarding system implemented in Hackney. Although that study concluded that "It is too early for robust evidence to be generated regarding improved service user experiences or enhanced child-level outcomes", it did highlight the extent to which the contextual safeguarding framework can facilitate the development of new processes and practices that are well placed in the longer term to generate measurable positive outcomes. It is also worth noting that that framework is much more closely aligned with public health

In our discussions with the range of practitioners and professionals that we consulted as part of the research it did seem to us that there was less sense of professional cohesion amongst DSLs as compared with some other professional groups such as social workers, or youth workers. Opportunities for the development of a stronger professional identity do not appear to have been embraced or acted on.

4.4 Feedback from the case study areas

Although many of the issues that we focused on in the area-based part of the research overlap with those discussed in other sections of the report, we decided to present some of the key findings in a separate section.

As we noted in section 3, the response rates for the survey components of our feedback collection on sampled estates were poor, and for us this was a significant finding in itself, which led us to probe local community representatives (and in some cases local councillors and other professionals who worked in the area) to find out why in more detail.

According to some of our police contacts there were local concerns about using survey links or survey QR codes, because levels of fraud and local scams had increased markedly during lockdown, and had made residents highly suspicious, and unlikely to trust surveys that required the use of these methods for questionnaire completion.

At the same time, there seems to have been an increase in the use of these consultation methods, and some areas were "flooded" with multiple consultations during the period we were attempting to generate interest in our own surveys. We were made aware of surveys implemented by local Councils during the same period, that generated zero responses.

It was also pointed out to us that in some of the areas we were looking at there were significant problems with "the digital divide", and at a time of increasing financial hardship, this problem was more apparent than usual[20]. While we have experienced this in previous research as well, we did not in this case also use hard copy questionnaires which could have been completed by those having no access to computers or smart phones (the implementation of a hard copy component does involve significantly more resources).

(and whole systems) approaches to violence and exploitation reduction work, than are more traditional approaches to safeguarding young people within the family.

[20] The term refers to the division between those who have access to computers and the internet, and those who do not. Also referred to as "digital exclusion", research suggests that such exclusion is complicated but determined primarily by income and age. Concerning the former, ONS data suggest that only 51% of households earning between £6,000 and £10,000 had internet access in the home, as compared with 99% of households with an income of over £40,001 (https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/householdcharacteristics/homeinternetands ocialmediausage/articles/exploringtheuksdigitaldivide/2019-03-04). The impact of the "divide" worsened for young people in particular during COVID restrictions, because those from households with no access to the internet (and/or to computing equipment) were disadvantaged in terms of continuing with their education (https://www.cchpr.landecon.cam.ac.uk/system/files/documents/digital_divide_research.pdf). The

But another significant reason for non-response had more to do with the way in which residents in our sample areas seem to have perceived our choice of their areas for consultation, and our reasons for consulting them about violence in particular.

In all the areas we found a level of distrust of "official" surveys into local experience, which they felt would never be acted on or result in any change for them. This perception was reinforced by the fact that many residents felt that they had been "consulted to death" on some of these issues, and that they had also been given promises about possible changes to their estates or areas, or possible extra funding for local community groups and so on, which had never materialised.[21]

It was also felt that some local residents were tired of having their areas labelled in the media and elsewhere as "high crime areas", and that some resented having another survey come in and reinforce that label by asking yet more questions about violence. As a local councillor in one of the areas put it:

> *I do think residents are fed up with their estate and area being consistently classed as a place riddled with crime. Residents take pride in their community and have been working well to bring people together.*
>
> (B-165)

In a sense, the final group of 47 survey respondents was more like an interview sample than a survey one, although the responses themselves are informative and useful, and did add value to the final data-set.

The respondents were predominantly White (38 out of 47), compared with a London average of about 60%), with 29 being female, and 18 being male.

The questionnaire asks about the resident's overall level of satisfaction with their area as a place to live, and also about whether things have got better or worse (or not changed) over the past 12 months.[22]

In relation to overall satisfaction, 25 out of 47 respondents claimed to be "fairly satisfied", with 12 claiming to be either "fairly dissatisfied" or "very dissatisfied".

In terms of levels of violence and related issues in their areas, it was obviously expected that residents would perceive that these levels were high, given the way in which we sampled the areas in the first place. Local residents did perceive rates to be fairly high for the full range of issues that we asked them about, and concerning

---

problem is particularly acute in some parts of London, and has led to the development of the Digital Inclusion Innovation Programme for example, and to a recent mapping exercise of efforts to address digital exclusion in London (https://loti.london/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/LOTI-Digital_Inclusion_Report.pdf).

[21] Again, there are some interesting overlaps between our findings here and those presented by Kane et. al. (2022) in their study of neighbourhoods and violence.

[22] See note 3.

violence in general, 25 out of 46 respondents described levels in their own areas as being either very high or high.

Many residents also felt that violence had gotten worse in the areas that they lived in, with 21 out of 47 respondents suggesting that it had either got slightly or got a lot worse. Respondents also reported similar increases across a range of specific issues that we asked about (including knife crime, verbal abuse/threatening behaviour in public spaces, on-the-street violence, people dealing drugs in public, robbery/theft from the person, and similar issues), but there were high levels of "don't knows". More generally in terms of whether their area had got better or worse as a place to live over the past 12 months[23], residents also reported a worsening of conditions. Twenty-three out of 47 respondents felt that their area had gotten either slightly or a lot worse, and 16 felt that it had stayed the same. Five out of 47 respondents felt that their area had gotten "slightly" better.

It was also of particular interest to us to learn whether respondents were themselves concerned about levels of serious youth violence in the areas where they lived, so we asked specifically about this after reminding respondents how we were defining "serious youth violence". Respondents were asked "How concerned are you personally about levels of serious youth violence" in their area, and 36 out of 47 respondents claimed to be either "moderately concerned" or "extremely concerned". Only 6 out of 47 respondents claimed to be "not at all concerned". Those who suggested that they did have some level of concern about serious youth violence were routed to a couple of questions about whether that concern had any impact on the way that they lived their lives, and what sort of impact that this was. In responses to the former question, 25 answered "yes", and 21 answered "no" (one respondent did not know).

Nineteen residents commented specifically on the impact that concern about violence had on the way that they lived their day to day lives, with most of these comments being about how the resident is afraid to move about the area during certain times of the day or night, or how they avoid particular areas altogether. Others made it clear that they would prefer to live somewhere else, and some residents referred to multiple impacts in the same response:

I feel I can't take my children out around certain areas. I might not necessarily be a target but I'm worried about getting caught in the crossfire. I also am concerned my children will grow up thinking this is normal and soliciting drugs is acceptable.

---

[23] See note 3, above.

(RES-170863110)

Having been the victim of street robbery I'm always scared coming home after dark but also now worry even in busy public spaces. I've seen guns being shown off to girls by young men, walked passed blooded pavements, watched untold acts of threatening behaviour in public spaces. All these things make life often intolerable and my adult children keep advising I should move away for a safer life.

(RES-168688870)

The impact is immense, having a disability means that one is limited to the immediate area. Following a recent assault in my local park means I now also feel unable to access local green spaces, as they are unsafe, due to drug paraphernalia and all the other crimes that are associated with it. I have to constantly alter my schedule in and around those who are offending and being offensive, if I want to be outside at all.

(RES-169948041)

I do not feel safe walking alone and feel the need to use the car even for short journeys. The lack of CCTV cameras and police presence makes me feel even more unsafe as the public do not step in to assist if there is something 'brewing'. The amount of drugs being dealt has dramatically increased with people being moved on, only to be replaced by others within the same gang. I wanted an escooter for fun but I am afraid even to ride it in the park in fear of being robbed. I am afraid of wearing gold jewellery or using my mobile phone in public in fear of being robbed as crime is now taking place openly during broad daylight, criminals no longer wait for sun down It's much easier to commit 'quick easy targeted crimes' during the day.

(RES-169721627)

We are due to have a child soon and have no desire to raise them in this area.

(RES-169124463)

The feedback also suggests that alongside these kinds of perceptions about the severity and trends of violence in their areas, there is a sense of community and "locatedness" for many residents. The survey questionnaires did ask about overall levels of satisfaction with the area, and also about levels of trust in neighbours, whether people felt they could socialise with their neighbours, whether people from different backgrounds "get on well in this area", and so on. For most claims of that sort, at least half of respondents answered that they either agreed or strongly agreed, and in the open-ended comments (as well as direct interviews), residents in some of the areas expressed frustration that their areas had been stigmatised in the media for being dangerous and out of control.

The feedback highlights an interesting mix of concern about personal safety on the one hand, and on the other, a sense that high violence areas can also be places where there is a sense of community and where residents can find support from one another. More generally, the feedback highlights how difficult to interpret "feelings of safety" can be, and how those perceptions might interact with varieties (and the context of) social connectedness.

Previous research has shown how areas of very high crime can also have high levels of resident connectedness (see Bottoms and Wilson, 2007, and Bottoms 2009), and also how visible local efforts to address difficulties (e.g., through local projects and community activism) can act as "control signs" which can in turn affect feelings of safety (see Innes, 2014 for a discussion). We also know from other research that different groups can have widely varying thresholds for "feeling safe", with some traumatised or vulnerable groups – including gang-affiliated young people for example – struggling to feel safe anywhere.[24]

It is also worth noting that in some of our case study areas, we found examples where residents and community workers were involved in efforts to address local issues (such as projects to support children and young people for example) and where those efforts appeared both to facilitate oasis-like pockets of local safety, and to provide visible signs to other residents that positive steps were being taken to improve conditions. Some local projects in these areas also appeared to be effective in terms of generating positive changes for those who they worked with (although we were obviously not in a position to evaluate them), and some were also inspirational for our team members who spoke with residents and workers in those areas – not least because such projects sometimes functioned with very little outside support or funding, and they were staffed by committed and determined individuals.

Views among residents about policing were mixed (see also section 4.9.3), but some residents did describe events involving the police that were particularly negative.

One resident interviewee described a stop and search incident which she witnessed, for example, involving a local boy from the estate, where half a dozen undercover police officers searched the boy on the street on his way to school. Apparently they found nothing, but then left him crying and picking up his own school books. The resident was somewhat politicised by the incident, and subsequently discovered that many of the estate's young people were also stopped and searched on their way to school. Members of the research team were not able to speak with officers involved in those incidents, but clearly, if even a few such incidents generate these kinds of perceptions among local residents (and among young people), that will obviously have implications for police-community relations and for the effectiveness of policing in the area more generally. We did hear quite a few descriptions of this kind, although again, the specific details could not usually be corroborated.

In some of the areas that we focused on, there had also been a clear impact on communities when young people in particular were lost to local violence - this is often not recognised and would benefit from further research, but it was clearly visible to the research team on certain estates and in ongoing conversations with young people. There is often a sense of idolising anyone who has "fallen" or "passed" due to street violence – as realised and visualised by the erection of public murals and public grieving events – although those practices are also sometimes linked to reminders of the need to take revenge and engage in violence.

---

[24] See Van der Kolk (2014, Chapter 5) for a useful discussion of the issue.

Further study of what we have called "community trauma" could be quite beneficial for the violence reduction field. The notion is relevant for several reasons beyond just looking at the impacts of local violent deaths of young people – it is relevant also to issues around some of the other correlates of high violence areas, and since many of these areas also have higher levels of residents from BAME groups (and are more likely to be deprived as measured on the usual scales), the issue is also relevant to efforts to understand links between trauma and disproportionality – links which have motivated the authors of some recent reports on this to have separate sections that discuss community trauma (see for example, IOPC, 2022).

Finally, both interview and survey respondents in some local areas made reference to connections between "HMOs" (houses in multiple occupation) and what we would call the vulnerability landscape in those areas. What has happened in some areas of London – Redbridge and Croydon in particular – is that because of the availability of relatively cheap private rental properties, practices have developed that involve the placement of vulnerable groups (e.g., substance misusers, individuals who would otherwise be homeless, young people in care, and individuals with mental health difficulties) in those high density accommodations.

That co-location of vulnerable groups in what are sometimes very geographically concentrated areas can create a dynamic critical mass of both drug dealers and users for example, which crystallises into a self-sustaining and resilient local drugs economy, but which also fuels a variety of forms of exploitation, and the violence which underpins those. As a police respondent in one borough described it:

> *A lot of our problem in* [this borough]*, the drugs problem is down to the housing of the users and the dealers. Right in the middle of the town centre, we've got a few roads, a block of roads that are all HMOs and bail hostels and cheap hotels and they are full of drug dealers and drug users. It's the bail hostels, the HMOs, the cheap property and the hotels, that's where the market is coming from….The lion's share is coming from the cheap property.*
> (B-FG, INT6)

A senior manager of a voluntary sector organisation described connections between placement in HMOs, vulnerability and exploitation:

I just mean that we need to look at all the systems and not think that if we put a little youth violence project over here we'll solve the problem when we're not solving the systematic issues. And whether that is funding or addressing it differently or whatever we've got to do, we will keep feeding this if we don't take care of some of those most vulnerable people in our society that I suppose as a local authority, and I'm going to say 'we' because I don't see that we're doing different parts of this role; we are not doing our jobs, corporate parents, the way that we treat kids in care. . . I mean, it boggles my mind how we can allow young people in care to be pushed out to a bedsit in an HMO in some crappy part of town, with no interaction, no guidance, no authority figures. So, obviously when somebody comes along and says, would you like to jump on my county line, but you'll have to go and live in Lincolnshire, well, in a way, they've kind of already done that, haven't they. So, you know, it's they're institutionalised into thinking, OK, well that's doable, but this time I'm going to make some money, so, you know, why not?

(A122)

A local authority drugs worker made more specific reference to the vulnerability of rehabilitating drug users being placed in HMOs:

And we constantly have a problem with people that we treat, that become abstinent or come out of rehab and then they end up getting housed in an HMO round the station. And, from my perspective, realistic how long do we help somebody early in recovery from drug addiction. And of course the dealers will of course target them, absolutely.

(B-FG, INT2)

Many HMOs are required to be licensed, but depending on the borough, this sometimes applies only to larger HMOs (where 5 or more people from 2 or more unrelated households live and share facilities) – these are subject to Mandatory Licensing, but that is not always enforced effectively.

Respondents to the residents' survey also mentioned HMOs as being responsible for increases in a range of crime and related problems in their own areas:

[The estate] *has become a catchment area for* [the Council] *to dump vulnerable people without supporting them sufficiently. The council also does not enforce HMO licensing. This has created a toxic environment filled with people who are unable to cope with the stresses of the pandemic. . . Encourage* [local projects] *to support their vulnerable tenants and to police against antisocial behaviour. Police against idling cars to deter the drug dealers. Enforce HMO rules to deter slumlords from renting a single house to 25 single men.*

(RES-168698054)

One of the many local data-sets that members of the research team received during the study, was a small database with detailed material concerning vulnerable individuals placed in a sample of HMOs in a small area in one borough. Our analysis of that material (and of responses to questions that we asked local stakeholders about it) highlighted how complex the range of individual needs can be, and how difficult the management issues are that this kind of co-location can introduce. Our investigation also showed how some of these difficulties were not anticipated by local professionals in advance, and how difficult to address they can be once they become rooted in an area.

One implication of this for local violence and exploitation reduction work seems to be that key stakeholders who focus on HMOs and related developments could profitably be brought onto multi-agency planning or strategic groups if they are not already there, and that a shared understanding of how developments in housing can be linked to the local "vulnerability landscape" can also help in the adoption of contextual safeguarding approaches (and the management of vulnerability by key public agencies).

4.5 Violence, vulnerability and local context – a vignette

In order to illustrate some of the issues referred to above, we focus in this section on an example which highlights key issues concerning vulnerability, local context, and violence and its impacts, as well as some of the interconnections between them.

We had other similar episodes while we were gathering feedback during the research, but this particular session was fairly lengthy, and allowed us both to gather useful feedback, and also to see some interactions which don't normally occur in the same fieldwork exercise.

We held a group discussion on the street with young people attached to a local youth club, in an area that was characterised by high levels of violence and gang activity.

We had arranged to visit the project and hear the views of project staff and young people, but on arrival it became clear that an incident was developing in the immediate area of the club, concerning the activities of a rival group that was apparently planning to target some of the club's attendees. The young people seemed very concerned for their own safety, and they were discussing how to respond to the perceived threat, and which routes they might take when they left the area and so on, which could help them to avoid being targeted.

The club itself is regarded by many local young people as being a kind of sanctuary, a safe place which is also overseen by project workers who have lived experience of violence and gang activities. When asked about the events that seemed to be playing out in the area, the project manager explained:

> *It's just a little issue, like some of the people that have got fights with another school, a notorious school, they're going to come down and try to attack some of these kids . . . .So the students from there are going to come down here with their knives to come and attack some of the kids from here. We're just mitigating whether they're going to come or not or what their plan is, or where*

they're going to go and what area they will be hiding in order to catch some of the young people here. Just a bit of like, looking at the logistics, their logistics, and understanding how they would attack. Like I know these streets like the back of my hand, so if I was to attack any person, how would I do it? And then I'll mitigate it from that to say 'that's how they would do it if they wanted to get away with it'. If they didn't want to get away with it, then it'll just be a bare-faced attack.

(A-FG-PROJ3-01)

While waiting to see if members of the rival group would make an appearance, a discussion ensued between the researcher and the group of young people (all males, aged around 14-16) about the area, the local school, and about violence and its impacts.

The young people made it clear that concern about violence was something of a constant for them, and that they tended to group together for their own protection.

Male 5: *Everyone's frightened. Deep inside, people don't be reassured, maybe don't show it, but everyone is frightened about everything.*

Male 2: *You're not really safe anyway.*

Male 5: *Exactly. No matter who it is, you could be the most respected person in the whole school and will have the most security ever around you, you could be one of the rich earnings people with the most amount of security, but at the same time, the one time where you're no longer safe, alone, someone is going to take you. Someone is going to rob you.*

Male 5: *All we're trying to do, just come after school, like either just straight go home or come [to the project]. We feel safe here, we know what we do or just go home with friends just in case anything happens.*

Male 2: *Like, in a big group of friends, so nothing will –*

Male 5: *– Exactly, yeah, just in case anything happens then we can defend ourselves.*

We asked them about their local school and about the level of support that they had from teachers about issues concerning their own safety, and the young people commented at some length on those issues, noting that the teachers were not from the area, and did not really know what was going on. Some felt that the school was not aware of the issues locally, and that were more likely to punish than to offer support on these issues:

Male 3: *But the school pretty much doesn't believe in it. The school talks about it only if so many people in school talk about it also. But if no one talks about, they're not talking.*

Male 4:	*Only talk about it, if we talk about it. They don't care.*
Male 2:	*The school won't know about it because like most of the teachers, they live like out – they don't live – they don't live in* [the borough].
Interviewer:	*They're not from* [the borough]*?*
Male 2:	*Exactly. They pretty much don't know really about what's going on. But he said that they don't care.*
Male 3:	*You say the teachers really care about us, but even if, they're like, "Oh, just go home, just go to …" These, man, rather than like helping us, helping people with problems and helping them with their issues, what they do, they just reprimand them.*
Male 4:	*Exactly, basically, they just say stuff and not even act. They're the ones meant to be helping us but they don't do it, and even if they do, they'll just give us a punishment.*

Interestingly, during the discussion two teachers from the nearby school came walking through the area, in an effort to break the group up and encourage them to go home (or to "shoo them on", as the project manager put it later). The teachers did not ask any questions about what the group was doing, or why they were there.

Issues concerning ethnicity and class also came up during the discussion, with the project leader suggesting that those at the school who are responsible for safeguarding students are "White middle class" and not at all aware of the circumstances in which many of the students live. Similar comments were made by the young people, and taken together, the feedback highlights some of the issues raised in current discussions about the importance of "cultural competence".

As it turned out, the rival group did not make an appearance - and we did not have enough information to piece together a background history to this event (e.g., whether it was about retaliation for previous events or not) - but in response to our observation that the young people near the club seemed quite fearful about the perceived threat, the project manager noted:

> *Yeah, absolutely they did, because they know that there could be a potential chance that they will be stabbed and they could lose their lives today. So, you know, with that in mind, you can see a lot of the kids find their sense of security just by being in our presence, just by being, you know, next to* [the project]*.*

This example also illustrates a key point that we return to in section 4.8, which is that some of the key drivers of violence are also *interactive* – that is, they can reinforce one another in a cyclical way over time. In an area where groups of young people engage in attacks on other groups, levels of concern about individual safety increase

or are reinforced, and can ripple across whole communities. This can lead to increased weaponisation – where young people in particular feel not only motivated to group together for self-defence, but to arm themselves for their own protection.

Some of our other feedback also suggests that where actual events of public violence regularly do take place, they are a powerful reinforcing *signal* to all groups that violence is an ever-present threat, and violence in this way becomes normalised in those areas. A normalisation of violence in turn means that thresholds of tolerance are raised, which can mean that incidents are less likely to be reported if they do not reach that threshold of perceived seriousness (which is partly why none of the robberies referred to by the young people above were reported).

Serious woundings and murders in such areas can become community events which are traumatising at both individual and community levels, and further impacts can include changed behaviour in public spaces, as residents and users avoid certain areas. Those changes can in turn have economic impacts, if they include a withdrawal from the local night time economy for example, or an abandonment of high streets. Those latter changes can then increase the scope for drug markets to flourish, as an abandonment of public space in some areas allows it to be taken over by others, and can also increase antisocial behaviour and levels of violence in those areas.

4.6 Impact of COVID

There was clearly one overriding impact of COVID that was identified across all respondent groups, which was adverse effects on mental health – of young people in particular, and especially those living in deprived areas where they also experienced abuse or neglect (or domestic violence and parental substance misuse) at home. DSLs in particular identified very high levels of trauma and adverse experience in the home lives of children and young people attending their schools – 52% felt that child abuse and neglect were either common or very common among families in their catchment area, and the figure was 80% for family mental illness, 48% for family substance misuse, 67% for domestic violence, and 60% for family members suffering from symptoms of trauma. All of these things were said to have either got a lot worse, or slightly worse, over the last 12 months, with levels worsening in particular for child abuse or neglect within the family (63%), and domestic violence (77%). DSLs pointed to severe mental health impacts from these trends, on young people's mental health, which in turn they related to future behavioural problems that are corrosive of effective learning.

During COVID restrictions some issues died off initially before then quickly altering in their presentation as drug dealing crews and street gangs adjusted their operations and movements. It was necessary that drug dealing activity alter quickly given that young drug dealers were more easily spotted and arrested by the police in circumstances where there were few people on the street. Numerous strategies appear to have been adopted in response to those circumstances - it was suggested to us that some drug dealers even signed up to become taxi drivers (or simply masqueraded as taxi drivers), for example, so that they could move around and deal directly from cars without attracting suspicion or attention. Cases of this kind were described by a youth worker in a voluntary sector project, and also by a local

authority serious violence worker in another borough (A-164, A-157). Other lockdown tactics emerged to ensure drug supply was maintained including more localised dealing, less travel on public transport, creation of fake IDs to provide reasons for movement outside, and a greater switch to ordering and dealing drugs online.[25] Whilst online ordering and dealing of drugs has hitherto been the premise of recreational drugs, steroids and so forth, lockdown prompted some drug dealing crews and street gangs to move more into dealing online.

Some respondents noted that during lockdown, the rules for young people were less clearly defined, articulated or stipulated, partly because most young people would have otherwise been in school during periods when COVID required closure, but also because there had not always been an effective adult presence in their home lives during this period (or only a sporadic presence). As a result, it was claimed that young people were more out of control; less likely to accept instruction/direction or discipline. One voluntary sector worker described to us how groups of 12-14 year old boys were "roaming the streets" during some of these periods in one borough, and that they were "absolutely terrifying" because they seemed "out of control". We were not able to identify a proxy measure of some kind in the existing data that would have allowed us to test such statements, although DSLs did report to us in their survey responses, that child/adolescent to parent violence had probably got worse in the 12 months prior to them completing the questionnaire – 6% of DSLs claimed that this problem got "a lot worse", and 37% that it got slightly worse during that period; 36% felt that the problem had stayed the same (with less than 1% claiming that it got slightly better, and 21% claiming not to know).

In their open-ended comments some DSLs also described how some children from their schools have parents who are simply absent because they work long hours; some of these families even have relatively comfortable levels of disposable income, but the young people use the time to gather in parks and take drugs. In some cases there are parents who themselves have mental health difficulties and are more easily pressured or controlled by their young children. One DSL described to us cases where families with disabled children did not get the support that they needed to work with their children, and where autistic young people for example, *may hurt or control family members as a result of their autism and may need a different type of intervention* (DSL78538881). Difficulties of this kind, some DSLs claimed, became worse during COVID restrictions.

Another DSL noted that some families in the area of their school struggle to meet the needs of their children at the best of times, and that during periods of school closure this situation became even worse:

---

[25] Cases where drug dealers masqueraded as joggers or as NHS workers were highly publicised during 2020 (see for example Drug dealers posing as joggers and NHS staff in Covid-19 lockdown); other examples of changes in methods were given to the research team – one, for example, where a dealer went out in public dressed in a thobe and kufi, and carrying an armful of Islamic texts (along with a backpack full of drugs) to reduce the odds of being searched.

> *Parents who struggle to meet the needs of their children struggled more with children at home full time and children missed out on daily support in school (beyond just education, e.g., emotionally responsive adults)*
>
> (DSL-75434130)

Other respondents also noted that there was active recruitment of young people into street gangs during lockdown, and that opportunities were taken to groom, entice and recruit new players into "the game". One police respondent linked the apparent increase of recruitment to financial factors (see also section 4.7.4):

> *Anecdotally we have heard from our partners in youth work that gang recruitment has got a lot worse in recent months, including young people carrying drugs. It has become increasingly easy to recruit young people into gangs because of families' financial struggles which gangs are exploiting. Our partners are saying that structural issues that cause violence are the same, and punishment is not working as a deterrent. This is because the present needs of young people are immediate & paramount (e.g., money for their families or status) and are more important than the threat of a potential prison sentence. Nationally police forces are reporting that there is more recruitment into County Lines, which they say is a child protection issue.*
>
> (PRAC-79797999)

This recruitment during lockdown altered the affiliation of some young people with street gangs. This will eventually lead to increased competition and rivalries within street gangs which may take months to play out but which will impact upon behaviours and activities as new skills and thresholds are introduced.

4.7 Drivers

Respondents' comments about the key drivers of violence ranged widely by level of focus, covering factors at individual, family, peer, school, community and societal levels, but also covering drivers that *span* these levels.[26]

Some respondents limited their comments to factors that operate at an individual level, but a majority of respondents also made reference to wider factors such as deprivation, lack of opportunity, poor quality services or lack of access to services, family issues, social media, or the impacts of both individual and community trauma.

The feedback illustrated how further research to "map" key factors in the context of individuals' lives, and in the context of an individual's pathway through and across those different levels over time, could be very useful for the field.

Some highlights from the feedback concerning factors of this kind are provided separately below.

---

[26] A very useful framework for mapping drivers of violence can be found in Cordis Bright (2015). A recent MOPAC (2022) publication also contains some very sophisticated and elegant analyses of links across factors of this kind, produced using sets of official violence data.

4.7.1 *Drugs*

Across all respondent groups, drugs were most commonly mentioned as being a key driver of violence in London, although the precise way in which drugs might be linked to violence was not always articulated.

Comments about drugs made it clear that this factor spans the levels referred to above. At an individual level for example, some referred to the way in which users become involved in illegal activities and violence in order to secure the resources to gain access to drugs, and others focusing on the way in which drug use itself can increase interpersonal violence because of its direct effects on individuals and relationships.

Some just mentioned drugs as part of a long list of factors associated with violence, without talking about what the precise causal link might be.

One police respondent described some of the links between drugs and violence in this way:

> *I wouldn't say they're necessarily all involved in violence. I mean, the job that I'm dealing with at the moment is a firearms job, so that's obviously linked to violence. And a lot of the jobs that we do around drug supply, a lot of the individuals have history of violence, violence, history of criminality. A lot of them carry weapons and a lot of the young ones carry weapons for their own protection, from other people, so they don't steal their commodities. So, yeah, I would say a lot of it is revolving around violence.*
>
> **[Interviewer: And how much of it revolves around drugs and drug dealing?]**
>
> *I'd say a lot of it is, it sort of comes hand in hand. A lot of them deal drugs or are involved in the supply of drugs and that's how they, they sort of fund their lifestyle, their criminality, it kind of starts with drugs. And then that kind of links in with the violence and the gangs. Obviously there are feuds and, again, it goes up and down, depending on what's going on. Usually when there's a major incident, like a murder or an attempted murder kind of aspect, then there's usually quite a fall out in the subsequent weeks and months after that.*
>
> (A-066)

Another interviewee from a local authority exploitation team also placed drug markets at the heart of the issues that they were dealing with:

> *Our issue is the drug market and it's about exploitation and making money out of drugs and poverty and all the other things that are linked to that.*
>
> (A-075)

So long as there is a market for drugs, there will also be competition to supply that market and benefit from the profits that can be made from doing so, and as many respondents suggested, violence is a key component in that competition.

Still others note that drugs are linked to the negative impacts of trauma, and that they are used for numbing and escape purposes – but this also increases impulsiveness and risk-taking behaviour, and erodes problem-solving capacity.

One of our young interviewees described how drug selling on her estate was occasionally linked to violence (and her comments also highlight how serious some of the violence is that young people sometimes witness in their own areas):

> *I think a lot of violence comes from drugs. I think that's the root of it, the gang war. I saw a boy, a man, a young man, one time, he was shotting[27] on the estate and he had just started shotting actually, and then he and another boy, man that was shotting on there before, that had left, had run away, God knows where, and come back, had been like, "Oh so now you're shotting on the estate, yeah", and beat him literally to a pulp, beat him, 'til the guy was [fanned], like collapsed outside. The guy managed to run to the Police Station and collapsed outside the Police Station, head injury.*

> *But a lot of the violence does come from selling the drugs because you'll have the boss, then you'll have the runners, who are the ones that go out and actually sell the drugs to the people. And then the boss will basically supply the drugs, come onto the estate to supply the drugs and then leave. And then you will have other people also that want to sell drugs and if someone else starts selling drugs on someone else's turf, that can create a big, big war.*

> (A-YP-07)

Links between drug use and family issues were also commented on by respondents, with some noting how substance misuse within families also led to some neglect or abuse of children and young people. Just under half of DSL survey respondents reported that substance misuse was either common or very common within families of children at their schools, and 42% felt that this issue had go with worse or a lot worse in the last 12 months.

4.7.2 *Social media*

The influence of social media/ networks continues to be central, and is woven into all aspects of life for most young people. This has led to new forms of vulnerability as well of course, and both practitioners and young people described many of these to us in their feedback. A DSL noted, for example, that there is real concern at the DSL's school about game apps such as Discord, which are being used for grooming purposes:

> *We are extremely worried about grooming via gaming - discord servers and groups set up where young students anticipate they are corresponding with*

---

[27] The term usually refers to low level drug dealing.

people their own age... however on a number of occasions we have had them groomed into unacceptable behaviours.

(DSL-78533738)

The role, importance and significance of social media continues amongst all young people, including those who are gang-affiliated. This is used for self-promotion, gang branding, buying and dealing drugs, gang recruitment, surveillance of others; ascertaining and determining loyalty; blackmailing others, fraud, etc.

Music such as drill remains a key expressive output for some young people across London, especially for working-class boys in some social housing estates. For many this seems to operate mainly as an artistic outlet of self-expression of their lived experience. However, a small percentage of drill content is highly targeted towards certain individuals or crews and articulates highly specific violent incidents which have actually occurred. Such targeted humiliations are viewed as provocative, and are thus often generators of violence. Some of those connections were highlighted by one of our young interviewees:

I think that most of these gangs are influenced by what they see on social media, having to keep up with a certain lifestyle and through music, like drill music and stuff, they have beefs and it all gets shared on social media and I feel like they're constantly having to keep up a persona that they show on social media amongst each other.

(A-YP08)

Respondents noted that some young people can be successful in relevant forms of music production and generate significant amounts of cash income from music publishing and production companies who will provide a sizeable cash advance to those deemed worthy of further investment. We were informed that some young men can find themselves in receipt of advances ranging from £10 – 50K for music recording, although we were not able to confirm some of the details provided to us. One of our practitioner interviewees described some of these developments, noting that the scope for both involvement in violence and money-making has been broadened by social media:

. . . with the advent of like YouTube and drill music, which literally translates into stab music. That is the best way, it's a way for the young person to get notoriety within their community, within their area, and they see it as, you know, a legit way to go. Especially when you're seeing, like, local drill artists. We just had a meeting today, one's been signed, another one's been signed to [a prominent music company] *with money in hand.*

(A-091)

Feedback from DSLs suggests that there have been few issues concerning drill music at schools across London however - with 74% of DSLs suggesting that drill music had not raised any concerns about young people at their school, and 14% suggesting that drill had raised such concerns (N=165). The open-ended feedback about the issue was also reflective of wider debates about drill music (and its causes and impacts), with some DSLs expressing their own concern about apparent glorification of violence, for example, and the creation of inappropriate role models for children and young people. Other DSLs suggested that drill music was a reflection of the reality of many young people's lives in circumstances of severe deprivation and high levels of daily violence.[28]

More generally in terms of links between social media and violence, feedback from many respondents suggest that what is key is the *speed* at which social media operates, and in certain circumstances this makes it act like an *accelerant* of violence, where complex perceptions about status and respect, loyalty, and of course business, interact.

4.7.3 *Trauma*

Links between violence and trauma were much referred to by interview respondents, and also by respondents to the practitioner and the DSL surveys in particular.

The feedback that we gathered made it clear that the way in which practitioners think about trauma and its possible links with violence and exploitation is not always consistent with what we know about these impacts from other research.

Much of the feedback was quite ACE-focused rather than what we would call "trauma-responsive", for example, and it was sometimes suggested that dealing with the impacts of trauma would require the inclusion of psychologists or clinicians on violence reduction teams – as if only they have the skills to engage with negative impacts of trauma, and other workers can at best be knowledgeable about such impacts in their dealings with vulnerable people (e.g., to avoid re-traumatising them). When asked about what being "trauma-informed" meant for interactions between project staff and vulnerable young people at a project in one borough for example, the project manager suggested that work focusing on the impacts of trauma *was for others – we are not psychologists* (C-027).

---

[28] Some of these issues have been developed at greater length in some of the wider research on this topic. See for example Faulkner's recent *Knife Crime in the Capital* (2021), which provides an evidence-based account of links between the content of some drill music and actual killings or attacks over time in specific areas of London. See also a recent publication by Hall et al. (2022), which focuses on links between grime and drill music lyrics, and serious violence and gang activities, and concludes that violent lyrics are a "reflection of lived experience" and the impact of adversities on Black boys and men.

Strictly speaking ACEs are static factors in the backgrounds of many people – and especially those involved in violence, as we know from decades of previous research – but the impacts of trauma are dynamic, and can be affected profoundly even by non-clinical staff. Having an impact on what young people in particular are dealing with in the present should arguably form a more conscious part of violence reduction work (and be much more clearly articulated within theories of change that are used by violence reduction partnerships), since the scope for having positive individual impacts can be sharply constrained by the impacts of trauma.

Purely ACE-focused approaches were also described by some respondents as being too "backward-looking", and those who worked with gang-affiliated young people in particular often said to us that they prefer "forward-looking" approaches that explore options and possible futures with those they work with. Comments of this kind again suggest a kind of "either/or" understanding of trauma and its relevance to practice, and that kind of understanding also tends to close off avenues for understanding protective factors in individual timelines which allow for the development of resilience for example.

Some of our interview and survey respondents did feel that attention to the presence of trauma symptoms in work to address violence and exploitation was not adequate, however. A DSL commented on the issue in this way:

> *The rhetoric is "trauma informed" but this does not play out in decision making or strategic responses. The reality of the everyday lives for some YP does not correspond with the threshold document in terms of a response. The school are seeing more traumatised children in crisis whose needs are not being met by partners including SEN, CSC and CAMHS. These children are further punished by mainstream schools who are not equipped to meet their needs and don't get sufficient support, resource or understanding from some partners to support them holistically in school. The reality for some of these children is that school end up holding them or managing behaviours to reduce the high risk of exclusion and are not able to educate them and due to the risk factors identified at Y2 / Y3 the trajectory for these children is poor and increases the risk of them being criminally and sexually exploited as they get older.*

(DSL-78156600)

Others suggested that dealing with the impacts of trauma is not well facilitated by a system which sets high thresholds for intervention, especially in times when budgets are stretched. As one interview respondent expressed it:

> *But I just think if you don't kind of meet certain thresholds sometimes, then – and if in general for mental health and stuff like that, trauma wouldn't necessarily hit the marker for threshold. So, it can often get lost, but I think if you have any sort of youth worker, youth services worker, children's services worker … So, anybody that really works with young people and children should have some form of training around trauma.*

Because I think if you can identify trauma early, then you won't necessarily have half of the kind of issues that you've got with exclusions and stuff. Because there's a lot of young people, especially in our borough, that have witnessed, seen or been involved in stuff that would be impacting on their mental health. A bit like soldiers.

(A-095)

On the other, some respondents argued that the impulsive or violent behaviour of some young people is often anchored in key symptoms of trauma, which are in turn related to adverse childhood experience. As one DSL expressed it in relation to behaviour at school:

Secondary schools are often focused upon results and therefore are not addressing the high level of students who have suffered significant trauma that will impact negatively on behaviour and their ability to learn.

(DSL-78677973)

A focus on trauma was in some cases anchored in analysis of information that professionals had gathered in relation to their own clients, and where that information was interpreted as being relevant to subsequent pathways into serious violence. As one local authority gangs worker described their own analysis of background information on cohorts involved in serious violence in their own borough:

I think a lot of the factors, especially amongst young people, I did life course – I did a piece of life course analysis of our top ten serious youth violent offenders, which normally means they're serious youth violent victims as well. And I think on a longer term we identified that there was strong evidence of domestic abuse and child neglect, which is a form of domestic abuse, in the home at a young age that they experienced.

There was also a high level of cannabis use in their young teenage years. There was – they were involved in minor antisocial behaviour from a young age so it's those things but really what my long-term plan is for this borough, the only way to tackle violence in the long term is domestic abuse. I think that is where we really have to focus almost all of our resources on a strategic level to really, if we really want to drive down violence in this borough.

(A-129)

Although the perceived links between trauma and violence (and/or exploitation) were not always clearly articulated by respondents, some did offer comments in that direction (as did the latter respondent, who attributed some causal power to experiences of domestic violence in early life – we comment further on this in section 4.7.6). A voluntary sector interviewee focused on a trauma-linked interpersonal aspect to the "recruitment" of young people into gang or offending activity, for example:

> *It is over-simplistic to see this phenomenon as "recruitment". It is traumatised young people finding each other and acting out much of their interpersonal trauma patterns - seeking out approval and attention, seeking out status and power, and acting out warped notions of care-receiving and care-giving. There is a transactional interaction in large part fuelled by a lack of self-esteem and self-confidence that needs to be defended against.*
>
> (A-075)

4.7.4 *Socio-economic factors, debt, exclusion and lack of opportunity*

A majority of respondents who commented on key drivers of violence made at least some reference to poverty or deprivation, and and/or to related issues such as lack of opportunity, debt, and access to education.

Some respondents also alluded to the key role played by a lack of opportunities in the lives of young people – given a lack of alternatives, as some young people see it, their option to become involved in offending activities is for them the only realistic path that is open to them:

> *A lot of the young people who work with are involved in crime, but they don't want to be. They just feel they have no other options.*
>
> (PRAC-78783548)

An environment of deprivation and perceived lack of opportunities can also make it easier for young people to be lured into participating in offending or gang-related activities, as many of our respondents commented. As one police respondent put it:

> *I feel that this is a losing battle as often the dealers or gangs will provide the young persons with phones, game consoles, Gucci gear, drugs and so on. This is by far much more than what we can offer them. Until we can at least take this power away from those recruiting we will not beat this problem. I have stopped the same youths, black, white, Middle Eastern or Eastern European and often those individuals will wear the same two items of clothing which will be Hugo Boss, Gucci, Prada or other high value brands. This is provided by the recruiters and these kids will not want to take them off as is shows their "status". Even when they have little to nothing else to wear. They will wash these clothes and put them on still wet as it is the only status clothing they have.*
>
> (PRAC-79210135)

Comments of that sort suggest not simply that young people in some areas might have a desire to own specific "high value" brands (although they might), but that such items provide a real and visible contrast to what those young people might be able to acquire for themselves otherwise.

A local authority gangs worker also commented on the importance of status or "aspiration", but also suggested that even though drugs are commonly viewed as being a key driver, poverty is a more fundamental ("core") factor underpinning violence:

> *So I think those are the issues we need to start tackling. That actually it's quite an aspirational thing now for some young people and obviously they're being drawn into it through poverty and what not but, yeah, for me, I just think we need to get away from this conversation about drugs fuelling the violence and we need to start talking more about the core factors, which are poverty. And then, from the poverty, there's this aspirational thing where you can make money really quickly, through the music, through drug dealing.*
>
> (A-091)

Some respondents who highlighted the importance of poverty also linked it with both lack of opportunity and lack of education, as in these comments from a local authority community safety officer, and from a police officer:

> *And I would like to see much more, we know what the drivers are for people going into violence, lack of education, poverty, so why aren't we doing that instead, why are we spending hundreds of thousands of pounds on football clubs and boxing and all that nonsense.*
>
> (A-078)

> *If you look at where crime and where violence and where gangs are embedded, they tend to be in areas of very high social deprivation. They tend to be in areas with significant poverty and other issues. Low school attainment. All of those types of things.*
>
> (A-126)

Many respondents also suggested that in a context of poverty and deprivation, the development of "debt bondage" at an individual level was much more likely to occur, and a majority of those who work with gang-affiliated young people commented on the importance of debt bondage to individual pathways into gang activities and violence.

In relation to debt bondage, violence can also become an ever-present threat both for gang-affiliated young people and their families. This local authority community safety respondent highlighted the importance of debt bondage both to individuals and families already under extreme financial stress:

> *Debt bondage plays a keys aspect in child criminal exploitation issues in* [this borough]*. We have high numbers of young people reportedly involved in drug dealing / county lines; with many of these young people making disclosures of professionals that they are working to pay off debts to criminal gangs. We have received several reports of families paying drugs debts to gangs, putting immense financial pressure on families who, in some cases have had to borrow the money themselves. Young people in* [this borough] *are trafficked across various parts of the UK, but also within London. Drug dealing is often the catalyst for issues around serious youth violence with young people in conflict with rivals over territory and notoriety. The pressure debt bondage plays on the individual and the family both mentally and physically is extremely worrying.*
>
> (PRAC-78743797)

About half of the practitioner survey respondents who offered open-ended comments on issues concerning debt bondage (i.e. 24 out of 48 who offered these comments) felt that this was of key importance, particularly to involvement in drugs markets and/or country lines.

Lack of opportunity is also strongly linked both to exclusion from school, and to issues around disproportionality, and many respondents commented on the importance of each factor to involvement in both violence and offending more generally.

In relation to exclusion and ethnicity, some respondents pointed out how rates for Black boys in particular (for both temporary and permanent exclusions) are far higher than for any other group.[29]

It is again worth noting how our discussions with practitioners and others about the key drivers of violence and how they might be addressed, illustrated the interconnections between those factors and the way that they can impact across different levels. Poor school performance or behaviour is linked to exclusion for example, which in turn reduces the scope for ETE opportunities and for longer term stable employment. Respondents did not always comment on such linkages without probing from us – sometimes beginning with responses like "it's all about the family" or "it's all about drugs" or words to that effect. Others verbally mapped out quite complex sets of drivers and protective factors and how these interacted and affected one another (and even how they could be addressed in terms of actual programmes or interventions) but those kinds of exchanges were obviously not typical.

---

[29] These claims are borne out by the official data concerning school exclusions. In one borough Black pupils are excluded at a higher rate than any other ethnic group, and at a rate that is about 2.2 times higher than for White pupils (for both temporary and permanent exclusions). If the figures are grouped into White and non-White, the exclusion rate for non-White pupils is 5.6 times higher than for White pupils for temporary exclusions, and 3.4 times higher for permanent exclusions – full data-sets can be downloaded at: https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/permanent-and-fixed-period-exclusions-in-england

4.7.5 *Deterrence, lack of repercussions*

Feedback about violence and young people also tended to vary in terms of the way in which individual decision-making, choice, and responsibility were characterised, and it was clear that different models of offending behaviour underpinned that variation. It is a similar variation highlighted in both academic and public debates about criminal justice, and about sentencing and deterrence, for example. In our own data, on one side there were those who argue that young people who engage in violence will make decisions to engage in such behaviour if they think it will profit them and that there are no realistic consequences of being punished for it. It is claimed that current increasing rates of violence are at least partly due to the fact that young people do not feel that there are any consequences for bad behaviour, and they therefore act in their own self-interest in the absence of fear about repercussions. As one police respondent expressed that view:

The only way to stop youths from committing violence is when they have fear of repercussions. Currently, there are no repercussions. We deal with the same minority (but growing) of people. These people often have charges of serious offences on their record yet here they are being dealt with by police again. I've spoken to numerous young people and it is demoralising. There is no fear of the police, nor of any consequence of the criminal justice system.

(PRAC -79170331)

Another police respondent to the practitioner survey suggested that longer sentences could deter offenders:

Longer sentences for convicted offenders. If a person carries a knife clearly any preventive/diversionary measures have failed. The emphasis on treating these often young people as 'victims' of poor circumstance is erroneous, they are contributory factors but law and order must be maintained for the greater good of society.   The public perceive that some areas of London are becoming lawless. They have the wherewithal to kill &/or cause serious injury and must be dealt with robustly whenever identified or this endless cycle will continue.

(PRAC-79076283)

One police respondent (to the practitioner survey) also referred to a necessity for young people to have some "fear of the police" or "fear of repercussions" for violent behaviour, when suggesting what the key characteristics of violence reduction should be:

1. Overhaul of the criminal justice system. There must be consequences to their actions. Over the years we have focused on trying to intervene and deter but it doesn't work. I remember years back a mandatory 5 year custodial sentence was to be implemented for carrying a knife; that could have helped but never came to fruition. 2. More police on the streets. More robust policing with significant support from politicians and senior management. . . . The only way to stop youths from committing violence is when they have fear of repercussions. Currently, there are no repercussions. We deal with the same

minority (but growing) of people. These people often have charges of serious offences on their record yet here they are being dealt with by police again. I've spoken to numerous young people and it is demoralising. There is no fear of the police nor any consequence of the criminal justice system. . . . I fear we will not solve this issue for a long time; if at all. Unless you are part of the agencies dealing with these people first hand it is impossible to imagine the reality.

(PRAC-79170331)

Views of this sort tended to be expressed more by police respondents, but not exclusively so. One manager of a voluntary sector organisation suggested that repeated "slaps on the wrist" for knife crime can in effect "teach" young people that they can act without consequence, for example:

I think the violence has definitely got worse. I think if you just look at the level of violence and I think in this case stats don't lie. I think if you look at the stats in terms of definitely knife crime, we are definitely in a worse place. I think the hardest thing is - the biggest question is why? Why has it got worse? Ultimately, I do believe that we don't hand out harsh enough sentences for young people. So, if a young person under the age of 18 - so they're still part of the Youth Offending Team, is caught with a knife, you can get a warning. It's up to three times that young person needs to be caught with a knife, for them to receive a custodial sentence. Well, the third time could lead to someone's death.

So, I could leave my house with a knife and get a slap on the wrist, the second time leave my house with a knife and get a slap on the wrist, the third time kill someone and then go right, 14 years. What are we actually doing the first time to make them know, you shouldn't be doing this again. So, if we keep giving people chances to do the same thing, we're humans, we're programmed, we're robots, it's OK, I've done it once and I never got in trouble, I'll do that again. So, ultimately how are we educating these young people not to make the same mistake? So, if you get caught with a knife what do we do? Maybe here's a prison sentence. Maybe it's workshops around knife crime.

(A-124)

The view that a "lax" criminal justice response to violence is a key driver of violence is of course not inconsistent with often expressed views in the wider population, and it was also the case for our own respondents that arguments about the need for stronger enforcement approaches were sometimes made alongside arguments for "upstream" prevention.

Perspectives that were more exclusively criminal justice focused and individualised obviously also rest uneasily with recent developments in the violence reduction field, and with public health approaches which incorporate consideration of broader (and more complex) factors at both community and societal levels. It is also a key aim of public health approaches that an understanding both of key drivers of violence and of interventions to address violence are carefully anchored in evidence.

4.7.6 *Family factors*

Family factors that have been described as being relevant to the development of serious youth violence have already been referred to in some earlier sections of this report – such as on Figure 10 and Figure 11 in section 4.3 for example, which summarise the responses of DSLs to questions about key families issues in the area of their own school – but many respondents singled out one or more of these issues as being key drivers of violence.

In particular, domestic violence or abuse was sometimes referred to as being relevant in several ways. Domestic abuse was described as being an effect of previous abuse, but also as a cause of the kind of damage to young people who witness it, which can in turn increase the likelihood of those young people becoming engaged in violence themselves (domestic or otherwise). Part of what respondents said could "cause" this future violence was the way in which domestic violence can normalise violence in the eyes of young people who are exposed to it, but respondents also made reference to the impacts of trauma on such young people.

The importance of domestic violence as a driver of future violence was also referred to by practitioners who indicated in our survey that interventions to support young people who witness such violence are of key importance to include in local packages of violence reduction measures (see Figure 13 and Figure 14, which summarise survey respondents' views on preferred violence reduction interventions). That feedback on domestic violence specifically is also in keeping with feedback from practitioners gathered in other research (e.g., Crest Advisory, 2019).

Respondents also referred to other family-related factors as being significant for the evolution of violence, including a lack of role models (especially positive role models for young boys), substance-misusing parents (which can lead to neglect and/or an absence of early childhood nurturing), and sibling or other family member involvement in violence or gang activities.

Some respondents also referred to a combination of family factors:

> *So, how do you get a 15 year old that's say mum and dad, dad's in prison, mum's a drug addict, all they see every day is negative stuff.*

> *When they wake up mum's drunk, mum's on drugs. When they leave their house on the local estate, people are selling drugs. You become a product of your environment. So, if you see it every day you become desensitised and it becomes normal, that's your normal. And therefore, it's really hard when it becomes normal to see there's anything wrong with it. That's why I believe that a lot of young people are really desensitised to what they do.*

<div align="right">(A-124)</div>

Of course, the converse of views such as the above can also be found, in respondents' descriptions of families as being sites where other (protective) factors are in place or can be supported to develop, where such factors can reduce the likelihood of involvement in violence. Consistent parenting and nurturing of children for example, can promote the development of resilience and self-confidence over time, and the presence of positive role models can provide examples to children and young people of possible (positive) futures for themselves. Some of our respondents also commented on the way in which connections with non-parental "significant others" within the family (such as siblings or grandparents) can also give children and young people the kind of connection and support which can build resilience and reduce vulnerability.

We return to some of these issues in the following section.

4.8 Protective factors, interactions

Taken together, the feedback concerning drivers such as those referred to above also makes it clear that single factors do not usually operate in isolation from other factors, and that they are often interconnected – and in some cases, mutually reinforcing.

Drivers of violence can coalesce both at the individual level and more broadly (e.g., at community level or within a school), where they can also interact with factors which have a more positive impact on the development of violence (i.e. "protective factors").

In a lot of our feedback the focus was very much on drivers rather than protective factors, with some respondents noting that an absence of a particular driver would reduce violence – in other words, it was felt that the absence of a risk factor is what was important for reducing the scope for violence to occur. Some also pointed specifically to factors which they felt were important for such reduction however – such as improved individual resilience of people in vulnerable groups for example, positive educational achievement, enhanced employability, greater "social cohesion" in communities that suffer from high levels of violence, and so on.

Not many respondents offered clear accounts of **why** they thought that certain factors were either a risk or had some importance for protecting individuals and communities from violence however, even though much is made about the importance of theories of change for underpinning such work and an understanding of why such work might be effective.

This is linked to the way in which some respondents were also unclear about issues around the *effectiveness* of interventions to address violence, and why particular interventions that they favoured might be expected to generate positive outcomes.

Although not all respondents commented specifically on drivers or protective factors, it is to some extent possible to read those perceptions off of comments about interventions to reduce violence and why these might be effective or useful. We turn to those issues in the following section.

4.9 Addressing violence

As noted in section 2 a key focus of the research was on perceptions about current efforts to address issues around serious youth violence and exploitation, about the value and effectiveness of such efforts, and about what else could be done to address violence across London. We questioned all of our respondents about these issues, and key themes in that feedback are outlined below.

4.9.1 *Projects, interventions*

Given the wide range of issues focused on in the research it was expected that respondents would also range widely in their views about the kinds of interventions that might be effective in addressing those, and feedback about these issues from across all the strands of the research was in fact quite varied.

We asked respondents about specific interventions that they might be aware of in their own areas or elsewhere (which they thought were promising), and also about the kinds of interventions that they thought might be effective (even if there were no such interventions in their area that they knew about.

Concerning specific interventions, respondents were not always aware of actual initiatives that were being implemented in their own areas (to address issues around serious youth violence or exploitation). We would expect this given the range of interventions that actually exist in this field of work, but in some cases it did suggest to us that some interventions could perhaps generate more traction or buy-in by doing more public relations work. The resident surveys in particular did not generate very much in the way of references to specific projects or interventions that the respondents thought were promising, with some even saying in response to our questions that they were not aware of any local initiatives.

Many of our survey and interview respondents did refer either to types of intervention that they thought were most important, however, or to specific projects or initiatives that they were aware of.

The majority of respondents felt that primary prevention (i.e. work delivered "upstream" to prevent violence from happening in the first place) is perhaps most important, and many respondents made reference in this context to factors having to do with poverty, lack of opportunity, and young people living in circumstances where family and other violence is normalised. The actual schemes referred to in this category ranged quite widely again, from more universal interventions – e.g., GAV-style ("Growing Against Violence") interventions in schools to raise awareness

among young people of violence and its impacts – to interventions designed to provide better and more widely accessible youth services, initiatives that aim to strengthen social capital, and so on.

Respondents also made reference to secondary prevention initiatives, which focus more specifically on groups that are at high risk of becoming involved in violence or exploitation. Some football schemes are of that sort for example, because they aim to occupy or divert young people who are on a negative trajectory in terms of violence or offending. Other schemes that involve trauma-responsive work to support young people living with domestic violence or parental drug use were also referred to. Schemes designed to build resilience among particular victim groups were also referred to, where the aim was to protect individuals from violence or exploitation in the future.

Respondents also referred to measures that could be categorised as tertiary prevention, involving work with known offenders to prevent further violence for example, or criminal justice measures to deter or sanction offenders – unsurprisingly, police respondents usually made reference to the importance of interventions in this category.

That typology obviously involves overlaps – GAV-type schemes are universal for example, but they also engage with at-risk young people in particular areas, since within a particular class room there might be a mix of young people, some of whom are on the periphery of gang activity for example, and some of whom are already involved in gang activity or violence to some extent.

In terms of how important respondents felt that various interventions were, we asked for feedback about these in our surveys and also in our interviews. In general, views about the importance of different types of interventions were strongly related to sector.

Across all sectors, some kinds of interventions were endorsed quite widely by respondents. Family support and parenting programmes were deemed by 95% of respondents to the practitioner survey to be either "very important" or "important", for example, with only 45% feeling the same way about the use of knife wands in schools. Figure 13 summarises responses across the whole respondent group, to the question "For each intervention listed below, how important do you think it would be for it to be included as part of an overall approach to reducing serious youth violence and exploitation?"

Figure 13 – Interventions to address violence and exploitation: percentage of practitioner survey respondents regarding them as being either "very important" or "important"

Intervention	%
Family support and parenting programmes	95%
Capacity building and resilience training in schools (to help young people reject violence)	94%
Provision of youth services	93%
Access to good quality mental health services	92%
Diverting vulnerable people away from the criminal justice system	91%
Support for young people experiencing domestic violence	90%
Supporting offenders upon release from custody	90%
Meeting the needs of vulnerable offenders	89%
Measures to increase trust and confidence in the police	82%
Access to good quality drug treatment services	76%
More CCTV in hotspots or high crime areas	76%
Improved street lighting	74%
Access to good quality alcohol treatment	67%
More police on the street	65%
Using knife arches/wands on the street & transport	55%
Using knife wands/arches at schools	45%

(N=96)

We also compared responses to these questions between broad sectors, to see how much variation there might be underneath the kinds of figures presented at Figure 13. As expected there were some clear differences in the way that practitioners from different sectors placed importance on different kinds of interventions to address violence and exploitation. We provide one example here, which compares responses by police respondents to the practitioner survey, with responses that DSLs gave to the same question in the DSL survey. In order to make the comparison, we calculated "strength of agreement" scores for each group in relation to each type of intervention, and plotted those as bars for each group at Figure 14.[30]

---

[30] Those scores are calculated by assigning values to each of the possible responses ("very important", "important" and so on, but excluding "don't know"s) and then averaging those for each group for each intervention type. In this case a score of 3 would represent the strongest level of importance possible. We would point out that scores of this kind should be regarded as indicative

It can be seen from those figures that DSLs tended to place importance on broad social interventions and support measures, particularly those that provide support for vulnerable young people and families. DSLs appear not to have placed much importance on target-hardening and physical measures such as CCTV, street lighting, and in particular, knife wands. Police respondents were likely to highlight the importance of physical measures and to place less importance on social programmes or support programmes – although they felt that capacity-building programmes in schools and family and parenting support programmes were important (in fact there was little difference between the two groups in their ratings for those interventions).[31]

---

only, since Likert scale data are, strictly speaking, ordinal data. There is an ongoing debate about this and related issues in the literature (see Norman, 2010 for a brief summary and useful comparison of both parametric and nonparametric approaches to analysing Likert score data).

[31] It is worth noting that the size of the two groups was quite different, with police respondents numbering 45, and the DSL group numbering 96.

Figure 14 –Comparison of "strength of importance" scores for DSLs and police, relating to various interventions to address violence and exploitation

Legend: ■ Police □ DSLs

Intervention	Police	DSLs
More police on the street	2.2	2.2
More CCTV in hotspots or high crime areas	2.4	2.1
Improved street lighting	2.1	1.9
Using knife wands/arches at schools	1.9	0.9
Using knife arches/wands on the street & transport	2.0	1.2
Capacity building and resilience training in schools (to help young people reject violence)	2.7	2.5
Family support and parenting programmes	2.7	2.7
Measures to increase trust and confidence in the police	2.3	2.5
Provision of youth services	2.5	2.7
Support for young people experiencing domestic violence	2.4	2.8
Access to good quality alcohol treatment	2.3	2.4
Access to good quality drug treatment services	2.0	2.4
Access to good quality mental health services	2.4	2.9
Supporting offenders upon release from custody	2.2	2.5
Meeting the needs of vulnerable offenders	2.2	2.6
Diverting vulnerable people away from the criminal justice system	2.4	2.6

Differences of that kind came out in more detail in the interviews and in open-ended feedback in the surveys, where responses across the two groups also made it clear how views about interventions might be linked to views about the causation of problems around violence and exploitation. As noted earlier police respondents were more likely to see the value of wider criminal justice measures designed to deter potential offenders, for example (e.g., having more severe sentences for weapon-related violence), and to comment on the need for role models and strong family upbringing.

4.9.2 *Partnership working*

Issues concerning partnership working are obviously of considerable importance to violence reduction activity, mainly because issues concerning violence and exploitation cut across traditional agency boundaries and policy areas. The issues

are also anchored in complex "causal chains" which cannot be addressed by single agencies acting in isolation from others.

As noted in the previous section (and also in section 4.7), some of the perceived drivers of violence problems have socio-economic and complex area-based correlates, for example, as well as individual ones concerning family and community history.

That complexity is acknowledged within most "public health approaches" to violence reduction, and such an approach clearly underpins official violence reduction frameworks and budgets in London, and is also enshrined in recent key policy documents.[32]

Related notions such as contextual safeguarding and "whole systems" theory also have implications for the involvement of partner agencies, as suggested both in the documents referred to above and in respondent comments of the following sort:

> *Better join up, and a single lens and pathway. Compartmentalisation or silo working must be avoided as children do not recognise the artificial boundaries we put in place and can fall through the gaps.*
>
> (PRAC-80247515)

> *Safeguarding harm outside the home is so complicated and involves so many more people than harm inside the home and that kind of wider understanding of that feels like it's the right way forward.*
>
> (B-075)

Feedback about partnership working in relation to violence reduction suggested quite a mixed picture across all London boroughs, and that the quality of partnership working varies widely in terms of extent, profile, and efficiency. Partnership working also continues to be characterised by strong political and agency interests in some areas, which can have a significant effect on direction and sense of purpose.

Some practitioners felt that the skills required for partnership working have declined or diminished significantly in recent years across all agencies and organisations including the police, with some claiming that those involved in violence reduction often pay lip service to it rather than getting actively "stuck in to it".

Some interview respondents pointed to an erosion of strengths in partnership working which had previously been developed in the community safety field, further to the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, which of course had made partnership working a requirement for identifying and prioritising crime and disorder issues of concern to local communities. That focus was felt by some to be closer to public health approaches to violence reduction, and that it also allowed greater scope for community involvement than was currently happening in some areas. One local authority community safety manager noted that partnership working had traditionally

---

[32] Key background documents include those released by Public Health England (2019), the cross-party Youth Violence Commission (2018; see also Irwin-Rogers et al., 2020), and the World Health Organization (2020).

been a key strength of community safety partnerships (CSPs) but that some of those skills had been lost in the wake of reductions in numbers of staff over the years; as they expressed it:

> *Community Safety is diminished and relegated – not now a useful way forward but it should be if it was restored to its former vision and way of working. . . Community safety needs re-instating and a boost.*
>
> (A-012)

"Silo working" and disjointed services were mentioned by several stakeholders as being a debilitating aspect of partnership working, and where that was thought to be an issue it was felt that fractured services led to a fractured sense of purpose. Links between silo working and budgets were also pointed to:

> *Well, I think the silos are the way that we created this system, isn't it? When I think about* [this borough]*, so you've got all of these departments that say that they're working together but when it comes to resources, that's when they are going to go back to their silo, isn't it? When there is a young person that needs some support from education and a bit from social services, people will start talking about their budgets and what they can provide, etc., rather than looking at long-term, what will this mean if we do this piece of work now, if we did this now, what would be the impact? Well, we'd probably be saving ourselves from a lot of other work, a lot of other stuff that we just react to, but we can see it happening.*
>
> (B-122)

In terms of information-sharing, issues concerning GDPR appear to have eroded the effectiveness of data-sharing practices for partnerships in some areas, and to have made some staff more risk averse about such matters – declining to share or "dragging their feet" on such matters until the pressure to share information becomes strong enough to outweigh perceived downsides to sharing. Respondents sometimes referred to a perceived lack of leadership or direction here, and a lack of clarity or information about best practice. Where strong data-sharing practice seems to exist it is often informal and can turn out to be short-lived, as one or more of the transactional partners moves on.

> *I just think silo working is an absolute issue in every area, whether that's internally, within strands within the Police, whether that's expert intel, you know, I just think that the more we can look to problem solve whilst making sure that we're compliant in relation to data protection, everything like that, which is quite simple to get through, you know. . . . As long as you've got a good knowledge of GDPR most of this stuff is doable with the proper information sharing agreement that you can make sure, you know.*
>
> (B-156)

Respondents also referred to the need for more shared IT systems across partners, as these systems currently do not always allow for seamless sharing from system to system. This was sometimes even within a single organisation and made worse by "silo working" in local government and other large organisations such as health and police.

A related point is that crime analysis ability across local partnerships and CSPs seems to have been depleted – at least since periods where a substantial amount of analysis was required for the generation of area community safety profiles and so on. Some suggested that cuts had led to an erosion of the Crime Analyst "profession", and that staff involved no longer had a sense of professional unity.

Partnership working also appeared to be functioning very well in some areas, and particularly at operational levels, and in relation to case work and problem-solving in particular:

> *I'm very lucky on this . . . I've arrived to the, a very, very sleek functioning system, whereby there are multiple meetings and engagements between all of our partners. From Social Services, Housing, DWP, Probation, you name it, they're there, and there's a really, really collaborative look at how we reduce risk and how we look after people. There's also, we've got the integrated offender management units, so I've used IOM as well. So, you know, our relationship's both internal with our partners and external with other government agencies, you know, it's really, really strong here. And it's just seen as a, these are people on a list that are a risk, at risk of violence or committing violence and how do we manage that best.*
>
> *So I've been really, really impressed with what I've inherited, so I can't claim any credit but it works really well here, in terms of our partnership working and sharing information where we can. And it, I suppose, it's a bit of a dare to share principle. . . . A few years ago everything was siloed, keep it to yourself. And then we realised, off the back of various inquests . . . . and the same with frontline policing, that the more you can actually share, the more chance you have of achieving results. So it's about sharing safely in the right forums and that's what's kind of in place here in terms of governance.*
>
> (B-065)

There is a perception that there are too many voluntary sector agencies involved across the whole crime landscape making funding difficult and leaving the third sector space over-crowded and with too many people doing the same thing.

Many frontline agencies or small, new agencies were just not getting access to funding. This was often because they cannot produce three years of audited accounts, let alone good quality evaluation reports. However, many stakeholders felt more could be done here to help fund and resource such groups as they often are the ones with the best reach into the young people who are most active on the streets or most difficult to reach.

Concerning the timescales for available funding, a majority of practitioners noted that short-term funding challenges are a real hindrance to local charities and projects, and it was also suggested that short-term funding eroded effectiveness.

The London VRU was also commented on in remarks about partnership working in violence reduction, and although the VRU received some criticism for "trying to please too many masters" or for being "too remote from communities and real-life

issues", it also received praise both for the way in which it organised and deployed funding opportunities for promising scheme to address violence and exploitation, and for the way in which it has promoted smoother partnership working in some areas. In relation to data analysts for example, several respondents commented positively on the way in which efforts had been made to "pull together" analysts from different parts of London, in order to generate stronger overall data-sets.

Schools, colleges and universities were not thought to be involved in partnerships to the extent that they could be, although DSLs obviously need to engage in a degree of partnership working as part of their work. Their perception of partnership working and its effectiveness was fairly positive, although views again did vary from area to area. Their responses to our main questions about their own partnership working are summarised at Figure 15.

Figure 15 – DSL survey: "As a DSL, you will occasionally work with external partners on safeguarding issues. To what extent would you agree or disagree with the following statements:" (%, by response category)
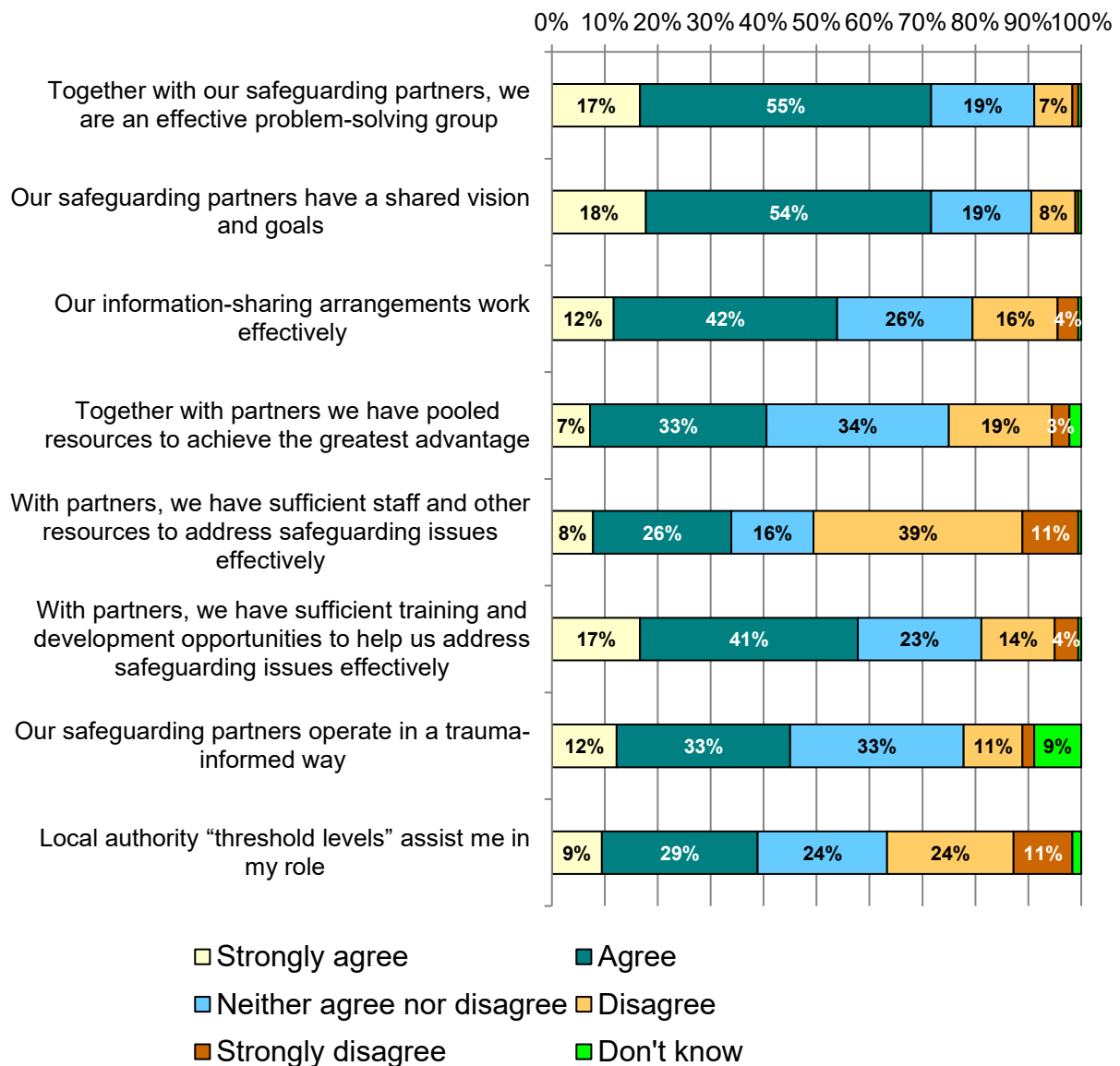
(n=180; not answered=1; to improve readability, data labels for values of 2% or less have not been displayed)

While interview respondents were quick to raise issues about the difficulties of partnership working in relation to violence reduction, respondents to our practitioner survey were fairly positive about particular aspects of partnership working, in their responses to some of our questions about the quality of that work.

In relation to key issues such as joint problem-solving, having a shared vision and goals, information-sharing, and consultation with local communities for example, from 70% to three quarters of respondents either "agreed" or "strongly agreed" with the relevant statements, which is clearly quite a positive response overall. Levels of agreement were somewhat lower for statements concerning some of the other aspects of partnership working - such as a shared focus on cost-effectiveness, for example, or having a shared understanding of links between trauma and violence. Details are summarised at Figure 16.

Figure 16 – Practitioner survey: "It is often noted that work to address issues around serious youth violence and exploitation requires the involvement of a range of agencies. To what extent would you agree or disagree that partners involved in addressing these issues in your own area:" (%, by response category)

Statement	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know
problem-solve together effectively	47%	26%	11%	7%	7%	
have a shared vision and goals	40%	33%	8%	9%	9%	
share information effectively	42%	33%	8%	9%	9%	
pool resources to achieve the greatest advantage	31%	30%	14%	18%	6%	
have sufficient staff and other resources to address these issues	44%	18%	5%	17%	14%	
keep track of key interventions and their effectiveness	35%	24%	17%	15%	6%	
keep track of the cost-effectiveness of their violence reduction work	24%	16%	29%	17%	9%	5%
adopt a public health approach to violence reduction work	33%	26%	20%	9%	9%	4%
ensure that their work is informed by the interests and concerns of local communities	36%	34%	9%	11%	7%	3%
have a shared understanding of connections between violence and trauma	41%	27%	14%	9%	7%	
have a shared understanding of the importance of gender, to the contours of violence and its impacts	29%	32%	15%	10%	10%	5%
base their violence reduction activities on evidence about what works	33%	29%	14%	11%	9%	5%

Legend:
- ☐ Strongly agree
- ■ Agree
- ■ Neither agree nor disagree
- ■ Disagree
- ■ Strongly disagree
- ☐ Don't know

(n=94; not answered=3; to improve readability, data labels for values of 2% or less have not been displayed)

4.9.3 *Policing*

Although policing was not a direct focus of the research, it is clearly of central importance to efforts to address violence and exploitation, and issues concerning policing obviously came up a lot in the feedback.

In terms of direct feedback about policing from young people, we did ask young people in our surveys to give us their opinions about the police, and some of that feedback is highlighted below.

The percentages of respondents who claimed that they had either a very bad opinion or a bad opinion of the police seem quite high, and it is also not very positive that the most common response (selected by 39% of respondents) was "neutral opinion". Again, it is hard to extrapolate to wider populations of young people, but these figures do seem quite negative.

Figure 17 –Young people survey – "Overall, what opinion do you have of the police?" (% by response category)
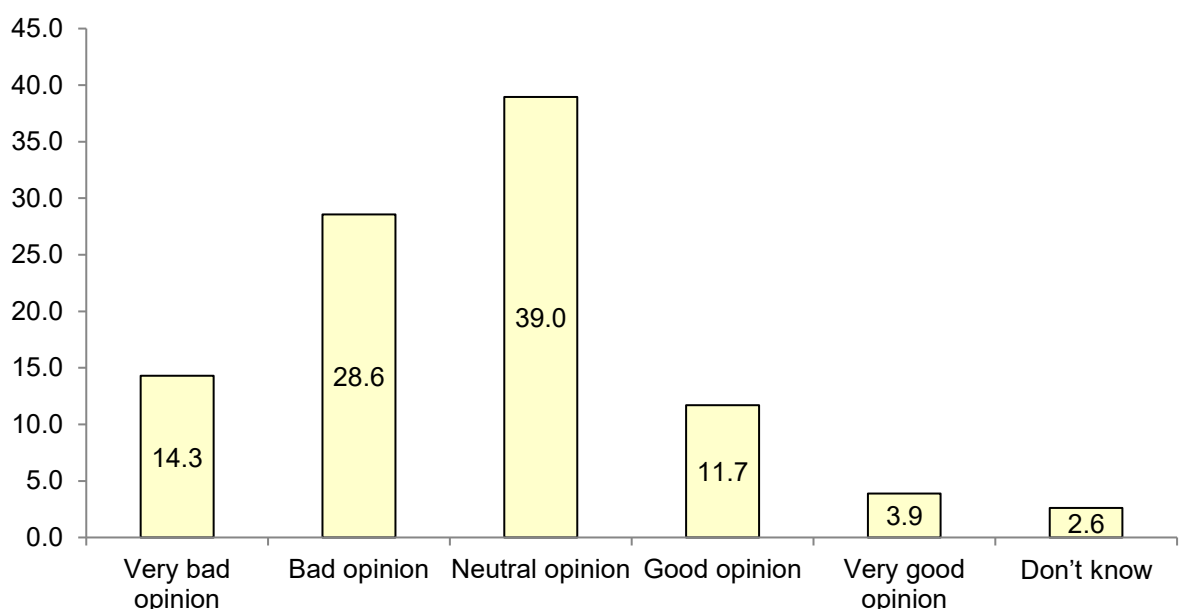

(n=77)

It is useful to compare these figures with findings from MOPAC's own Youth Voice Survey (Ramshaw et al., 2018), since that survey covers (almost 8,000) young people aged 11-18, and covered all boroughs in London. Since that survey is administered to school-based populations we would expect that feedback would differ in some key ways from our own feedback, since our questionnaires were completed by young people who are more likely to be somewhat older and also to have been excluded or otherwise not be attending school. That expectation seems to be borne out in relation to perceptions about the police - while 43% of our sample had either a very bad or a bad opinion of the police overall, only 14% of the MOPAC respondents had a "bad" opinion of the police.

The other survey question where we did ask directly for young people's views about the police involved asking for each respondent's level of agreement with each of seven statements about the police or police practice.

The feedback was fairly mixed, as indicated on the following graph. On the one hand, it does appear that whatever they think of the police, most respondents would make sure that incidents of serious violence were reported to the police (if they saw any such incidents) – 57% either agreed, or agreed strongly with the relevant statement. A sizeable proportion of respondents (though not a majority) also felt that "the police will be there if I need them" (with 38% either agreeing or agreeing strongly), although the response relating to "the police keep me safe" was a bit more equivocal (with 30% either agreeing or agreeing strongly). Forty-three percent of the MOPAC respondents felt that the police "will be there when I need them", and 47% felt that the police "can protect me from crime".

Levels of agreement with the statement "The police treat everyone fairly whatever their skin colour" were somewhat more worrying in our own survey, with only around 12% agreeing or agreeing strongly, and just over two thirds of respondents expressing disagreement or strong disagreement. That finding also resonates with some of the comments made in response to the open-ended questions (see below).

Figure 18 –Young people survey – "Do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the police?" (% by response category)
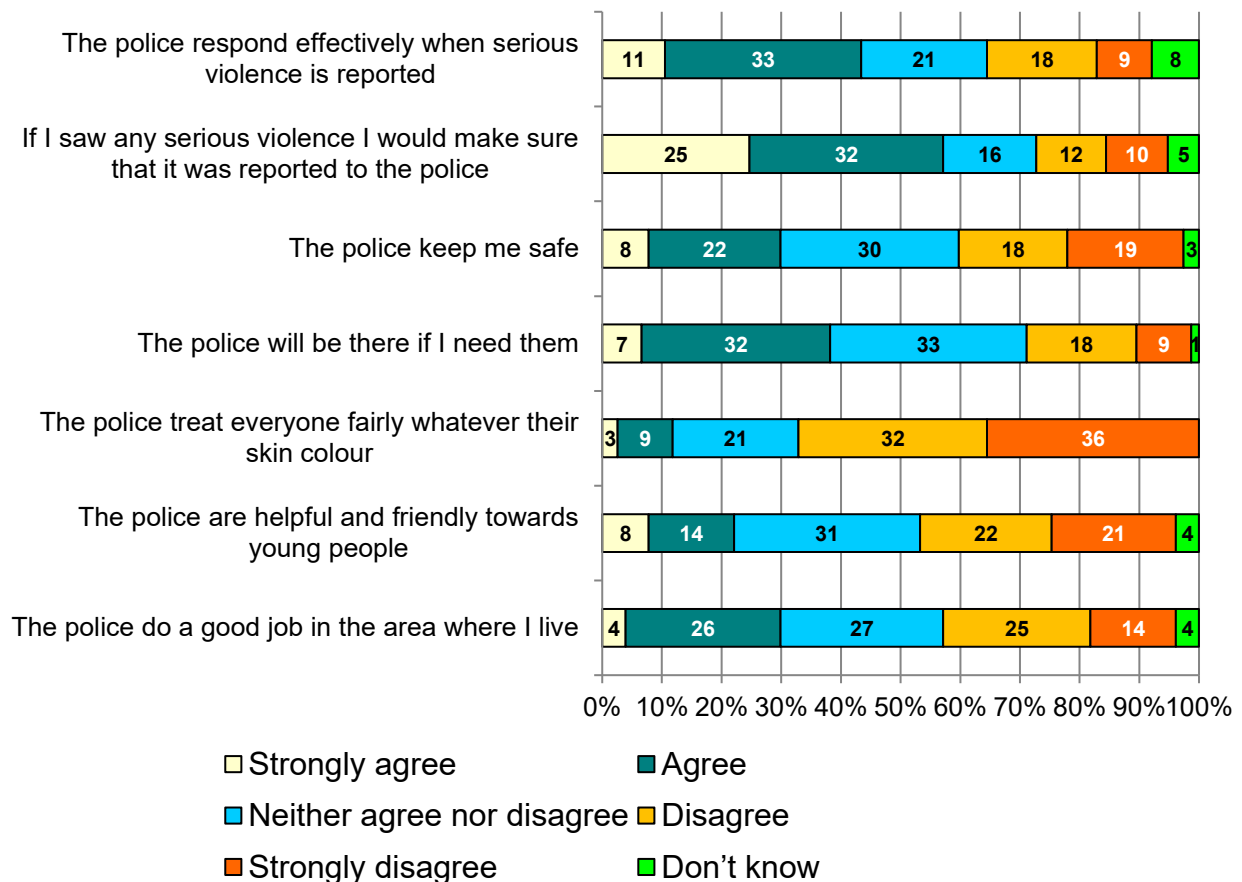
(n=77)

Again by way of comparison, the MOPAC youth survey respondents were somewhat more positive than our respondents, with 37% agreeing that the police "treat everyone fairly", and only 27% disagreeing (Ramshaw et al., 2018).

Although the open-ended questions did not ask directly for comment about the police, some of the comments made are also relevant to issues around policing. The comments below were made in response to the question: "In just a few words, what do you think is the most important thing that could be done, to stop or reduce violence?"
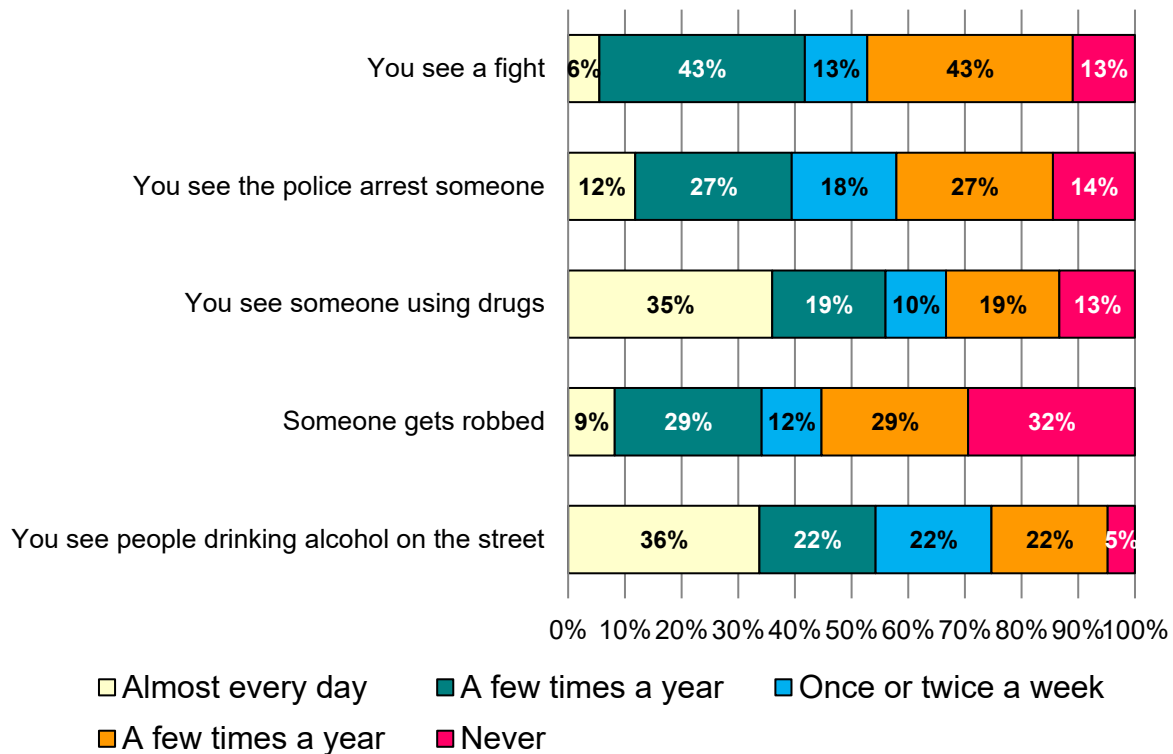
Police or policing are mentioned 22 times (with further mentions using other terms – such as "law enforcement"), and there is roughly an even split between positive and negative comments. Again there is a view that police need to be more understanding of young people, and that the police need to pay attention to racism and relations with the community – but there is also a strong theme about the need for more policing, and more targeted policing (e.g., arresting drug dealers, being on visible patrol more often, and so on).

Eighteen respondents made further comments in response to the question: "If you would like to make any more comments about any of these issues, please use the space below", and some of those comments make direct reference to the police – for example:

> ➢ *Fuck the police.*
> ➢ *I'm satisfied with police. They are always there when we need them.*
> ➢ *less stop and searches.*
> ➢ *police create the violence with picking on certain groups they do nothing.*
> ➢ *Stop and search is getting out of hand in the area.*
> ➢ *The acceptance of racism in the police force is necessary to move forward.*

The rest of the main young people surveys do not include much on the police, although one other question does ask for feedback about the frequency of police arrests in the respondent's own area. Responses to that question are summarised below.

Figure 19 –Young people survey – "The next few questions are about things that happen in many areas of London. Please say how often these things happen in the area that you live in." (% by response category)

	Almost every day	A few times a year	Once or twice a week	A few times a year	Never
You see a fight	6%	43%	13%	43%	13%
You see the police arrest someone	12%	27%	18%	27%	14%
You see someone using drugs	35%	19%	10%	19%	13%
Someone gets robbed	9%	29%	12%	29%	32%
You see people drinking alcohol on the street	36%	22%	22%	22%	5%

Legend:
- ☐ Almost every day
- ■ A few times a year
- ■ Once or twice a week
- ■ A few times a year
- ■ Never

(n=77)

The respondents do seem to see arrests quite a lot, although it is difficult to assess these numbers on their own. (It is also interesting that it seems to be a regular feature of everyday life for these young people, that they see either drug-taking or public use of alcohol.)

Comments about policing and racism were not limited to our young respondents, with some practitioners and residents also referring to a need to address disproportionality and what they saw as the racism that underpins it. The following comments from one of our DSL respondents illustrate such a view:

> *The unnecessary aggressive and racist attitudes of the police towards young people of BAME heritage is fuelling some of the issues of violence and trauma that is being experienced in communities. This is also leaving some young people and their families traumatised as well as criminalised and Local Authority Safeguarding arrangements and expertise do not have either the means or sufficient expertise to challenge or address this. This is a systemic issue and a consequence of institutional racism.*

(DSL-75487072)

Internal confidence amongst police staff appears to be quite variable. A view by many is that recent changes have diluted efficacy, efficiency and professionalism. Some longer serving officers felt that the MPS had changed significantly now and lost too many older, seasoned and knowledgeable staff above Inspector rank.

Some police respondents felt that new BCU arrangements across the capital have affected ability, productivity, confidence and outcomes significantly over the past few years, although some boroughs report moving on a bit now from such an 'unwelcomed interruption'. Others report that the situation has still not settled. There was some criticism as regards the impact of moving to tri-borough BCUs in terms of local partnership working with CSPs with several areas saying this generated some confusion.

It was noted by some police respondents that engagement with particular communities had suffered over the past couple of years in some boroughs, and fallout from public issues about the Matrix was referred to in this context.

Policing resources both centrally and in each borough were thought to be very variable with a commonly heard critique that resources go to key boroughs and hotspots only, whilst other areas are left to fend for themselves. Some also commented that resources more generally were spread too thinly across London.

Confidence amongst young people towards the police is recognised by stakeholders as being very low, and our own feedback from young people generally supports that view, although expressed lack of confidence in the police obviously varies by area and also by age and ethnicity.

Among residents in our case study areas, confidence in the police also appears to be low, as reflected in both our direct interviews with residents and in feedback from our online surveys. Interview feedback and open-ended feedback from some residents who have responded to the survey, is quite negative in relation to experiences around reporting incidents of violence.

Views on stop and search were quite mixed across respondents, with some arguing for more but more focused stop and search activities, and others arguing that the negative impact of stop and search on community and youth relations (especially in some BAME communities) is not outweighed by any particular gains that the police might get from that activity. Comments such as the following were typical:

> *More strategic use of stop and search. Being searched and delayed on the way to school or after school several times a week and having nothing illegal on their person is traumatic.*
>
> (DSL-78801890)

Other respondents also drew connections between disproportionality, racism and trauma at community level (e.g., the DSL quoted on the previous page), and a small number linked policing and the criminal justice system itself with wider social control of non-White groups. Again, these were minority views, but strongly expressed to us on several occasions.

It is worth noting that some of the above feedback is consistent with findings from other research that has focused on levels of confidence in the police across London. A recent review by the Police Foundation found that overall attitudes toward the police have become more negative in general recently, for example, although there

have been clear differences in those attitudes across different ethnic groups (Muir et al. 2022).

Similarly, a survey of Londoners conducted by YouGov (Mile End Institute, 2022) suggested that just under half of all respondents (N=1,114) had either "no trust at all" or "not very much trust" in the Metropolitan Police, with trust levels again varying significantly by ethnicity – the percentage for respondents from BAME communities was 54%, for example, and a large majority of those respondents also felt that the Metropolitan Police service is either "definitely" (43%) or "probably" (29%) institutionally racist.

MOPAC's own Public Attitude Survey returns also show that perceptions of fairness and trustworthiness of the police among Black and Mixed ethnic groups fell further recently and from a lower starting point than elsewhere in the UK. In response to the key question about police "fairness", for example levels of agreement fell for the latter groups, from a point one year ago that was already significantly lower than for respondents from White groups.[33]

Concerning stop and search specifically, it is well known that people from BAME communities are more likely to experience it, more likely to be subjected to use of force as part of a stop and search encounter[34], and less likely to claim that stop and search as currently practiced is justified or should continue. In a recent IOPC public perceptions tracker, only 28% respondents from BAME communities claimed the latter for example, as opposed to 43% of white respondents (Naseem, 2021).

---

[33] Details can be found on MOPAC's Public Voice Dashboard. The survey is noteworthy for its methodological rigour and for the robustness of the final data-sets that it generates, and these are therefore often used for a variety of purposes in the literature.

[34] Gaps in the available data concerning use of force during stop and search mean that claims about disproportionality are indicative only, but reports such as the recent HMICFRS (2021) publication on force offer some support for such claims; the authors suggest that "despite limitations, the data suggests a disproportionate use of force" by ethnicity.

### 4.10 Perceptions on how to reduce violence

As part of the research, we asked all respondent groups for their views about how to reduce violence and the form that work takes. We also asked respondents for their views about what the likely trajectory of such work might be, and how likely they thought it would be effective.

Overall, the research team found it quite striking that levels of confidence were so low among many respondents about the likely effectiveness in reducing violence in the future. Interview respondents were fairly restrained in their expectations about how to reduce violence, in either their own areas or London generally, and survey respondents were even less positive.

Practitioner survey respondents were asked to rate their level of confidence that future efforts to reduce violence and exploitation would be effective, from 1 (meaning not at all confident) to 5 (meaning very confident), and the average was about 2.8 (for those having a borough focus in their own work) and 2.2 (for those with a pan-London focus). Respondents were also asked how likely they thought it was for each of a range of factors, that it would blunt the effectiveness of efforts to reduce violence in their area or in London generally. For "lack of resources", 94% of respondents felt that it was either likely or highly likely that this would reduce the effectiveness. Figures for other factors included "lack of understanding across partners about the causes of violence" (77%), "lack of awareness across partners about what would be effective" (78%), "lack of longer-term planning and oversight" (82%), "lack of political will to do what it takes to address these issues" (84%), "lack of shared commitment across partner agencies to reduce violence" (73%), "work to address serious violence and exploitation is not properly joined up" (89%), and "lack of understanding across partners about public health or 'whole systems' approaches to violence reduction" (77%).

Responses from practitioners to those issues are summarised in the following figure.

Figure 20 – Practitioner survey: "For each of the following factors, how likely do you think it is that it will undermine the effectiveness of future work to reduce serious violence and exploitation?" (% by response category)

□ Highly likely ■ Likely ■ Unlikely □ Highly unlikely ■ Don't know
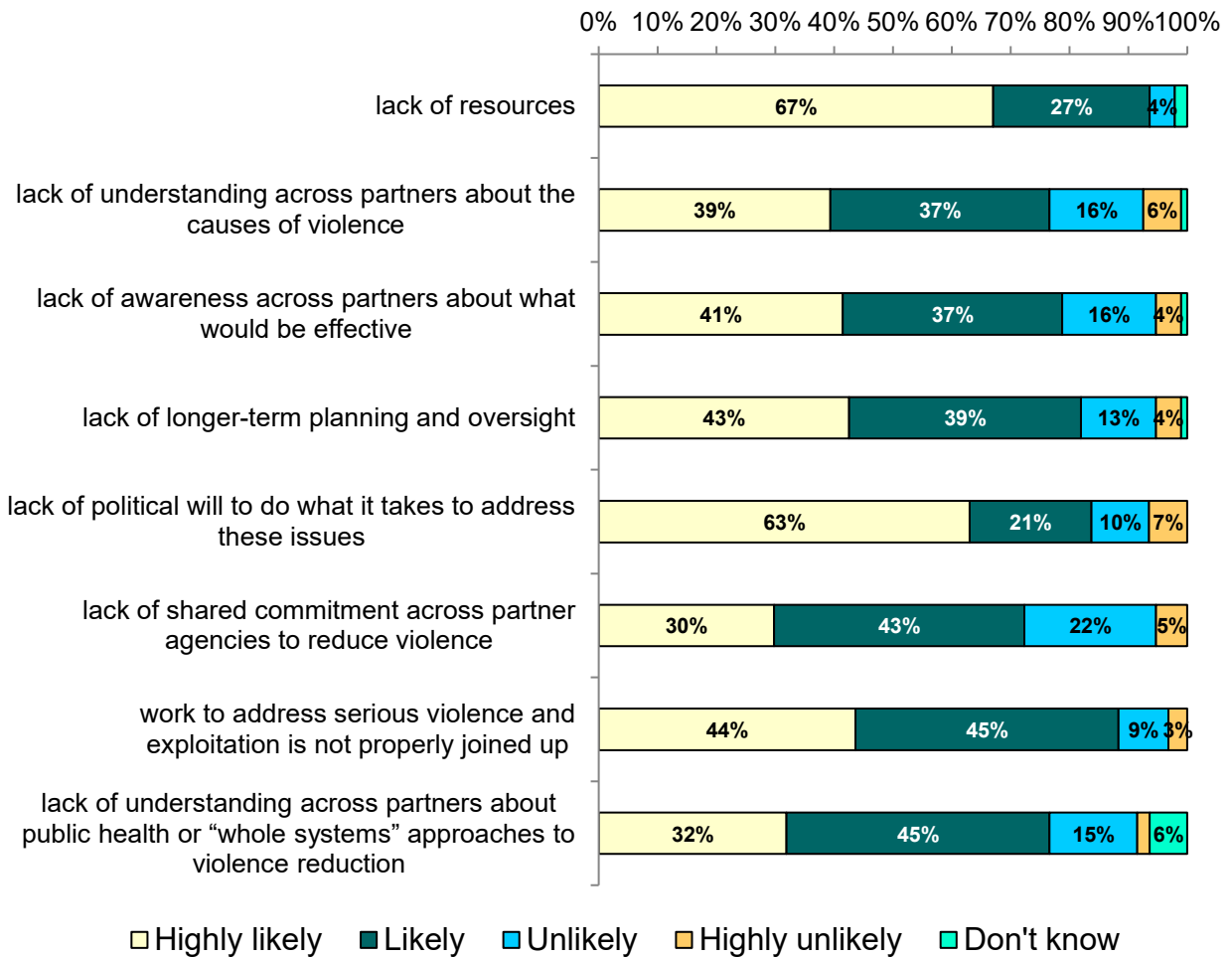
(n=94; to improve readability, data labels for values of 2% or less have not been displayed)

Perceptions about the future reduction of violence in London were also provided in more detail by practitioner survey respondents in their open-ended comments about these issues (which were provided by 60 out of 97 respondents). Feedback from residents and professionals working in our case study areas reinforced that view, with residents in particular reporting low levels of confidence that future efforts to reduce violence in their areas will lead to real change.

Interestingly, respondents to the residents' survey expressed views about the likely trajectory of future general violence efforts in their own areas, which were quite similar to the views of practitioner survey respondents. The question for residents was worded in a slightly different way, but 41 of 43 people who responded to this question felt that "lack of resources" would make it either likely or very likely that the effectiveness of reducing violence would be undermined, and for "lack of political will to do what it takes to address these issues" the number responding in this way was 40 out of 43.

In some residential areas, low levels of confidence about the future reduction of violence was clearly related to a perceived history of authorities failing to act, and as

many expressed it, failures to honour promises made to provide support or to regenerate areas and develop opportunities.

One resident made reference to a lack of services, and to a need for investment and "upstream thinking":

> *There is no simple quick fix, it will take investment and upstream thinking which the government don't seem to be interested in. Locally only so much can be done without the money and staff to be effective but ironically a happy and prosperous community would be able to contribute more. It's a very sad situation and I'm glad I'm not a young person living here at this time.*
>
> (RES-168777014)

Other residents also referred to a need for longer-term investment:

> *Solving youth violence will take long term solutions and needs long term commitment and funding. This isn't an issue to keep on chopping and changing approach.*
>
> (RES-169127472)

> *The council and partner agencies do nothing but tick boxes to collect funding while ignoring the causes of many of the problems in the community because that requires too much long-term commitment.*
>
> (RES-168698054)

Some residents simply claimed that they did not know what future efforts to address serious youth violence might look like, or that some of the causes of such violence were perhaps too difficult to address:

> *I just think there is currently a serious lack of resources or political will to do anything about these problems.   I am centre-left and I feel that the Police services have been excessively cut. There is a total lack of any community policing. I would like to see more services to help young people - clubs, sports and recreational facilities. I know there is a problem with the breakdown of families as well and absent fathers... how do you address that?*
>
> (RES-169115529)

5   DISCUSSION

Although there are clearly some limitations concerning generalisability for some of the findings (because of the way in which respondent numbers were achieved for several of the fieldwork strands), the research has generated a strong and unique data-set covering a wide range of respondent groups, and focusing on a variety of key (and interconnected) issues.

Using mixed methods has also allowed for the development of a final data-set that has both depth and scope.

While some of the feedback confirms or elaborates what we already knew from other research, some of it has also usefully either highlighted some key gaps in existing knowledge, or yielded new insights into how some of the key determinants of serious youth violence might interact and influence one another.

In the former category, the final data-set again highlights the importance of learning more about how girls and young women are connected with serious youth violence and gang activity, and what the key features are of individual pathways into such involvement. We would suggest that what has been referred to as the "invisibility" of girls and young women in gang activities could be addressed not just by examining those forms of involvement directly, but by viewing those activities (and serious youth violence more generally) through a gender lens, in order to developed a more nuanced evidence base which can allow us to see gendered interactions and pathways.

At the time of writing MOPAC is already responding to address some of these issues, by commissioning new work to examine pathways into gang activity taken by girls and young women and to identify factors which might protect against or facilitate the involvement of girls and young women in such activity. That research will be timely and highly relevant to violence reduction in London.

Another gap that has been highlighted by the feedback that we have gathered also concerns the identification and theorisation of protective factors which might insulate otherwise vulnerable groups from becoming involved in violence – factors which perhaps strengthen individual resilience and reduce vulnerability. It is crucial to understand factors of that kind in much greater detail, since we know that many young people who are exposed to whole sets of violence drivers do not in fact take pathways that lead them into involvement in gang activities or violence. Some of the feedback offers us hints about what those factors might be and how they might have positive effects at key points in an individual life history – such as descriptions of "significant others" in the lives of young people for example, individuals who perhaps offer a combination of individual connection and support, key role models, and some continuity of interest at key points where a young person might otherwise lack those things. As noted earlier, we already know that simple equations such as poverty=violence are not very useful, but a deeper understanding of protective factors of this kind would allow us to understand individual pathways into and out of violence much more clearly, and to design interventions to allow us to test such connections more specifically.

The research has also shown us how some small areas of London are particularly affected by high levels of serious youth violence alongside the presence of a whole range of drivers at both individual and community level, and a study of individual pathways into and out of violence could usefully allow for some focus on the interplay of factors at different levels – the way in which individual factors resonate with the impacts of poverty and/or disproportionality for example.

Other developments in some of those areas can add even more complexity to these problems - by co-locating vulnerable groups for example, as in areas with a high density of HMOs. Further research focusing on shifts of this kind in the "vulnerability landscape" in small geographic areas over time could help us to understand how

new and concentrated risks can sometimes be formed, and help us to anticipate such changes and develop partnership structures for avoiding and/or managing them.

In relation to issues about links between violence and trauma, the feedback suggests that much "trauma-informed practice" in this field is quite backward looking and overly fixated on static past events (or sets of events), rather than on current struggles that young people in particular might have right now. Not everyone with sets of adverse events in their childhoods or adolescence struggle with the impacts of trauma (though many do), and ACE-focused assessments can therefore lead to inappropriate targeting and to a focus which has been shown in other evaluations not to combine well with efforts to establish trust relationships between young people and service providers for example.

A more general point about that issue is that "trauma-informed practice" is arguably moving in a direction that is less positive than it could be in this field. The current Youth Endowment Fund call for new delivery and evaluation of trauma-focused interventions is to be welcomed, but the description of the proposed work is arguably unnecessarily focused on efforts to actually address trauma directly (e.g., via clinical methods). Some of our respondents have also commented on this, but it is possible for violence reduction efforts to address trauma-related drivers without having a clinical focus at all – in our view, some prison-based interventions have quasi-therapeutic outcomes (including aspects of trauma resolution) for example, in some cases even where they do not focus on trauma at all.

We also know from the wider literature that interventions designed to address some of the impacts of adverse childhood and adolescent experience can be both effective in terms of reducing a whole range of problems including violence, but that such interventions can also generate significant financial savings in the longer term. Much of this evidence comes from interventions that were designed to address specific adversities such as abuse, neglect or domestic violence for example, rather than to address adversities that co-occur in particular areas in the manner we have referred to above in relation to the notion of "community trauma".

Further work is necessary to help us understand how drivers of violence can coalesce and reinforce one another in very localised communities, and also how community activism and local pride in an area can be harnessed to build resilience and a broader and deeper sense of connectedness in such areas. There is some evidence that social cohesion can be a protective factor in high violence areas, but it would be useful to know more about which forms of social cohesion might have the strongest violence reduction potential, and how these can be developed over time.

This leads to a more general final point, that some violence reduction in London could benefit from stronger anchorage in robust theoretical frameworks. We have examined a wide range of theories of change that have been developed in this field, and our respondent feedback overall also suggests that there is some scope for key stakeholders to be given more support for considering *why* they think that a particular intervention might have the impact that they hope it will, and *how* identified drivers of violence might have their causal effects. Theories of change that have been developed to map out violence reduction and its impacts are in some cases

less useful than they could be, for underpinning local violence reduction strategies and for raising awareness about how programmes can be effective. This could in turn help to focus future research and to inform evaluation frameworks, but also to do more nuanced and finely-tuned cost-benefit studies.

6   APPENDIX – METHODOLOGY: FURTHER DETAILS

We provide further details here concerning sampling, selection of case study areas and fieldwork within them, and data-analysis.

Sampling

For all of the fieldwork (interviews, focus groups, and online surveys) we worked through our own existing networks to build contact lists but were also assisted where appropriate by colleagues at MOPAC and/or the London VRU. The latter two organisations each have extensive mailing lists, and some of those contacts were used to communicate with local stakeholders about the research, and to invite their participation in it.

In some cases where representation by sector was thought to be imbalanced, we made further contacts (some through our MOPAC colleagues, and others through our own networks) to improve coverage by further targeted communication with key stakeholders in that sector.

For the survey of Designated Safeguarding Leads (DSLs) we first worked through a voluntary organisation that had good existing school links in London, and we supplemented those respondents by working through the London community safety networks. In cases where we did not receive any responses from a particular borough, we made separate contacts directly with key stakeholders in that borough to enlist their help in encouraging response.

For the surveys of young people and of street workers, we worked through our own networks of youth clubs and youth support organisations in order to generate participation, and we also attended youth events (e.g., football events) to set up stalls where we provided information about the surveys and how to participate.

Decisions about which respondents to interview and which to involve in one of the surveys was dependent on assessment of the achieved sample of interviewees as it developed over time (with it being our aim to have an achieved sample that was broadly balanced by area and sector for example), but also on practicalities (such as switching to the survey for those who could not easily be contacted for interview for example, or by interviewing some practitioners who were simply very keen to speak with us rather than use a survey link).

Because of the way in which the surveys were conducted, it is not possible to calculate response rates. For each survey there was some internal cascading within organisations or agencies, and invitations to be involved were forwarded on our behalf by MOPAC or the VRU – where because of GDPR constraints we did not see the full contact lists ourselves. Our own contact lists also grew incrementally over time, and the survey responses were in any case anonymous.

In terms of survey design, both the practitioner survey and the survey of Designated Safeguarding Leads were designed using JISC software, and the other surveys were designed using the SmartSurvey Enterprise platform.

UNIVERSITY OF WEST LONDON / ARCS LTD

The young people and the resident surveys used both survey links and QR codes. For the surveys of young people we worked with local youth projects and/or had a presence at key events for young people, where we distributed survey links and/or QR codes. All of the young people and residents' surveys were incentivised.

The surveys and the interviews and discussion groups all had bespoke questionnaires or topic guides, and although we have not attached them to this report (as there are several dozen across all methods), they covered broadly the same issues that are reported on in the main sections of the report.
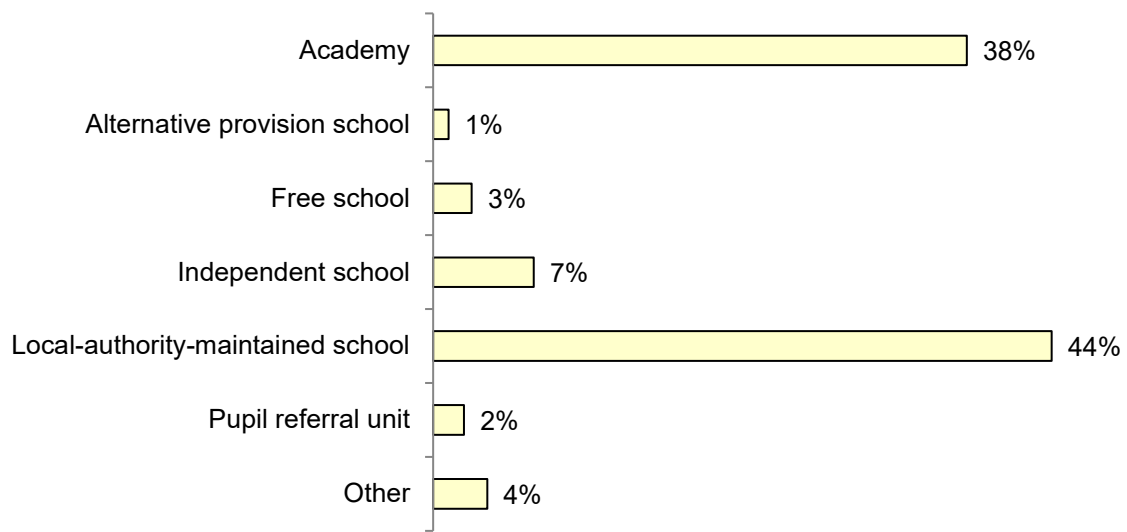
DSL survey response

Concerning the spread of DSL responses across London boroughs, responses numbered from 0 (5 boroughs) to 25 (for Wandsworth). The average number of DSL responses per borough was 6.
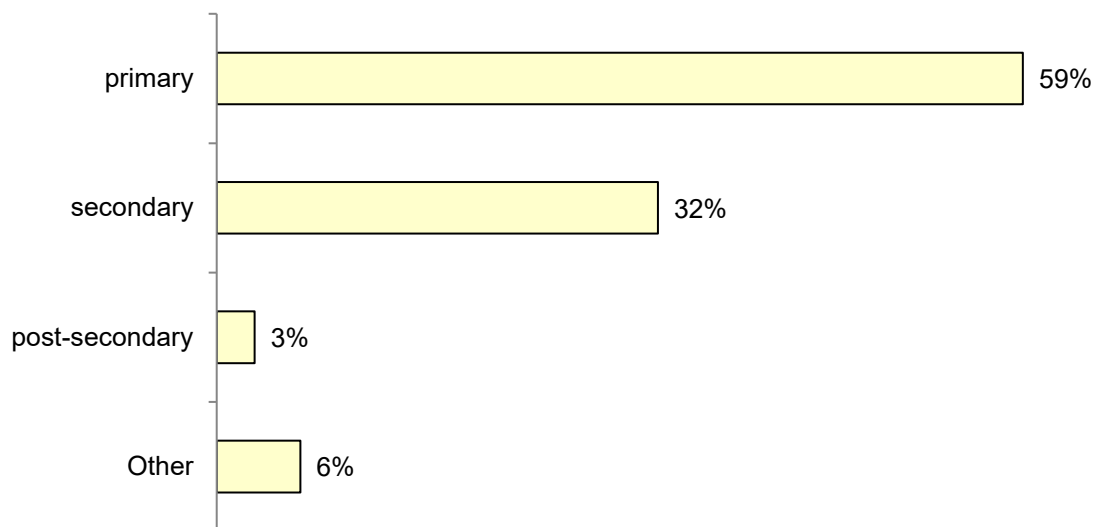
Figure 21 summarises the type of school that respondents worked in, and

Figure 22 summarises the level of the establishments worked at.

Figure 21 – Respondents to DSL survey: type of school or college worked in

(N=181)

Figure 22 – Respondents to DSL survey: level of establishment worked at

primary — 59%
secondary — 32%
post-secondary — 3%
Other — 6%

(N=181)

Interviews

Almost all of the interviews were digitally recorded, and transcribed fully for importation into NVIVO for analysis. Most of the stakeholder interviews were conducted using Microsoft Teams or similar, although some were conducted "on site".

The interviews with young people were all conducted face to face, either in local youth clubs or other community locations, or in agency premises.

Project summaries and information sheets were provided to stakeholder respondents in advance, and for the interviews with young people we provided relevant details on the day. Our standard details concerning confidentiality and anonymity and reporting were also given again verbally prior to each interview, for all respondents.

Case study areas

In selecting the case study areas we used an assessment tool developed by the GLA Community Intelligence Unit (CIU) (in conjunction with MOPAC and the London VRU); we examined ward rankings based on multiple sources of data relating to crime, public perceptions, deprivation, and public health. Using four different approaches to combining data on those key issues, the tool generates scores which are then used to rank wards in terms of overall need.

The intention was to conduct interviews and online surveys in all six of the sample areas selected – Angell Town/Loughborough estates, Lambeth; Brandon estate (Newington Ward), Southwark; Noel Park estate, Noel Park ward, Haringey; Fairfield ward, Croydon; Grahame Park Estate, Colindale ward, Barnet, and Shadwell ward, Tower Hamlets. After several months we dropped one of the areas (Shadwell ward) on the advice of local contacts, but we did conduct interviews and online surveys in all five of the other areas.

While the interview component of the case study work was fairly straightforward to conduct and very useful in terms of the feedback generated, the online surveys were very difficult to implement due to a fairly negative local response. In all we designed 7 surveys - 2 for Lambeth (one each for Angell Town and Loughborough estates), 2 for Graham Park (one for adults and one for young people), and 1 adult survey for each of Brandon Estate, Noel Park Estate, and Fairfield ward - and after much consultation we launched 5 of them. Two received zero responses in spite of assistance from local contacts, although in the end we did receive 47 responses from across 3 areas. There were several reasons for this low response, as we note in the main report at section 4.4.

Analysis

Survey data-sets were analysed using SPSS, but were also imported into NVIVO so that the open-ended material was easier to analyse, and also so that cross-tabbing and cross-referencing by topic area could be undertaken more quickly across data types.

For understanding the final data-set we adopted a reflexive approach to our thematic analysis, in keeping with the approach pioneered by Braun and Clarke and branded as "reflexive thematic analysis" or RTA[35]. That approach involves six stages (data familiarisation, generating initial codes, generating themes, reviewing themes, finalising thematic framework, and reporting) although in practice these stages are not strictly chronological. We also truncated their second stage because we began with an initial coding structure which was linked both to our research questions and to the structure of our data-collection instruments. But RTA is paradigmatically flexible, and it allows analysts to vary quite a bit in terms of where they sit on the scale from essentialist to constructionist for example, what the balance is between deductive and inductive analysis[36], whether it is felt that respondents' comments are a reflection of their experience or constitutive of it, and the extent to which it is felt that analysis should focus on those comments in terms of surface or latent meanings.

---

[35] Braun and Clark first outlined the RTA approach in their 2006 paper, but have since elaborated on the approach at much greater length (2012, 2013, 2014, 2020).

[36] With inductive approaches tending to use open-coding for example, as in "grounded theory" approaches to thematic analysis (famously popularised by Glaser and Straus, 1967), and deductive ones tending to use preconceived coding structures.

7 REFERENCES

Abianda (2021) *Abianda's reflections on the term "gangs"*. 31 May, 2021. London: Abianda. Available at: https://www.abianda.com/post/what-does-abianda-mean-when-we-say-gang-read-our-reflections-on-the-term-gang-to-find-out-more

ACMD (Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs) (2015) *Prevention of drug and alcohol dependence - Briefing by the Recovery Committee*. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/406926/ACMD_RC_Prevention_briefing_250215.pdf

Andell, P., and Pitts, J., (2023) *The Palgrave Handbook on youth gangs in the UK* , Palgrave (forthcoming).

Bottoms, A.E. (2009) Disorder, order and control signals. *British Journal of Sociology*, Vol 60 (1):49-55.

Bottoms, A.E. and Wilson, A. (2007) Civil Renewal, Control Signals and Neighbourhood Safety' in T. Brannan, P. John and G. Stoker (eds.) *Re-energizing Citizenship: Strategies for Civil Renewal*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Braun, V., and Clarke, V (2006) Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3(2), 77–101.

Braun, V., and Clarke, V. (2012) Thematic analysis. In: Cooper, H., Camic, P.M., Long, D.L., Panter, A.T., Rindskopf, D., Sher, K.J. (eds.) *APA Handbook of Research Methods in Psychology, Research Designs,* vol. 2, pp.57–71. American Psychological Association, Washington.

Braun, V., and Clarke, V. (2013) *Successful Qualitative Research: A Practical Guide for Beginners.* Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks.

Braun, V., and Clarke, V. (2014) Thematic analysis. In: Teo, T. (ed.) *Encyclopedia of Critical Psychology*, pp. 1947–1952. Springer, New York.

Braun, V., and Clarke, V. (2020) One size fits all? What counts as quality practice in (reflexive) thematic analysis? *Qualitative Research in Psychology*. Volume 18, 328-352 - *Issue 3: Quality in qualitative approaches: Celebrating heterogeneity.*

Brennan, I., Burnley, N., Cutmore, M., Holt, A., Lillis, J., Llewellyn, J., MacLeod, S., Shah, M., Van Zanten, R. and Vicentini, L. (2022) *Comprehensive needs assessment of Child/Adolescent to Parent Violence and Abuse in London*. London: Violence Reduction Unit. Available at: https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/comprehensive_needs_assessment_of_child-adolescent_to_parent_violence_and_abuse_in_london.pdf.

Browne, K.D., Green, K., Jareno-Ripoll, S. and Paddock, E. (2022) Knife crime offender characteristics and interventions – A systematic review. *Aggression and Violent Behaviour* 67 (2022).

Paul Bywaters, P., Skinner, G., Cooper, A., Kennedy, E. and Malik, A. (2022) *The Relationship Between Poverty and Child Abuse and Neglect: New Evidence*. Nuffield/University of Huddersfield. Available at: https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Full-report-relationship-between-poverty-child-abuse-and-neglect.pdf.

Cordis Bright (2015). *Preventing youth violence and gang involvement: A review of risk and protective factors*. London: Early Intervention Foundation. Available at: https://www.eif.org.uk/files/pdf/preventing-gang-and-youth-violence-risk-protective-factors.pdf

Crest Advisory (2019) *Serious Violence in Islington: A Deepdive*. December 2019. (Powerpoint presentation, provided to the research team.)

Davies, T., and Dawson, P. (2022) *London Gang Exit: Final Impact Evaluation Report*. London: MOPAC Evidence and Insight. Available at: https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/final_lge_pdf_190122.pdf.

Disley, E., and Liddle, M. (2016). *Improving Understanding of Urban Street Gangs: An Assessment of Local Experience in Ending Gang and Youth Violence Areas*. London: Home Office. https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/491802/horr88.pdf

Education and Training Foundation (2021) *Survey of safeguarding staff in post-16 providers in England: March 2021 - Report of a survey into the skills, needs and views of safeguarding staff in the learning and skills sector*. Available at: https://www.et-foundation.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Safeguarding-Survey-Report.pdf

Faulkner, S. (2021) *Knife Crime in the Capital - How Gangs are Drawing another Generation into a Life of Violent Crime*. London: Policy Exchange.

Firmin, C. (2020) *Contextual Safeguarding and Child Protection: Rewriting the Rules*. London: Routledge.

Francis, C. and Wilcox, P. (eds.) (2013). *The Oxford Handbook of Criminological Theory*. New York: Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199747238.001.0001.

Gamble, J. and McCallum, R. (2022) *Local Child Safeguarding Practice Review, Child Q, March 2022*. City of London and Hackney Safeguarding Children Partnership. Available at: https://chscp.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Child-Q-PUBLISHED-14-March-22.pdf

Glaser, B., & Strauss, A. (1967) *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. Chicago: Aldine.

Hall, B., Khan, R., and Eslea, M. (2022) Criminalising Black Trauma: Grime and Drill Lyrics as a Form of Ethnographic Data to Understand "Gangs" and Serious Youth Violence. *Genealogy* 7: 2. https://doi.org/10.3390/genealogy7010002

Harding, S. (2020) *County Lines: Exploitation and Drug Dealing among Urban Street Gangs.* Bristol: Bristol University Press.

Havard, T., Densley, J., Whittaker, A., and Wills, J. (2021) Street gangs and coercive control: The gendered exploitation of young women and girls in county lines. *Criminology & Criminal Justice* 2021: 1–17.

HMICFRS (2021) *Disproportionate use of police powers - A spotlight on stop and search and the use of force.* Available at: https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmicfrs/wp-content/uploads/disproportionate-use-of-police-powers-spotlight-on-stop-search-and-use-of-force.pdf

Innes, M. (2014) *Signal Crimes - Social Reactions to Crime, Disorder, and Control*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

IOPC (Independent Office for Police Complaints) (2022) *National stop and search learning report – April 2022*. Available at: https://www.policeconduct.gov.uk/sites/default/files/Documents/publications/OFFICIAL%20IOPC%20National%20stop%20and%20search%20learning%20report%2020%20April%202022.pdf

Irwin-Rogers, K., Muthoo, A. and Billingham, L. (2020) Youth Violence Commission Final Report. Youth Violence Commission. Available at: http://oro.open.ac.uk/72094/1/Youth%20Violence%20Commission%20Final%20Report%20July%202020.pdf

Lefevre, M., Preston, O., Hickle, K., Horan, R., Drew, H., Banerjee, R., Cane, T., Barrow, M., and Bowyer, S. (2020) *Evaluation of the Implementation of a Contextual Safeguarding System in the London Borough of Hackney - Evaluation report.* London: Department for Education.

Mile End Institute (2022) *Polling London - Londoners' Priorities ahead of the Local Elections*. Mile End Institute, Queen Mary University of London. Available at: https://www.qmul.ac.uk/mei/media/mei/tgc-media/filesx2fpublications/161_22-MILEEND_Polling-report_V5_final-WEB.pdf

MOPAC (2022) *A Problem Profile of Violence, Gangs and Young People. MOPAC Evidence and Insight*, September 2022. Available at: https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/serious_youth_violence_problem_profile.pdf

Muir, R., Higgins, A., Halkon, R., Walcott, S., & Jeffrey, B. (2022) *A new mode of protection – re-designing policing and public safety for the 21st century.* The final report of the strategic review of policing in England and Wales. The police

foundation. Available at: https://www.Policingreview.Org.Uk/wp-content/uploads/srpew_final_report.Pdf

Naseem, S. (2021) *stop and search undermining confidence in policing by black communities*. Available at: https://www.Policeconduct.Gov.Uk/news/our-podcasts-and-blogs/stop-and-search-undermining-confidence-policing-black-communities

Norman G. (2010) Likert scales, levels of measurement and the "laws" of statistics. *Advances in Health Sciences Education: Theory and Practice*. 2010 Dec; 15(5):625-32. doi: 10.1007/s10459-010-9222-y. Epub 2010 Feb 10. PMID: 20146096.

Paoli, L. (ed.) (2014). *The Oxford Handbook of Organized Crime*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. http://site.ebrary.com/id/10958785.

Public Health England (2019) *A whole-system multi-agency approach to serious violence: A resource for local system leaders in England.* London: Public Health England. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/862794/multi-agency_approach_to_serious_violence_prevention.pdf

Ramshaw, N., Charleton, B. and Dawson, P. (2018) *Youth Voice Survey 2018.* MOPAC Evidence and Insight. Available at: https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/youth_voice_survey_report_2018_final.pdf

Van der Kolk, B. (2014) *The Body Keeps the Score – Mind, Brain and Body in the Transformation of Trauma.* London: Penguin.

Youth Violence Commission (2018) *The Youth Violence Commission - Interim Report, July 2018*. Available at: https://www.yvcommission.com/_files/ugd/ad2256_d4b4f677734a4a4b86cb5833cfcee53f.pdf