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Ofsted Care Quality Commission

HM Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services

His Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation

Research and analysis

Multi-agency responses to serious youth violence: working together to support and protect children

Published 20 November 2024

Applies to England

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Introduction

This report sets out our findings from 6 joint targeted area inspections (JTAIs) carried out between September 2023 and May 2024. JTAIs are carried out by Ofsted, the Care Quality Commission (CQC), His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary, Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS) and His Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation (HMI Probation).

Together, we looked at how local partnerships and services respond to children and their families when children are affected by serious youth violence.[footnote 1] We considered the work of individual agencies as well as multi-agency working arrangements between children's social care, health services, youth justice services (YJS), schools and the police. In this report we use the term 'multi-agency' to describe arrangements between these agencies.

Our inspections focused on 3 themes:

- strategic responses to serious youth violence
- work with children, both individuals and groups, affected by serious youth violence and child criminal exploitation
- intervention in specific places to improve safety for children and communities

We sampled and tracked the experiences of hundreds of children across these inspections. Most of the findings refer to this large sample. From this, we selected a smaller sample of 36 children whose experiences we tracked in detail.[footnote 2]

There are strong links between serious youth violence and the harm and exploitation caused to children by county lines.[footnote 3] In sampling and tracking children's experiences, we included those who were at risk of or subject to child criminal exploitation.[footnote 4]

As part of our inspections, we spoke to children and families affected by serious youth violence. We also commissioned the children and young people's charity Safer London to consult with children and parents affected by serious youth violence.[footnote 5] Although most of these children and parents do not live in the areas that we inspected, their testimonies about multi-agency responses were extremely valuable. We are grateful to the children and their parents for the time and effort they contributed. This will better inform our collective understanding of their experiences of multi-agency responses to meet their needs. We have published Safer London's report (https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/children-and-families-experiences-of-multi-agency-support-when-impacted-by-serious-youth-violence) on this work alongside this thematic report.

We also:

- carried out a literature review of current research, including looking at national and local data
- held focus groups with the multi-agency inspection teams that led the 6 inspections
- consulted stakeholders from organisations that work in the field of serious youth violence to help us develop the methodology

This report shares the most significant findings from these inspections. It aims to help improve practice, knowledge and understanding. The report is not a summary of all the inspection findings. These are available in the letters that we published after each inspection.

There are so many organisations and agencies that have a part to play in addressing serious youth violence. We have therefore referred to partnerships, or partners, to describe the local multi-agency working between the local authority, police, health, Youth Justice Services, etc. Where we refer to a specific named partnership, we have been clear, for example Local Safeguarding Partnership (LSP) and Community Safety Partnership (CSP).

We have changed children's names and personal information in the case studies included in the report. We withheld some details to protect identities.

Executive summary

The extent and impact of serious youth violence are more far-reaching than many adults realise. Too many children, including some as young as 11, are carrying knives because they feel unsafe and see this as a form of protection. Serious youth violence has a wide impact across communities. In some localities in the areas inspected, carrying a knife is the norm for some children.

A failure to consistently identify serious youth violence as a safeguarding issue is leaving too many children at serious risk of harm. Lack of comprehensive guidance from the government on how partners should address harm outside the family, including serious youth violence, is exacerbating this, as is a lack of focus by Local Safeguarding Partnerships (LSPs).

The government and local agencies must prioritise the needs of children who are disproportionately at risk of harm from serious youth violence. This includes children with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND), in particular those who are neurodivergent. The government should equip local agencies to ensure these children have access to timely assessment and appropriate support. Some children from specific ethnic groups are disproportionately represented among those harmed by serious youth violence. Partnerships need to target interventions to support those most in need, and to better understand and address the underlying causes of serious youth violence.

We found examples of local partnerships doing effective work to reduce harm to children from serious youth violence, but this is not happening in all areas. Despite the expectation set out by the Home Office in the Serious Violence Duty, not all local partnerships are sufficiently focused on serious youth violence. This leaves some children at risk of harm.

Multi-agency work was most effective when serious youth violence was a strategic priority. Effective partnerships had a shared understanding of local need. They collated and analysed all relevant information, and consulted with children, families and communities about their experiences and needs. This resulted in effective work to reduce harm and meet children's needs.

In some areas, partners worked together well to meet the wider needs of children affected by serious youth violence. They had a shared understanding of the children's backgrounds and experiences, including trauma and abuse. Effective initiatives focused on addressing the impact of abuse, supporting children to access education, giving children opportunities to develop interests and skills and helping them to stay safe.

Local partnerships need to do more to evaluate approaches to addressing serious youth violence, to use available research about what works and to share learning across areas to drive improvement in practice.

Children's access to support to address serious youth violence varies too much between local areas. Some areas have violence reduction units (VRUs), and some VRUs were making a positive difference for children. But not all areas have this additional resource.

Projects aimed at preventing serious youth violence often receive short-term funding. This limits partners' ability to evaluate their effectiveness and compromises long-term planning.

Engagement with the community, children and parents is essential. We saw some strong practice where partnerships worked to reduce harm and build stronger community support for children. We found that the risk of serious youth violence is reduced when statutory partners and the education and voluntary sectors work together to maximise impact by building trust with local communities to identify needs and appropriately support those working within them.

Context

Serious youth violence is a major social concern. It has dramatic effects on the lives of children and families. The number of children and young people

who lose their lives to violence now is higher than it was 10 years ago. So is the number admitted to hospital for knife assaults. In 2022–23, in England and Wales, 42 young people aged 16 to 19 were victims of homicide by a sharp object.[footnote 6] In 2022–23 in England, there were 467 instances of children being treated in hospital for injuries caused by a knife or sharp object. This was a 47% increase from 10 years earlier.[footnote 7]

Serious youth violence can be devastating for those involved. It can result in death or life-changing injuries for children. It can also have a serious emotional impact, resulting in trauma. And it has a wider impact across communities, including on people's sense of safety. During our inspections, we saw examples of skilled, coordinated and considered work that reduced harm within communities. This work helped to reduce harm to children from both exploitation and serious youth violence. We saw professionals work together to offer children the opportunity of a safer future where they could develop their skills and talents. We found that effective multi-agency work can make a real difference to children's lives. There were many examples of this that partners can learn from.

Good practice

Professionals from different agencies worked well together to understand why Luke, a young teenage child, routinely carried a knife. Good engagement with Luke by a range of agencies revealed that he was frightened of some of the older children in his area. He was too frightened to attend school and felt that he had no one to help keep him safe. Luke experienced neglect and overcrowded conditions at home. He did not feel safe at home nor that there was space for him there. Children's social care, a voluntary sector organisation and Luke's school had a shared understanding of the needs of Luke and his family. They carefully planned and coordinated their work to help Luke and his family and to improve his safety.

Luke's mother is being helped to apply for a new house with more space for the family. Work with his mother is helping her to understand how Luke feels and the important role she has in making her child feel loved and safe. Their relationship is improving. Luke has moved to a new education provider – a safe space for him to go every day. His attendance has improved. As Luke is a child vulnerable to exploitation, professionals are helping to keep him safe. Luke has good relationships with those who work with him and this has helped him to feel valued.

As a result of the multi-agency work, Luke's life is more stable. He has structure, and he has people to talk to and to support him. Luke is making friends and knows that if he is scared or worried, there are a range of people to help him. Significantly, Luke has decided to stop carrying a knife. This is keeping him and others safer.

We have, however, seen wide variation in multi-agency responses, sometimes depending on where a child lives. We have seen children let down and left at serious risk. We have seen families and communities let down too. This report covers the main learning from our thematic JTAIs. We do not cover every aspect of serious youth violence or discuss all the factors that make children more vulnerable. Instead, we focus on the main areas of learning from our inspections and share approaches that are working well in some areas. Our intention is that our findings will drive improvements across areas and provide insight into the extent of serious youth violence and its impact on children, families and communities.

Part 1: What do our findings mean for children?

The impact of serious youth violence

Serious youth violence is widespread, and its impact is not limited to those directly involved.

Our inspections have highlighted that whole communities are affected by serious youth violence. Parents are very concerned for the safety of their children. We frequently heard of children carrying knives in order, as they described it, to protect themselves. The fear of knife crime among children is evident. Inspectors were alarmed at how many children and professionals told them that it is common for children to carry a knife. This included children as young as 11.

In 2023, the Youth Endowment Fund surveyed 7,500 children in England and Wales. It found that 1 in 4 either had been a victim of violence or had perpetrated violence themselves. Almost half (47%) had witnessed violence in the last 12 months and 60% had seen 'real world' violent acts on social media.[footnote 8] This context for children is not generally well understood by adults. In some of the areas we visited, stronger partnerships had consulted with children to better understand their daily lives and experiences of serious youth violence. Children's views need to be prioritised so that we can better understand their experiences, needs and concerns about violence. More work is needed to understand which approaches work best to prevent children from carrying knives, as this can put them at more risk. As we observed in our inspections, just living with the fear of knife crime has a significant impact on children's health and well-being. For the sake of all children, national government, local strategic partners, and those who make policy and who resource partnerships all need to better understand this

issue. They need to reduce both the level of fear and the level of serious youth violence that children, families and communities are experiencing.

Disproportionate risk of harm from serious youth violence

It is well documented that, while any child can be affected by serious youth violence, there are factors that make some children more vulnerable. These include poverty, mental ill-health, abuse and harm, including being a victim of domestic abuse and other forms of trauma.[footnote 9] Some groups of children are particularly vulnerable. These include some children in particular ethnic groups, some looked-after children, children with SEND and children who are not in full-time education.[footnote 10]

The group of children we reviewed had a wide range of needs in addition to harm from serious youth violence. These children require a multi-agency response that is well coordinated and sequenced to meet all of their needs, and not just to respond to the harm of serious youth violence.

Increased risk of harm for children with SEND

There is evidence of a link between SEND and an increased risk of exploitation and serious youth violence. Practitioners working with exploited children often find high numbers of children with SEND in their caseloads. [footnote 11]

Findings from our inspections further demonstrate the heightened risk of exploitation and serious youth violence for children with SEND. Of the 36 children whose experiences we tracked in detail (29 male and 7 female), only 4 had a disability noted in their children's social care record. However, when we reviewed the children's experiences, we found that, of the 36, 16 had a diagnosis of a disability and/or an education, health and care (EHC) plan. A further 15 had additional needs identified and were waiting for an assessment: 10 for a neurodevelopmental assessment (including for autism and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)) and 5 for a mental health assessment. Of the 36, only 5 had no additional support needs in these categories.

These findings raise several issues, including:

- the prevalence of children with additional needs among those affected by serious youth violence, in particular the high number of children who have

SEND or are neurodivergent, including those diagnosed with autism and/or ADHD

- the delay in children receiving appropriate assessments to diagnose and address these needs
- diagnoses of disability not being recorded properly on social care records or understood and addressed by the professionals working with the child

Delay in assessments and support for children with SEND

We know that, nationally, children with SEND are having to wait too long for their needs to be assessed.[footnote 12] There are also delays in children being able to access services, and variation in the quality and timeliness of EHC plans.[footnote 13] This is making children more vulnerable to serious youth violence, as problems can escalate while they wait for an assessment or support. Waiting times are especially long for children who need a neurodevelopmental assessment, including for ADHD and autism, and for children with social communication needs. In 3 of the areas we visited, children had to wait at least 2 years for a neurodevelopmental assessment. In one area, children then had to wait a shocking 10 years for a service, by which time some of them would be adults.

Inspectors were also concerned about waiting times for speech and language assessments. If professionals are not aware of a child's level of understanding, or clear about the best way to communicate with them, this may reduce their ability to engage with and help children who are being harmed. In addition, failure to identify and address a child's SEND needs is highly likely to limit the child's ability to engage in and benefit from education. Many of the children we reviewed who were out of education, or excluded, were awaiting these assessments. Being out of full-time education further increases a child's risk of being affected by serious youth violence.

Some areas were trying to speed up assessment and support for children. For example, in Manchester, most schools, including alternative provision, had trained teaching staff in children's speech and language needs. This was helping staff to identify children's speech and language needs and ensure targeted support is provided at an early stage. In Merton, there were dedicated child and adolescent mental health service (CAMHS) staff in the child exploitation teams, social work teams and the YJS. This ensured prompt access to mental health support for those children affected by serious youth violence.

As we have found in previous JTAIs, once children are receiving services from a YJS, many are provided with appropriate assessments and support.[footnote 14] The multi-disciplinary nature of these teams means they provide access to a range of assessments, such as speech and language, substance misuse and mental health. We found that neurodevelopmental assessments happened more quickly once children were being seen by the YJS. They then received valuable input and support at a critical time. The

assessments often identified a range of unmet needs for children. But for many children, this is too late, as they have already been affected by exploitation and serious youth violence. This raises questions about whether these children's life trajectories could have been different if the assessments and support had been in place earlier in their lives. If there is to be a truly effective public health approach to reducing serious youth violence, children must be able to access assessments and services to address their specific needs early.[footnote 15]

Professionals not recognising and addressing additional need

There needs to be a holistic response to meet the needs of, and reduce harm to, children affected by serious youth violence. In too many cases, professionals did not focus sufficiently on all aspects of children's needs. This was particularly the case for children with SEND, children who are neurodivergent, including those diagnosed with ADHD and autism, and children with communication needs. Children cannot fully benefit from support if their specific needs are not understood and addressed.

In one case, professionals had 'adultified' a highly vulnerable child with SEND.[footnote 16] He was criminalised as a result of a failure to assess his special educational needs and to address and understand that he was a victim of exploitation.

Case study

Adam was involved in offending, and professionals across all agencies saw this as an active choice. They did not fully recognise the level of harm to him from serious youth violence or the extent to which he was being criminally exploited. Adam was an older teenager, but his developmental level was that of a young primary school child. Although professionals were aware of this, it did not adequately inform their assessment and actions. They attributed an adult level of understanding to Adam, which was much higher than his actual level of understanding. Professionals were also largely unaware of Adam's wider learning, emotional and mental health needs. They failed to recognise him as a victim of exploitation. They did not accurately assess and support his complex health and communication needs. This meant that he was criminalised. Adam was sentenced to time in a young offender institution.

Even when professionals identify a child's additional needs, they do not consistently consider them in wider assessments, reviews and plans to support the child and family. In one area, we found that professionals carrying out reviews did not consider the EHC plans of children who were on child protection plans or looked after and at risk of serious youth violence. This meant that children's holistic needs were not being

addressed, even though we know that education is a protective factor against exploitation and violence.[footnote 17]

We did see some strong multi-agency work, including with education services, to make sure children's specific needs were met. In Merton, schools delivered training to local police officers on children and neurodivergence so that they could better understand children's needs. We also saw examples of professionals working relentlessly to show children that they care about their lives and outcomes. This included examples of them working effectively to ensure children could access the right kind of support for their specific needs.

Good practice

Vijay has been known to children's social care services for several years. He has autism spectrum disorder, ADHD and poor mental health. Staff from across education, health and children's social care have worked closely with Vijay and his mother. This has given them a good understanding of Vijay's culture, family life and specific needs. They have established trusting relationships with Vijay, which has helped him to be involved in all planning meetings. Priority has been given to making sure Vijay has access to further education. A specialist education team have been helping him to access courses at college that motivate him. Additional funding has been put in place to support his engagement with education. The professionals in the network of support for Vijay and his mother have worked consistently to show they care about his life and outcomes. This has enabled Vijay to access a range of support to meet his needs and for his mother to get the support she needs. As a result of all this work, the risks to Vijay of serious youth violence and exploitation have reduced.

Ethnicity and disproportionality: professional responses

Structural issues in society can make some children more vulnerable to serious youth violence. These include issues of inequality, such as poverty and racism. When these issues intersect, some children can be doubly disadvantaged.[footnote 18] For example, the disproportionate number of Black boys in the criminal justice system needs to be understood in a wider context.[footnote 19] Children from some ethnic backgrounds are more likely to experience poverty and school exclusion, both of which increase the likelihood of children entering the criminal justice system.[footnote 20] In addition, systemic discrimination and bias affect which children come to the

attention of services. The police are far more likely to stop and search Black boys. They are also 4 times more likely to strip-search Black children than white children.[footnote 21] Black children are therefore exposed to institutional bias and a range of risk factors that mean serious youth violence is more likely to affect them. The Youth Endowment Fund recently published data showing that, in 2022/23, Black children were over 6 times more likely to be victims of homicide compared to their share of the population. They are twice as likely to be arrested and over 4 times as likely to be in custody.[footnote 22] This disproportionality has narrowed recently but remains worse than a decade ago.

Some of these issues, such as poverty and structural racism, can only be addressed at both a national and local level. But strategic partnerships must make it an objective to reduce the overrepresentation of Black and other ethnic minority children affected by serious youth violence in their area. They need to assess the causes and then address what needs to be done locally to bring about improvement.

Many strategic partnerships were undertaking work to better understand the themes and patterns related to serious youth violence in their area. But disproportionality was not always well understood. Most strategic partners agreed that they needed to do more work on this. Even in strong partnerships that had reduced serious youth violence through a public health approach, partners recognised that they needed to do much more to address its impact on different groups of children.

Some partnerships were taking direct action to meet the needs of groups that were disproportionately affected by serious youth violence. Targeted preventative work was evident in 2 areas. For example, one partnership had commissioned voluntary organisations to provide resources such as parenting support, educational interventions, and direct support to children from specific communities that were overrepresented in the data on serious youth violence.

Efforts to address disproportionality were particularly effective when a whole area had a clear strategic approach. For example, Manchester has an equality strategy that aims to address some of the underlying issues that can cause disproportionality. Different partners referred to this strategy and incorporated it into their work. An analyst in Manchester's VRU provides monthly analytics. This includes reporting on ethnicity disproportionality. Some agencies and strategic partners were working to, or had, ensured that staff in different agencies were more representative of the ethnic makeup of the local population.

It is clear from our inspections that much more is needed at a national and a local level to better understand and address disproportionality. The interplay of structural factors like racism and poverty that put some children at additional risk of serious youth violence needs to be recognised at a national level. Multi-agency partners, including the police, social care, youth

workers, health professionals and education staff, need to develop strategies and approaches to reduce disproportionality at a local level.

Adultification and victim-blaming

Adultification of children is closely linked to issues of disproportionality. Professionals are more likely to adultify Black children.[footnote 23] In our inspections, we saw too many examples of adultification in responses to individual children. The consequences of adultification can be serious, resulting in a higher risk of criminalisation, as children's needs for protection and a welfare approach are not recognised, and children are seen as responsible for their own problems.

In one area, some health professionals had not heard of the term, nor were they familiar with the concept of 'adultification'. The language these professionals used sometimes reflected an attitude of seeing older children as adults rather than children. They did not realise the harmful consequences of some of the ways they responded to children, such as blaming them for the harm they have experienced, and/ or failing to recognise their need for protection.

We found further examples of victim-blaming language, although this was not present in all areas or all services.[footnote 24] Professionals in one multi-agency meeting talked about a child 'placing themselves at risk' and having 'risk-taking' behaviour. This child was clearly being exploited. This language was not challenged by other professionals. In a different area, we found girls described as 'choosing' to be in a relationship with a 'gang' member. The possibility of exploitation or coercion and risk of violence in this context was not understood or fully addressed, nor was the use of the term 'gang' recognised as problematic.[footnote 25] We also heard professionals describe girls who were being sexually exploited as 'putting themselves at risk'.

We found there were significantly fewer girls than boys in the professionals' caseloads. Studies have shown that girls who experience serious youth violence may be less likely to come to the attention of services.[footnote 26] For example, they may present at hospital with mental health issues linked to trauma, or to health services as a result of sexual violence. Professionals may not make the connection with serious youth violence. Some professionals are concerned that a great deal of hidden harm is happening to girls in the context of serious youth violence. A few local areas had recognised this and were working to reach girls, through specific interventions, to understand and address their needs in relation to violence and exploitation.

Attitudes, assumptions and inappropriate language can have a real impact on children. They can affect the professional response to the child if the

context of exploitation and/or serious youth violence is not understood. Children can then be blamed for their problems. In the worst examples, we found children left at risk and/or unnecessarily criminalised.

The use of victim-blaming language, and professionals' understanding and approach to adultification, varied widely between areas. In some areas, we found no examples of victim-blaming language. Professionals understood adultification, and effective approaches to avoid adultification were in place. This was often because the issue had been recognised and responded to at a strategic level. This shows that victim-blaming and adultification can be addressed with appropriate strategic leadership, and training and support for staff.

> **Good practice**
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> In Merton, many children were benefiting from trusting relationships with practitioners, such as youth workers. This followed Merton Safeguarding Children Partnership's work to raise awareness of the impact of adultification on Black and ethnic minority children.
>
> The partnership had commissioned a 'young scrutineer' to speak to children in schools about adultification and its impact. An 'adultification subgroup' was then established to focus on training professionals across all partner agencies. This included partnership work to improve the police understanding of the impact of stop and search on children.

Work to address racism, discrimination and bias in organisations that work with children is essential. There was some evidence in Merton of positive outcomes from their approach. However, more evaluation is needed to inform the development of the most effective approaches to address adultification and victim-blaming to ensure all children receive a child-centred and appropriate response.

Part 2: What do our findings mean for multi-agency work and frontline practice with children?

Early identification and initial responses to children

Recognising need and harm at the earliest opportunity is essential to support and protect children and their families and reduce the harm from serious youth violence. We found from our inspections, and from the feedback from the Safer London consultation, that lack of clarity about thresholds for access to services can make children and their families feel like they do not matter or belong. Parents told Safer London that they felt that, because the risk to children was outside the family home, they did not receive the support and protection they needed. We found that professionals do not always recognise serious youth violence as a safeguarding issue. Sometimes confusion about thresholds and pathways means that children do not get an early enough response to their needs.

Ambulance service and emergency departments

Some children affected by serious youth violence only come to the attention of professionals following an emergency. This may be through the ambulance service and/or the emergency department (ED) in a hospital. Children attending emergency trauma units or EDs, who have injuries as a result of serious youth violence, generally receive high-quality coordinated care. Many health professionals demonstrated a high level of safeguarding knowledge and shared information through referrals to multi-agency partners, including the police and social care. We saw some effective multi-agency work in some areas to ensure that children received an appropriate response.

> **Good practice**
>
> Children received a high standard of coordinated care when attending the Manchester Royal Infirmary ED. The hospital had good processes in place to provide a prompt multi-agency approach to managing risk and planning longer-term support. For example, ED staff made referrals to children's social care. They also worked with the police to manage children's safety while they were in the ED, including through an internal security system. This meant, for example, that if children from different groups who could cause harm to each other might be attending at the same time, staff could identify this and ensure an appropriate multi-agency response to keep children safe. Inspectors were impressed generally with the ED's response.

In some areas, hospital staff understood the specific needs of children affected by serious youth violence. For example, in Merton ED, children aged 16 to 18 could choose between treatment on a paediatric ward or an adult ward. Whichever ward they chose, they were still overseen by paediatric services, including oversight by a contextual safeguarding nurse. This recognises their vulnerabilities and additional needs as children, and the need to support older children as they transition to adult services. Some areas had specialist services in place to meet the needs of children and families. This included the role of 'navigators' funded by the VRU.

Navigators are staff who are based in ED departments and hospitals and give advice and support to children and families affected by serious youth violence. We found that this specialised service made a significant difference.

In Merton, the ED had navigators from a voluntary sector organisation. The hospital had considered how these might best meet children's needs. It ensured that the demographics of the navigators were representative of the local community. This meant they could better understand the local community and children felt more able to trust and speak with them. There were strong links between the navigators and multi-agency professionals who could support and protect children. We saw this leading to early responses to children and their families to help them get support.

Good practice

Charlie had a serious stab wound. Ambulance staff took the opportunity to speak to her in detail about what had happened. They explained that she could get support through the navigators. Charlie agreed, and her mother was keen to access the help provided over the next few days while Charlie was in hospital. As a result of this early intervention, Charlie, her mother and a sibling, who was also at risk, were able to access the ongoing support from professionals that they needed to keep them safe and well.

Good practice

In Leeds, information about children who attend the ED for reasons relating to violence is shared at weekly multi-disciplinary meetings. This ensures that children are directed to the right services. ED youth work navigators accept referrals for victims of serious youth violence aged 11 to 25 years old. They aim to make prompt contact with the child, build a rapport and identify appropriate ongoing support. For serious incidents, the navigators will triage and offer support within 24 hours. Local evaluations showed the positive impact this work has had on children. But the Youth Endowment Fund has identified that national evaluation of the role of navigators in EDs is needed.[footnote 27]

This type of coordinated child-centred response is not available to children in all areas. Inspectors were concerned about the variability of response to children depending on where they lived. Not all areas visited had a navigator service in EDs, and funding for some of the services we saw was time limited. Not all medical staff sufficiently understood serious youth violence or demonstrated the professional curiosity to understand children's needs. For example, in one area we found that children attending the ED

with injuries consistent with knife crime were not referred for support and protection. Medical staff did not have the appropriate training and supervision. They did not engage with children to understand what had led to the injuries, the wider risks to the child and others or the child's needs. In another area, the ambulance service and the ED treated children according to a purely medical model. For example, they would treat the wound but not ask the child appropriate questions. This left children at risk and meant valuable opportunities to give children the care and support they badly needed were lost.[footnote 28]

When a child first meets with medical staff, they are likely to be distressed by their injuries and associated trauma and in need of support. At this time, the child may want to speak out about what is happening to them. It is an opportunity for professionals to show empathy and listen to the child, who may express themselves in different ways, both verbal and non-verbal. It is also an opportunity to reach out to offer support and protection and let the child know that an adult is concerned and cares about them. To miss this opportunity leaves the child, their family and other children at risk and in need.

Some children may be unwilling or unable to attend the ED. They may only be treated on the street by the ambulance staff. The response of this service to the child is important. It may be the only opportunity to understand the child's needs for support and protection and to identify the needs of other children and risks to them.

We did find some strong examples where the ambulance service and staff felt supported to identify and address safeguarding issues for children affected by serious youth violence. Having appropriate systems and processes in place can ensure children get the correct response. For example, in Coventry, every call-out for an ambulance to attend a potential serious youth violence incident resulted in an instant safeguarding referral to children's social care by the call handler. This system ensures that information is shared, and children receive a welfare response.

We found that having appropriate training and support systems made a difference to the way health professionals respond to children impacted by serious youth violence. We found that this was not in place in all areas.

Police response and early identification

Police responses to children affected by serious youth violence were inconsistent. This was particularly evident in frontline policing and initial responses to children. It meant that the police did not always recognise children's needs, including their need to be safeguarded. We identified 3 areas of learning in relation to initial police responses to serious youth violence.

First, police personnel did not consistently make timely referrals to children's social care to get children the help and support they needed. In

one area, there was no routine process for making a referral when children came into custody or were interviewed about criminal activity. In another area, a child was repeatedly exposed to risk in several different incidents. The police did not recognise the cumulative harm to the child and treated these as separate and unrelated incidents. The child's need for support was therefore not addressed.

Second, when the police make referrals, they do not always include all the relevant information needed to ensure the child gets an appropriate response. Some officers do not record enough information about the voice of the child or about their ethnicity or cultural heritage. They do not always make it clear why they are making the referral. These omissions can mean that vital information is not available to those who decide which support services the child should get to prevent harm.

Third, there is often a lack of quality assurance or police management oversight to ensure that children affected by serious youth violence are referred for support.

When professionals failed to identify children's needs, or harm done to them, this was sometimes because of a lack of training. In some areas, neighbourhood and community officers had received training on the impact of trauma on children, with a focus on serious youth violence. But investigators in general criminal investigation departments had not been trained. This inconsistency meant that risks to some vulnerable children were not recognised.

Specialist police officers, such as those in exploitation teams, who had been trained, had a better understanding of children's wider needs, and provided better responses to children. For example, frontline staff and specialist investigators who had been trained recorded and shared detailed information more effectively with partner organisations.

We saw some good work by the police to identify children affected by serious youth violence at an early stage and provide a multi-agency response to meet their needs.

Good practice

In Leeds, where possible, children are not arrested when they are linked to serious youth violence. Police and partners take alternative approaches to prevent criminalising children. If a child is arrested and brought to custody for an incident relating to serious youth violence, police custody staff work closely with multi-agency partners to provide a child-centred approach within the criminal justice system. The vulnerability of detained children is well recognised. Clearly agreed multi-agency processes and procedures mean that children get the help they need. For example, every child is seen by health professionals and

liaison and diversion professionals. They also have timely referrals to social care. Professionals make alternative accommodation arrangements when these are required. They quickly arrange community-based help for these children. This ensures that, in line with their needs, children do not remain in custody longer than necessary.

Good practice

In Lancashire, police custody staff are trained in trauma-informed practice. Children are only taken into custody when necessary. Health and youth justice teams are involved in a pilot scheme to place therapists in the custody suites. This provides children with brief solution-focused therapy straight away. Police leaders carefully scrutinise the situation of every child detained to make sure their needs are met. Older children who spoke with inspectors were positive about their experience of police custody. They said that the treatment they received was appropriate and that they received help promptly.

We did find some strong practice by the police in identifying the vulnerability and needs of children affected by and/or causing serious youth violence. But not all children were receiving an appropriate response. We found that too many police officers were not sufficiently focused on children's needs for help and protection.

Use of risk assessment tools and the multi-agency front door

The limitations of using risk assessment tools to identify exploitation and harm outside the home have been well documented.[footnote 29] Their efficacy depends on the quality of the tools, staff's knowledge, training and understanding of serious youth violence, and wider consideration of the child's specific circumstances. Where staff had a better understanding of the potential harm to children from serious youth violence, for example in YJS teams, we saw stronger practice in the use of tools to identify harm.

Many professionals use assessment and screening tools to identify harm when they first come into contact with children. However, we found that most of the tools being used did not include or reference risk factors for serious youth violence. Risk and need were not always identified. Some health professionals, in particular, were not aware of what to look for when considering the factors that could make a child more vulnerable to serious youth violence.

For example, in one area, professionals in CAMHS and sexual health services who assessed children's needs routinely asked questions about child criminal exploitation. However, the tools they used did not direct them to ask questions about serious youth violence. This was a lost opportunity

and we found that children's needs for support and protection were not always identified and addressed.

We found some examples of strong practice once children were referred to the multi-agency front door (MASH or equivalent).[footnote 30] When partner agencies had a shared understanding of the harm to children from serious youth violence, and information was shared and assessed in a timely way, children then received an appropriate welfare response.

In areas where there were specialist teams that worked with children where there was risk outside the home, we saw effective work with the multi-agency front door to ensure information was shared and specialist advice provided. This meant wider risks to children and links between children could be identified and responded to.

The YJS made a positive contribution when it was involved in the multi-agency front door. Opportunities for information-sharing were improved when probation services were also involved in the front door. This gave the agencies a better understanding of a child and their family, so that they could put appropriate interventions in place early enough to prevent problems from escalating. We saw some strong examples of the YJS having good oversight of children who were transitioning from youth to adult services. This helped in planning transitions for children.

Some areas were developing, or had in place, arrangements for transitional safeguarding to support older children. They recognised the ongoing needs of young adults affected by serious youth violence, and the limitations of services when children reach the age of 18. Not all areas had these arrangements in place or recognised that they were needed. Clearly, needs and risks do not end when children reach the age of 18. It is important that multi-agency work is planned and coordinated in good time for older children as they move into adulthood.

Where there were daily multi-agency meetings that included all relevant agencies, and sometimes housing and voluntary or community-based agencies, these allowed for timely consideration in the multi-agency front door of the harm to children from serious youth violence. In strong partnerships, this meant they could respond rapidly when a child needed support and protection. They could also provide a coordinated multi-agency response in a particular location where needed to prevent serious youth violence. But in other areas, systems to share information were not as effective. This meant that disruption activity by the police to respond to serious youth violence, for example, was reactive rather than preventative.

Multi-agency front doors need to provide a more consistent response to serious youth violence. We saw too many examples in which:

- serious youth violence was not consistently recognised as a safeguarding issue

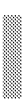
- the wider needs of children affected by serious youth violence were either not recognised or not met. This included needs related to exploitation, mental health and trauma
- those making referrals were not always clear about the thresholds for referral for protection and support for harm outside the family, and were not clear whether action was taken or how to escalate concerns about a child
- strategy meetings were not always attended by the right professionals; for example, the police attending were not the right personnel with the relevant information about the child
- strategy meetings were not always held for incidents that happened out of hours
- referrals to the multi-agency front door were not audited in every area

Longer-term work to address serious youth violence

Establishing relationships, building trust

Staff must be able to establish relationships with children, and to build trust with them and their families. This is fundamental to long-term work to address serious youth violence. It is also essential for multi-agency partners to build trust with each other, and for partners to have a shared approach, both to understanding serious youth violence and to working with children. While we did not see this in all areas and for all children, we will begin by describing the positive elements of joint work we found to establish relationships with children and their families.

It is important to see the child's needs and experiences holistically, rather than just focusing on serious youth violence. This means understanding the child's background, their family, their strengths and what interests and motivates them. We saw examples of this in the strongest multi-agency work. It is essential to nurture children, help them to engage with activities they enjoy, and support their development. This helps to guide them towards positive routes away from those who are harming and exploiting them or putting them at risk of serious youth violence. This approach also provides the basis for a relationship of trust. It enables practitioners to work together with children on complex issues relating to serious youth violence and exploitation. Equally important is the need for children to be given a choice about the support they receive. Many children will have been exploited and feel they have no control over their lives. Professionals need to be respectful and listen to, and take account of, children's views and wishes, and those of their parents/carers.



Good practice

Alex was being harmed due to child criminal exploitation and serious youth violence. Professionals were working in partnership with Alex and his family to address his needs. They were also using their knowledge of Alex's talents and skills to support him and reduce harm. They fully considered Alex's views when developing education and training opportunities. For example, Alex loved sport, so professionals found a relevant apprenticeship opportunity for him. As a result, Alex is now engaged well in working with professionals and making plans for his future education. While Alex's mother was not initially confident about the professionals' approach, over time she saw that they would listen and understand her perspective. This made a difference, and Alex's mother agreed to receive support. The trusting relationships that have been developed between agencies, Alex and his family are now firmly embedded. This has significantly contributed to reducing harm to Alex from serious youth violence and child criminal exploitation.

The elements of practice and approaches that we found made a difference included:

- asking the child for their view on the right professional to work with them
- taking a strengths- and relationship-based approach to the child and their family[footnote 31]
- giving children agency and a sense of control through recognising and responding to their views and wishes; for example, they may have a view about the sequencing of interventions
- understanding the child's wider needs
- encouraging healthy challenge between partners as they advocate for the child
- using the positive influence of education
- taking account of the child's identity

The role that education can play in a child's life is particularly significant in terms of their long-term prospects and their ability to develop their talents and interests in a positive way. In the example below, a reduced timetable was used successfully to help a child to re-engage with education.

Good practice

Professionals recognised that Tom was not ready to begin full-time education immediately. They supported him with a phased return to school. The YJS, his school and children's social care worked effectively together to provide Tom with a mentor, who nurtured his talent in music. This made a real difference to Tom's confidence and sense of trust in those working with him. When the school had a showcase evening, he

was able to perform in front of the whole school. His interest in music had been recognised and promoted by the professional group working with him. This was strong evidence of Tom's increasing confidence and of him feeling valued, supported, and cared for by a group of professionals.

Work with children who are affected by serious youth violence must focus on their individual needs and sense of identity. Practitioners need to recognise the importance of, and focus on, what the child's ethnicity and cultural identity mean for them. This is particularly important in the context of where the child is growing up and the effects, both positive and negative, on their daily lives. Issues of racism that children experience need to be acknowledged and explored.

We saw some examples of professionals taking the time to explore children's cultural heritage and history with them. They did this through direct work and creative approaches, recognising its significance for children. This approach was seen to open the door to more difficult conversations about the risk of child criminal exploitation and serious youth violence. These opportunities were not available to all children, and we saw too many examples where professionals did not consider the wider context of the child's life. This meant that the child's wider needs, their strengths and their sense of identity were not understood and the opportunity to build trusting relationships was lost.

Assessing and understanding need and risk

It is essential to understand the context in which children are affected by serious youth violence, whether as victims, as children who have harmed others, or both. Professional curiosity in the context of serious youth violence means caring for, and about, children. It means seeing children as children, and understanding the child's context, background and strengths, and those of their family. Professionals need an enquiring approach. Agencies must have a shared understanding of how to assess needs and harm, and knowledge and understanding of any issues that may be affecting the child.

We found that professional curiosity is not yet consistent across all agencies. Although some practitioners have an enquiring approach, others accept children's explanations at face value and do not explore that child's wider lived experience. As a result, they do not fully understand the level of harm to, and from, the child.

In a small number of examples, professionals focused solely on the child's understanding and interpretation of what was happening to them. They did not take account of all other evidence of significant risk and need.

Case study

Professionals underestimated the level of exploitation and harm from serious violence that Asa was exposed to. They relied too much on him disclosing risk and need rather than evaluating all the available information. When Asa told professionals that harm to him had reduced, they took his word for this. Systems for sharing and analysing information between professionals were ineffective. This meant that not everyone had the information they needed to fully understand the harm to Asa or his needs. Risk assessment tools were not used effectively. Multi-agency panels did not analyse information on Asa's patterns of behaviour, for example his numerous arrests, the police intelligence about him or his links with known adults who posed a risk. As a result, Asa was not given the support and protection he needed, and other potential victims were not identified. Opportunities to intervene earlier had been missed. This meant that Asa's offending had escalated, in both seriousness and frequency. As a result, the risk of violent harm to him and other children increased.

This is not to say that the children's experiences and understanding of what is happening to them are not important. Rather, it is that professionals need to see and understand the wider picture. They should consider that the child may have been exploited and that those exploiting the child may have threatened them if they speak to professionals. They need to be aware of the child's level of development and cognitive ability to fully understand risk and need.

There are tensions that exist in this work between establishing a relationship of trust with the child, while the child may be subject to external pressures. They may not be fully aware of all the harm they are exposed to, or able to understand it. Progress in working with the child may not be linear.

Recognising and acknowledging that children can harm others is difficult. Some professionals appeared fearful of, as they saw it, 'labelling' children. Risk of harm does need to be identified, but the context is important too. Professionals need to ask, why is the child behaving in this way? Are they being exploited? What are their needs, particularly in terms of safeguarding and support for them and their family? Shifting the focus to need is important, but this should not mean ignoring or minimising harm to others.

Professionals need to be mindful that some children may be being manipulated and groomed by those exploiting them. Families, too, may have been threatened. Some children may have had negative experiences of services such as the police or children's social care. This can make them reluctant to share information. Children's behaviours may be misinterpreted. For example, they may appear 'resilient', when in fact they are highly vulnerable and being exploited. For professionals, this is skilled work and

they require support and supervision to be able to help children and families effectively.

Multi-agency approaches to understanding trauma

We found some approaches particularly effective in addressing the range of children's needs, including those of children who had experienced trauma. One example was formulation meetings. These were effective in supporting professionals to have a good overview of all a child's needs, so that they could develop a shared multi-agency approach to supporting and protecting the child. 'Formulation meeting' is a commonly used term in the youth justice system, though the specific meaning can vary. The principle is to bring professionals working with a child together to take both a psychologically and trauma-informed approach. The aim is to understand the underlying and often complex needs that affect all aspects of a child's life, including their behaviour in the context of trauma.

When done effectively, formulation meetings led to a much more detailed understanding of the child, their situation and their journey to their current life circumstances. They provided a reflective space for the team around the child to plan how they could best work together to support the child and their family. They helped the team to create a multi-agency plan for long-term change, as well as to respond immediately to pressing issues and concerns. For example, they focused on a child's diverse needs, considered methods to engage the child, and sequenced the plan based on a shared understanding of need and harm.

Good practice

Cameron had been excluded from school. The team of practitioners working with Cameron held a formulation meeting while he waited for an assessment for ADHD. This helped them to get an in-depth understanding of all of his needs, including his education needs. As a result, professionals adapted their approach to working with Cameron. The virtual school worked to remove the barriers that were preventing a safe return to school. The social worker and YJS practitioner maintained consistent contact with Cameron and his carers. Their work supported his transition back to school and provided stability in other areas of his life. They also helped him to explore the opportunities available to him after he turned 16. The multi-agency team around Cameron ensured a safe and positive return to school. As a result, Cameron was at lower risk of further harm from serious youth violence.

We found that staff in YJS teams were well trained in a trauma-informed approach. This was helping them to understand the links between traumatic life experiences and violence and exploitation. Bringing multi-agency partners into forums such as formulation meetings, where there was a

trauma-informed approach, helped staff to develop a better understanding of children's behaviours in the context of trauma.

Engagement with families

Fundamental to an effective multi-agency approach is an understanding of the need to engage with children's parents or carers and the wider family. Again, we found too much variation in the approaches and lack of consideration of the wider needs of family and siblings. This finding was supported by the Safer London consultation work (https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/children-and-families-experiences-of-multi-agency-support-when-impacted-by-serious-youth-violence). Where multi-agency work was effective, all professionals engaged with, and took time to understand, the whole family when a child was at risk of serious youth violence. They understood the family's background and their strengths as a family. Professionals recognised the need to work in partnership with the family and think about the needs of and risks to all family members to prevent further harm. This was not the experience of all families. In some areas, not all professionals understood or addressed the needs of siblings or harm to them.

The current child protection system is still very much focused on risk within the family. We saw examples where professionals were struggling to understand what pathways and options were open to children at risk of serious youth violence. Some children's services identified these children as children in need and some as children who needed a child protection response. In the worst examples, serious youth violence was not recognised as a safeguarding issue and children and families were not referred for support of any kind. Children's experiences of harm outside the family do not fit neatly into the current statutory systems. This has many consequences, including for families whose children are affected by serious youth violence.

Parents who are doing their utmost to protect their children can feel blamed if their child is subject to a child protection plan when the risk of significant harm is outside the home. We found some evidence that the risks outside the home (ROTH) approach developed by the contextual safeguarding programme was making a difference.[footnote 32]

Good practice

In Leeds, professionals used the ROTH pathway when the sole or principal issue for the child was risk outside the home. Parents and carers were viewed as partners, alongside representatives from professional organisations in the ROTH process. Their role in keeping children safe was considered as it would be for all participating agencies. Parents were not seen as the subject of the process or the source of the harm. The ROTH pathway enabled partners to work under statutory child protection planning to address risks effectively. It also

> enabled children and families to work in partnership with agencies using a non-blaming relational approach. The ROTH pathway identified and addressed the contexts in which the child was experiencing significant harm, and the contexts in which they were safe and protected. Subsequent planning involved parents and children, but also addressed wider harm to, and the needs of, groups of children and/or risk in a particular place. Intervention to address risk in those contexts, such as local neighbourhoods, can involve non-statutory partners such as local businesses and licensing.

However, there are no national statutory guidelines to support ROTH pathways, and only limited guidance for multi-agency partners to manage risk outside the home. The Department for Education commissioned pilots to test the efficacy of the ROTH pathways. These have recently been evaluated by the contextual safeguarding programme.[footnote 33] The evaluation found many positives in this approach. But it also found that further work is required to fully implement the model and ensure, for example, that children are fully engaged in the process. Local areas do not have enough guidance from central government on how to address harm outside the family, including serious youth violence, within the context of child protection work. While we welcome the multi-agency practice principles for responding to child exploitation and harm outside the home, there remain gaps in statutory guidance.[footnote 34]

This presents a challenge for multi-agency partners and, most of all, for children and their parents. It has also contributed to an inconsistent approach across areas.

Multi-agency approaches to prevention

Prevention is a central element of partnership work to address serious youth violence. The areas we visited used a wide range of preventative approaches and interventions. What worked well included a shared multi-agency approach to identify children at risk from serious youth violence, and a focus on providing diversionary activities that gave children opportunities to develop their skills and interests. Joint multi-agency working was evident in many of the approaches we saw.

For example, we saw some examples of strong practice by experienced police officers who worked closely with local areas to prevent and reduce serious youth violence. In Leeds, one police officer's good relationships with voluntary groups and individuals experiencing serious youth violence provided a local area with invaluable intelligence for preventing incidents. Joint work between the police and voluntary sector also meant that the police could share information about groups of children who were disproportionately affected by serious youth violence. These children could then be supported in the community by the voluntary sector. Support groups, sports and other activities were well used and were successfully engaging many children who were at risk of serious youth violence.

In Lancashire, the police identified concerns about possible harm to children from serious youth violence. They organised diversionary activities for these children and identified other activities and opportunities in the local area for them. Providing children with access to alternative ways to spend their time helped to divert them away from potential harm.

Decisions about where to target preventative work were sometimes based on a strategic analysis of information and intelligence.

Good practice

In Merton, detailed analysis of information about groups of children was used to inform the approach to prevention with the support of the VRU. Leaders and managers in the YJS analysed their data and identified that a disproportionate number of boys, children from diverse backgrounds and children who had experienced abuse and neglect were victims of serious youth violence and/or criminal exploitation. They established a disproportionality task force to explore how to address these issues locally. Working creatively across borough boundaries, leaders secured funding from the London VRU to set up a specific project to address these children's needs. The project provides specialist mentoring and outreach, advice and support, educational workshops and group work for parents and children.

Early identification of children who may be harmed by serious youth violence can be a challenge for partners. Some areas had worked to address this.

Good practice

Local agencies in Manchester, in partnership with the VRU, have developed an approach to identifying children who may be harmed by serious youth violence but are not involved with statutory services. A multi-agency ENGAGE panel has been set up across the city to offer interventions and support for children. A wide range of agencies can now refer children who are not open to statutory social services to the ENGAGE panel. The panel identifies which partner agency is best placed to offer support and work to prevent harm from serious youth violence. Community services are also involved in the panel, so that a range of interventions and projects can be considered to meet children's needs at an early stage.

Preventative multi-agency approaches that are flexible and coordinated, and that recognise the individual needs of children, were seen by inspectors to make a positive difference.

Good practice

In Coventry, the Community Initiative to Reduce Violence took different approaches to working with children, depending on the child's level of engagement. If children were not able to engage with low-level interventions to prevent and reduce harm from serious youth violence, the police and YJS worked with them individually to identify and address the barriers preventing them from engaging. They then worked collectively with the child to find ways of overcoming these barriers. This helped children who otherwise might have missed out on support to be able to access this in a way that worked for them. The Youth Endowment Fund has established that there is a good evidence base for this approach.[footnote 35]

Children who come to the attention of the police can be referred to the YJS to be considered for an out-of-court disposal (OOCD), where this is appropriate.[footnote 36] An OOCD allows agencies to work together to identify whether children are affected by serious youth violence. Partners can then intervene at the earliest opportunity to provide the appropriate help to children and, where possible, divert them from the criminal justice system. OOCDs are short interventions (generally 3 months maximum) and can be provided by the YJS or other agencies. The work aims to prevent harm and evidence suggests it can successfully help children fulfil their potential.[footnote 37] These children often require ongoing support. Once the OOCD has ended, provision of this support is dependent on partner agencies' capacity. We found that this ongoing support is not always available to all children.

There can sometimes be less of a focus on preventative work with children already involved in the criminal justice system who are affected by serious youth violence. In Manchester, the YJS and VRU jointly funded a specialist agency to work intensively with 26 children who were known to the YJS and affected by serious violence. Although these children were already involved in the criminal justice system, this intervention should still be viewed as prevention work, given their young age.

We found that funding for many of the preventative projects came from a range of organisations and agencies. Each funding arrangement had individual specifications in terms of required outcomes and duration of funding. This presents a real challenge to partnerships in terms of having a coordinated long-term plan for supporting children and preventing serious youth violence.

Use of multi-agency panels to address serious youth violence

Multi-agency panels form a significant element of any multi-agency system to address serious youth violence. We are loosely defining a panel as a multi-agency group that meets regularly to review a number of individual

children, groups of children and/or contexts in relation to risk outside the home, including serious youth violence. Panel members can include a wide range of statutory and voluntary sector organisations, depending on the panel's purpose.[footnote 38] Those that focus on the harm caused by serious youth violence in the community may include community representatives, local businesses and council departments. Panels may address a range of issues relating to risk outside the home, including serious youth violence, child criminal exploitation, child sexual exploitation, and children missing from home and school. We also included YJS panels, such as out-of-court disposal panels.

Multi-agency panels can improve responses to children by sharing information and coordinating multi-agency work. This gives the agencies a shared understanding of the child's circumstances. They can then take a joint approach to addressing the needs of the child and their family, and any risks to them in particular places and spaces. Panels can also promote a better understanding of cross-agency roles and responsibilities and the services that can provide support. We found that panels varied in their approaches and effectiveness. Some effective panels made a positive difference for some children and contexts such as schools and communities.

We found the following from reviewing the effectiveness of panels in each area:

Panels that worked well made sure that agencies understood the purpose of the panel and each member's roles and responsibilities. The chair's role included providing challenge where needed and making sure all participants were heard and given time to contribute.

Panel chairs were instrumental in keeping a focus on the child and their needs and promoting a shared understanding of serious youth violence. The panel chair ensured that actions to support and protect children, and their impact on children, were reviewed over time and that agencies shared responsibility for improving outcomes for children.

We found that ensuring appropriate representation is essential. Panels that focus on risk in local areas need to recognise the roles of the education and voluntary sectors, housing and communities. Community knowledge and expertise need to be included to fully understand the extent of harm and need.

More effective panels kept children, parents and carers informed of meetings and the outcomes. They shared children's and parents' views and experiences at panel meetings. Panel members considered it essential to share information promptly so that they could coordinate and target multi-agency action to meet children's needs. We saw examples where this made a real difference to children and to communities.

Good practice

In Merton, multi-agency panels of police officers, youth workers, social workers, health professionals and education staff share information promptly about harm to children from serious youth violence and emerging issues in specific locations. Staff who attend know the children and the local areas. This means they can organise interventions quickly to prevent harm and meet children's needs. Information from these panels feeds into the Community Safety Partnership and other strategic groups to provide a better understanding of local children's needs and any harm caused to them.

Good practice

'Project Shield' in Leeds is a city-wide partnership between West Yorkshire Police, YJS, Crimestoppers, Leeds City Council, and community and youth service providers in the city (such as housing support charities, and mental health and well-being charities). It was established to provide a coordinated response to serious youth violence. The project was developed in collaboration with children and young people in Leeds. They chose the name for the project and designed its logo. Project Shield has improved information-sharing between partner agencies about violent crime affecting children. In the daily meeting, partners share information about incidents of youth violence that happened the evening before. The partnership also holds locality meetings every 6 weeks to review children and incidents. This helps partners to build up information and intelligence about serious youth violence and child criminal exploitation to ensure that planning and responses are joined up.

Good practice

Coventry police panels effectively shared information with schools about the risks of serious youth violence. School leaders in Coventry reported

> that they felt listened to by the police and that being involved in the panels helped them to understand serious youth violence. They appreciated receiving police intelligence about where the hotspots were, and where there were places and spaces of concern that they needed to be aware of. School leaders felt that this approach helped them to take measures to ensure the safety of their pupils.

The relationship between different panels and the way they communicate with each other need to be clear. We found that the way that some panels were managed and organised made it difficult for them to share information effectively and understand children's needs. For example, sometimes the same children were discussed at multiple meetings without sufficiently clear oversight or evidence of action to address needs and concerns. In one area, multiple panels meant that there was duplication of work. This was confusing for children and parents and meant that professionals' time was not used efficiently. Sometimes, the right professionals were not on the right panels, meaning not all information was shared. All of this meant that children's needs and risks were not addressed in a timely way. Sometimes there was lots of activity with little evidence of effective outcomes for children and parents.

Part 3: What do our findings mean for strategic partnerships?

A multi-agency strategic focus on serious youth violence is essential, as tackling the causes, as well as the impact, of serious youth violence is complex. Strategic partners need a collective ambition and drive to address serious youth violence if they are to achieve a 'whole system' approach. We found that strategic arrangements differed between areas. Many partnerships, though not all, were able to evidence that they had prioritised serious youth violence and had a clear strategic intent to reduce it. However, the effectiveness of these arrangements varied. Although there were some strong examples of strategic partners making a difference for children, families and communities, all partnerships had areas for further development.

Public health approach

The government introduced its Serious Violence Duty in January 2023. [footnote 39] The duty aims to make councils and local services work together to share information and target interventions to prevent and reduce all forms

of serious violence. The duty is based on a public health approach. This means different agencies work together to understand and address the causes and consequences of serious violence. They should focus together on prevention and early intervention across the whole population in their local area. Strategies to prevent violence are needed that address the multiple factors that increase the harm caused by violence and promote protective factors.

Most areas visited were making progress in implementing the duty. The better partnerships had a specific focus on serious youth violence. More effective partnerships recognised, and were seeking to address, some of the wider structural issues that cause inequality. These include poverty, discrimination and unequal access to education and good-quality health support. All of these can make children more vulnerable to serious youth violence.

We found that having council-wide support for a public health approach was important.

Good practice

In Coventry, the multi-agency strategy to address serious youth violence is based on a collaborative public health approach. This enables the partnership to respond to children's existing needs and adapt to any emerging needs and harm. All the staff that inspectors spoke to were clear and knowledgeable about this approach. They took collective responsibility for responding to serious youth violence. They understood its causes and consequences and the need for all agencies to contribute to a public health approach. As part of this approach, the agencies have developed a range of services over several years to identify early any children who may be harmed by serious youth violence, and provide targeted interventions. This keeps highly vulnerable children safer, provides them with support, and often keeps them in education.

Good practice

In Manchester, there is a well-established 'complex safeguarding' approach to addressing risk outside the home, including exploitation and serious youth violence. This, together with the council-wide anti-poverty strategy, means that the partnership has a good understanding of the impact of deprivation and inequality in communities in Manchester and the links with serious youth violence. The partnership's shared focus on reducing poverty means that strategic leaders have a good understanding of different communities and where need is most

prevalent. This approach is informing decisions about where to intervene to prevent serious youth violence.

Without a public health approach in place, it is difficult to see how multi-agency work can effectively address the wider structural issues that make children more vulnerable to serious youth violence. It is essential therefore that, as strategic partners implement the Serious Violence Duty, they prioritise and implement a public health approach to reducing serious youth violence.

Strategic arrangements

Our findings from these inspections show that, to make a difference locally, serious youth violence needs to be a shared strategic priority across a wide range of agencies. This includes the local authority, police, health, youth justice services, the education and voluntary sectors and community organisations. Agencies need to have a shared understanding of the factors that can make children and communities more vulnerable to serious youth violence. Intentions need to be clearly set out in strategies, policies and procedures. Roles and responsibilities across different strategic arrangements and boards need to be clear and understood.

Some partnerships had developed new governance arrangements, or adapted existing ones, to ensure they had a clear focus on serious youth violence. We found that the role of the Community Safety Partnership (CSP) is essential to effective joint working and to ensuring there is a shared approach to addressing serious youth violence. However, not all CSPs focused adequately on children's safety or on serious youth violence. Where CSPs worked effectively, they had a clear remit to address serious youth violence. Working arrangements and responsibilities across different boards and partnerships were clearly understood and working well.

Good practice

In Manchester, partner agencies have a strategic priority to continuously improve their multi-agency response to serious youth violence. The CSP has developed a serious violence board that works collaboratively with the Manchester Safeguarding Partnership to ensure that there is an effective focus on children affected by serious youth violence. Working relationships with the regional VRU complement local arrangements. The VRU has identified where it can support the partnership to deliver interventions and develop strategy more effectively. This includes

through delivering proactive public awareness campaigns to reduce serious youth violence.

Appropriate representation at CSPs is essential. In Manchester, the area education lead was able to pass views from strategic leaders in schools to the CSP. School leaders therefore felt they had a voice and an influence. We found that strategic governance arrangements to address serious youth violence differed across different areas. In some areas, the police took the lead role. For example:

Good practice

Coventry's response to the new Serious Violence Duty is led by the police through the Coventry Serious Violence Prevention Partnership. This has strong links with the West Midlands Regional Violence Reduction Partnership (VRP) and Coventry Safeguarding Children Partnership. Together, these different partnerships are developing and overseeing approaches to addressing serious youth violence. Having a range of aligned subgroups, with exploitation and serious youth violence as a clear overarching strategic priority, ensures there is a mature, coordinated approach across the partnership. Through its public health approach, the partnership has made tangible and sustained progress in reducing harm to children from serious youth violence and child criminal exploitation over a number of years.

We found that YJS managers and leaders tend to be influential at a strategic level in issues relating to serious youth violence and child criminal exploitation. They have developed a strong understanding of safeguarding concerns caused by serious youth violence and child criminal exploitation. This is because of the significant and increasing number of children in the youth justice system affected. Their knowledge and understanding, particularly of children's wider needs, was seen to make a positive difference.

In all but one area, we found police force leaders actively supporting and contributing to effective multi-agency strategic approaches to tackling serious youth violence. Some police forces endorsed the public health approach. We saw this in a range of approaches to prevention, and some effective work between the police and schools and other education providers to reduce harm from serious youth violence. However, even when the police had clear strategic approaches, inspectors found these did not always have an impact on frontline policing. More work is needed by police leaders both nationally and locally to ensure consistency across police forces in identifying and meeting the needs of children affected by serious youth violence.

Health services were represented at a strategic level in most partnerships. However, there were limitations to this. For example, the ambulance service was represented as a strategic health partner in only one area visited. In areas where practice was stronger, health leaders worked consistently to improve practice to ensure children at risk of serious youth violence were better protected. This included regularly monitoring referrals made by health practitioners to children's social care, and promoting better awareness and understanding of serious youth violence through the training offer to GPs.

Some strategic arrangements we saw had an inclusive approach to engaging all relevant agencies. This had a positive impact, such as greater involvement of the voluntary sector. Voluntary sector organisations often have the most detailed understanding of local need and provide many services to support children and their families. In Merton, we saw strong and effective links between strategic leaders and the community and voluntary sectors. For example, leaders regularly visited sites to get a better understanding of local projects. This was informing the direction of the partnership. It meant that leaders could provide strategic oversight as well as evaluate operational work.

The role of the Local Safeguarding Partnership

LSPs have an essential role to play in keeping agencies focused on safeguarding children harmed by serious youth violence. We found wide variation across areas in how effectively they did this. In a few areas, LSPs were well established and kept a good focus on children's needs and frontline practice in responding to serious youth violence. The relationship between child criminal exploitation and serious youth violence was well understood. In other areas, LSPs focused very little, if at all, on this important safeguarding issue. They had not identified serious youth violence as a priority. They had not understood their role in challenging individual agencies and partnership boards to address the safeguarding needs of children affected by serious youth violence. There was limited evidence that they had carried out multi-agency audits of serious youth violence work to better understand the experiences of children and their families. This meant that too many LSPs did not have an overview of the effectiveness of front-line responses in protecting children and supporting them and their families.

This is a significant finding, as the LSP has a statutory responsibility to improve outcomes for children locally across all levels of need and all types of harm, including serious youth violence.[footnote 40]

Consultation with children and families

An effective multi-agency strategic response to serious youth violence must take account of the views and experiences of children, their families and communities. We found some good examples of this being done well.

Good practice

Engagement with communities, children and parents and carers is informing the development of services in Coventry. Community consultation is an integral part of planning. The community sector is seen as equal to statutory services. Staff in the community sector provide important insights into the day-to-day reality for children and families living with the impact of serious youth violence and child criminal exploitation. The VRP heard from children directly, through a youth assembly, about their experiences of living in their local community. As a result, it has worked with a local community and produced a short film about the positive bonds within the community. Children who are already in the criminal justice system can contribute to a shadow board called 'through their eyes'. This was created by the YJS and enables children to feed their views back to the YJS management board. The YJS is using this feedback to shape the way it provides services. As a result, services and interventions are reducing risks for these very vulnerable children.

Good practice

Partners and the VRU take a consistent approach to listening to the views of children and families in Lancashire. The aim is to better understand what makes children feel safer in their communities. They use creative activities and conferences well to understand children's views on key areas of their lives, including their worries, the pressures they are facing and their aspirations. Children's voices are used effectively to help shape education programmes, individual practice with children, community-based initiatives and health services.

Some areas, however, need to take a more coordinated and overarching approach to consultation. They need a better understanding of the best way to engage with the children most affected by serious youth violence. In one area visited, for example, no work was happening at a strategic level to seek and understand the views and experiences of children, families and communities in relation to serious youth violence. This meant the needs and

risks in that local area were not understood, and children were left at risk. Effective ways to seek and understanding the needs of children, their families and communities needs to integral to multi-agency approaches to address serious youth violence. Where this is working well good practice needs to be shared between partnerships.

Using data, intelligence and information to understand local need

When developing a strategic approach to serious youth violence, it is essential to build a clear understanding of local need and harm, using data, intelligence and information from across agencies. The Serious Violence Duty sets out an expectation that all partners will develop a strategic needs assessment of all aspects of serious violence. Practice varied across the areas we visited. Some areas had a specific focus on serious youth violence. This meant they carried out a comprehensive analysis of relevant information, and used it to inform responses to improve the safety of children and communities. We also saw some poor practice, with very little information sharing.

Some local partnerships had a dedicated analyst who was responsible for collating and analysing multi-agency data, information and intelligence on serious youth violence, from a wide range of sources. This made a real difference to children's safety.

Good practice

The research unit in the West Yorkshire VRP provides regular and detailed analysis of data, research, community feedback and children's views and experiences. This builds a rich picture and understanding of where, when and why children may be harmed through serious youth violence. The research unit gathers data regularly from sources such as hospitals (attendance data), schools, fire, ambulance and police, in line with a wide range of indicators. The unit has developed a dashboard housing this data and information. Partners across the system can directly access this to understand the local picture and get detailed information on the impact of serious youth violence on local communities and children in Leeds. This enables the VRP to work in partnership with the Safer Leeds executive board to target training for professionals and interventions with children and communities where it is most needed.

In contrast, in one area, the only data collated on serious youth violence was police data. Only a small number of incidents are likely to come to the attention of the police. This meant the partnership had seriously underestimated the extent of risk and need within the community.

Health data has an essential role to play. For example, using data from the ED and the ambulance service helps partnerships to understand patterns and trends in serious youth violence and the places where it is prevalent. In Leeds, as in the good practice example above, hospital attendance data is incorporated into their dashboard and also analysed in the local strategic needs assessment.[footnote 41] In another area, the partnership did not collate or use vital information on ambulance services' responses to children affected by serious youth violence, even though this was readily available.

Our findings suggest that, although the Serious Violence Duty does require local areas to develop a strategic needs assessment, not all areas have a specific focus on serious youth violence. Local partnerships need to be ahead of patterns and trends in respect of knife and violent crime and ensure they are aware of developing risk and need. They can only do this if partners work together to understand what data is available. Systems and processes need to be in place so that partners understand how and when to share information. They need protocols to protect personal information. Population data needs to be gathered from a range of sources and analysed to inform decisions about effective preventative and operational interventions, both at a strategic and operational level.

Professionals in most, but not all, of the 6 areas inspected were aware that children from some specific ethnic groups were overrepresented among children affected by serious youth violence in their area. They considered this in strategic discussions, such as VRU or CSP meetings. They gathered information on ethnicity from the YJS, and data on school exclusions and/or police stop and search rates. But inspectors found only limited evidence that concerns about overrepresentation were being addressed on a day-to-day basis, in terms of prevention.

Of significant concern was that strategic leaders in one area had not recognised that they had a serious youth violence problem, even though inspectors had identified clear examples. This was partly because they had not acknowledged that serious youth violence could affect any kind of area and any demographic. In another area, there had been a recent increase in the number of children from one particular ethnic group being affected by serious youth violence. Although this was clear in the data available to the partnership, until the inspection no action had been taken to query it or understand why it might be happening.

A public health approach promotes a focus on early identification and prevention. Strategic leaders need, therefore, to recognise and analyse emerging patterns of serious youth violence. Our inspections have identified that strategic leaders need to recognise and respond to emerging patterns

of disproportionality in the population of children affected. Only with a much clearer focus on this issue will they be able to address the underlying causes and prevent problems from escalating.

The role of education

Keeping children in education can protect them from a range of harms, including serious youth violence.[footnote 42] Where education representatives were present in strategic meetings, and fully engaged in developing and implementing a multi-agency approach to addressing serious youth violence, we saw that this made a real difference for children. Children received better, more coordinated responses to their needs when education was seen as a protective factor. Education was clearly recognised and prioritised in some, but not all, areas as an essential element in approaches to prevent and minimise the risk of serious youth violence.

Good practice

In Merton, education leaders were seen as central to a strategic approach to address serious youth violence. They were represented on a range of panels. This helped them to build a clear understanding of the potential risks and needs in the local area, including places where there were concerns about serious youth violence and exploitation. Headteachers were involved in developing new ways of dealing with serious youth violence. They took a flexible approach to avoid excluding children, where possible. The missing education panel considered strategies to keep children with low attendance in school. Partners used creative ways of involving children in educational activities. What was evidenced was a multi-agency drive to ensure that children's need for education was central to partnership work at every level.

We saw some positive examples of effective information sharing with schools. This helped them to understand the local context, and children's needs and risks within the local community.

Good practice

In Coventry, school leaders told us that there was effective 2-way communication between them and key agencies such as police and children's social care. Information sharing was working well, and school leaders felt well informed by the police about locations where there were concerns about serious youth violence. This information alerted them to

issues that might affect their children. School staff were clear about the pathways and processes for referring safeguarding concerns about individual children. They knew who to speak to if they had concerns about places and spaces, and were confident they would receive an appropriate response.

Training for education staff is essential, as it helps them to better understand serious youth violence and child criminal exploitation. Multi-agency support to keep vulnerable children in school/education, where possible, is also vital. If a child is excluded, coordinated multi-agency work to reintegrate them into mainstream education needs to be seen as a priority by all professionals working with the child. We saw this work well in some areas.

Good practice

Strategic leaders in Manchester ensure that schools and education providers receive useful training and guidance on serious youth violence and child criminal exploitation. This helps school staff to recognise when children might be harmed by serious youth violence. Schools are aware of the range of agencies that can help these children. Partners work effectively together to ensure that, if pupils disengage from learning, they are supported to return without undue delay. The SAFE Taskforce, funded by the Home Office, contributes to this work. Specialised key workers from community providers, the YJS, the complex safeguarding team, and mental health and education services, help children to remain in education. This reduces the risk of involvement in serious violence, and improves their mental health and well-being.[footnote 43]

In contrast, schools in another area did not have the support, or a coordinated strategic and frontline multi-agency response, to help children affected by serious youth violence and child criminal exploitation to stay in school. School staff did not have the training they needed to support these children. Without this coordinated approach, children who were excluded and at risk of serious violence then remained in alternative provision for too long.[footnote 44] Some had a very limited timetable of only a few hours a week. There was no planning to help them transition into further education or apprenticeships. This meant that educational opportunities for these children were not prioritised, leaving some of them at further risk.

Learning and evaluation

Many mature partnerships that had prioritised serious youth violence focused on learning and showed a determination to improve. Some local areas had links to national and regional arrangements, such as VRPs. These links were helping them to gain a wider and better understanding of the patterns and trends in serious youth violence. They were able to share learning about best practice in multi-agency responses to preventing and dealing with serious youth violence. Links with national voluntary sector organisations and academics were also helping partners to improve their practice and to share effective multi-agency approaches.

While a commitment to, and evidence of, continual learning was present in some partnerships, too often areas lacked a comprehensive and coordinated method for evaluating approaches and interventions, and for using evidence-based interventions. This was despite the Youth Endowment Fund publishing a toolkit on existing research about what works to prevent serious youth violence.[footnote 45] For example, one area had carried out individual evaluations for specific projects and interventions. There was no overarching approach to monitoring and evaluating how the different initiatives were working together within a multi-agency system to tackle serious youth violence. One of the challenges for areas is that the funding available for some of the initiatives and interventions for children, families and communities is often short term. This means they cannot measure long-term impact. Even when projects are found to be successful, their funding may be time limited and the resources to continue providing them is not always available. This limits learning and ongoing improvement in responses to serious youth violence.

Places and spaces

In 2019, the government published a document setting out how local system leaders should work to develop multi-agency responses to serious violence.[footnote 46] This includes a section on ‘place-based interventions’ and defines a place as ‘a physical setting or a context’. The government’s intention is that a place-based approach will bring partners together to work towards improving long-term outcomes, not just for individual children, but for whole communities.

In our inspections, we found a range of interventions in places and spaces. These ranged from hot-spot policing (a police strategy that targets policing resource at localities where there are high levels of harm from serious youth violence), to community-based services to address serious youth violence and meet the wider needs of the community. Some areas were taking a contextual safeguarding approach and were assessing risk in specific areas of concern.[footnote 47] They then coordinated multi-agency responses to meet children’s needs, to manage risk and make the community safer.

We saw a wide range of initiatives and cannot cover all of them in this report. We can, however, draw together themes from what was working well and some of the potential challenges and shortfalls in some initiatives.

In partnerships with coordinated interventions in places and spaces that effectively reduced serious youth violence, leaders were:

- collating and analysing a wide range of information on the local area to inform decisions about where to target support
- responding promptly to emerging harm and needs
- ensuring children's views and those of families and communities were influential and informed the commissioning, design and delivery of services
- engaging widely with agencies, schools, businesses and communities
- ensuring a shared vision, objectives and approach across all partners and the community to promote collective responsibility for reducing serious youth violence and making places safer
- ensuring support is in place for voluntary sector and community groups that provide services and support to children and families in the community. This includes training, supervision and a clear governance structure
- ensuring community-based projects met the needs of families, children and the wider community
- providing services designed to meet local need but also providing bespoke offers to children to develop their interests and strengths
- adapting the physical geography of the area to promote safe places for children and families
- including evaluation in the development of the approach

Not all areas were able to achieve all these things, but we saw many strong examples. We have set out some of the approaches below.

In Leeds, we found examples of partnerships working together with communities, children and families to create alternative activities to divert children from harm caused by exploitation and serious youth violence. Children's views and feedback had helped to shape services. The partnerships had evaluated the project and found that it had improved safety for a high proportion of children. More than this though, it had given them a sense of place within their community. They were provided with hope and opportunities for their future:

Good practice

Children in the north east of Leeds have access to CATCH, an exceptional voluntary sector resource that promotes education and employment and offers children alternative positive activities to keep them safe from exploitation and serious youth violence. CATCH staff run the centre with support from the police, education and social care. Children can also access specialist and voluntary sector services. Over 1,400 children have used or are using the service.

Children are encouraged to develop building and craft skills and to care for the different animals at the centre. This is helping them to develop their emotional intelligence and build a sense of responsibility. 'Restore' is a project in the centre that supports children who experience difficulties in school. Children are referred by schools and are supported through focused work to re-engage in education. As they get older, children are encouraged to become volunteers for the centre and act as role models for other children.

As well as producing quantitative data for the VRP about the numbers of children attending, staff also measure the impact of their interventions. A significant number of children have gone on to gain employment or progressed into further education through the support they receive from staff.

In Coventry, partners were sharing information and considering where to intervene to prevent serious youth violence. This, together with a collective understanding about approaches to intervention in places and spaces across a broad range of agencies, ensured that partners took concerted and coordinated action to reduce harm from serious youth violence.

Good practice

Coventry has a strong and varied voluntary sector that offers services for vulnerable children and their families. These are provided by a range of local organisations in a non-stigmatising and well-organised way. Partners work closely together to make well-informed decisions on the interventions required in particular places and spaces. Relevant partners are involved in making these locations safer.

Safeguarding partners identify locations of concern across the city. They evaluate each location individually and take a flexible approach to making it safer for children, recognising that multiple partners may be needed for this. For example, when one residential area was redeveloped, partners focused on children's needs and aimed to reduce violence in the community. Arrangements included creating walkways with better street lighting; making sure there were spaces for children and families to spend time outdoors; and including a family hub that provided a youth club for children, as well as access to early help

services and health services. Police report there have been no significant violent incidents in the area since May 2023.

In Lancashire, timely information sharing has meant that partner agencies have been able to respond quickly to emerging concerns and have prevented incidents from escalating in the community.

Good practice

In response to a significant rise in antisocial behaviour and youth violence in 2 communities in Lancashire, partner agencies came together with local community representatives and businesses and planned a multi-agency community-based response. They launched a range of innovative interventions, including targeted youth groups, and open-access sessions offering dance and football. Youth workers were available to children in the community. Some school staff supported activities at the weekends. One football club included sessions on knife crime, hate crime and substance misuse in its work with children. These approaches have helped to significantly reduce harm from serious youth violence.

In Manchester, we saw examples of outreach support, which recognised that some children will not readily attend or access services.

Good practice

The Youth Zone provides a range of effective interventions for children and families in one area of the city. The aim is to prevent and reduce serious youth violence by engaging with children both in and out of the youth centre, and by building intelligence so that staff can identify potential incidents. The centre reaches a broad range of children. Staff view safeguarding as a collective community responsibility. They work to raise awareness across the community, including with transport providers, supermarket security staff and takeaways, as well as across a range of small grassroots charities and groups. As a result, children report feeling safer in parks and open spaces when the detached youth workers are around and when using public transport at night. Children feel hopeful because of the opportunities provided in the Youth Zone. They report feeling respected and supported due to the trauma-informed practice model.

Approaches and practice varied between areas. Not all areas took a strategic approach to intervening in places and spaces. We found some examples of staff who were doing challenging work in local communities but

not getting adequate support and supervision. In addition, staff may be at risk themselves. Their safety and emotional well-being need to be managed through support, supervision and clear governance structures.

We saw evidence that some individual projects had been evaluated. We also saw many projects that were making a significant difference to the lives of children and more widely to whole communities. But without frameworks and models to broaden our understanding of what works and why, there is a lost opportunity to build on this nationally.

Conclusion: implications for policy and practice

Serious youth violence affects many children across society. Too many children feel unsafe in their neighbourhoods. It is all too common for children to carry knives, as they see this as a form of protection. The impact of serious youth violence is not well understood by adults across society. More work is needed to understand children's perspectives, their fear of serious violence and their views on how to prevent it.

Some children are at particular risk. Our findings highlight the significant risk of serious youth violence for children with SEND, including those who are neurodivergent, such as those diagnosed with ADHD and autism. Delays across England in assessing children's needs in relation to SEND are putting these children at greater risk of harm. Some areas had introduced measures to reduce delays in assessment and support. But this can realistically only be addressed at a national level if harm to children is to be reduced.

We found some good work to tackle issues related to adultification. Some areas were starting to address the inequalities that put children from some ethnic groups at greater risk of serious youth violence. But there needs to be more urgency in dealing with this issue. Strategic leaders need to recognise and analyse emerging patterns of disproportionality in the population of children affected by serious youth violence if they are to prevent it from worsening. They should address the underlying causes through a public health approach. The causal link between poverty and discrimination and serious youth violence is well documented. These issues need to be addressed at a national as well as a local level.

In this report, we have highlighted some good multi-agency practice in identifying, addressing and preventing serious youth violence. It is important that this learning is shared widely, as we have seen many positive examples where effective joined-up work can make a difference to children and their families. For example, we saw:

- coordinated and skilled work to address the underlying needs of children, including those who have experienced abuse and trauma
- effective work in communities to prevent serious youth violence
- effective information sharing and analysis that are informing strategic decisions on how to prevent serious youth violence

We have also found some significant areas for improvement. Serious youth violence is not always recognised as a safeguarding issue. We saw too many examples where frontline staff had not identified or responded to the wider needs of children affected by serious youth violence.

Children benefit when staff have appropriate training and support systems. But health professionals, particularly in ED and ambulance services, and the police do not all have sufficient training to ensure that those on the frontline always identify the safeguarding needs of children affected by serious youth violence. Police leaders need to have closer management oversight to ensure that officers respond appropriately to meet children's needs and reduce harm to them and others. Oversight is also needed to ensure that strategic initiatives are making a difference for children at all levels of policing.

LSPs were not always taking an active role in ensuring that areas meet their duty to safeguard children at risk of serious youth violence. LSPs should be aware of the quality of frontline practice so that, where necessary, they can challenge other boards and forums that are responsible for strategic arrangements and policies to address serious youth violence. They have a responsibility to ensure that serious youth violence is seen as a safeguarding issue in the local partnership area.

The child protection system still focuses on harm within families. There is limited guidance for partnerships on how to respond to harm outside the family, including serious youth violence. We hope our findings will galvanise the Department for Education and Home Office to provide better support for partnerships to improve their understanding of and approaches to this very serious issue.

Where VRUs were in place, we found that they were mostly making a positive difference for children. This worked best where there were established local strategic arrangements to address serious youth violence. VRUs could then complement existing arrangements and build capacity for partners to provide additional services. However, funding both for VRUs and for interventions to address serious youth violence is often short term. This poses a real challenge, both in terms of partnerships' ability to evaluate the projects, and in terms of finding the resources to continue projects that are working well for children.

We saw some evidence of consultation with children, families and communities. In some areas, this had a clear impact. More work is needed

to embed this. Partnerships need a systematic and coordinated approach to seeking the views of those affected by serious youth violence. They need to gather and analyse all relevant data and information and use this to inform and develop approaches to serious youth violence. Co-design of projects with children was evident in some areas, but again this requires development.

The role of the education and voluntary sectors is critical in this work. Many of the children in our sample were not in full-time education. There were impressive multi-agency initiatives in some areas to support children back into mainstream education. Keeping children in education is a key element of a protective approach to serious youth violence. Local areas must learn from each other about what works well.

What is clear is that when partnerships fail to identify, respond to and prevent serious youth violence, the level of harm to children and their families, and communities, is high. The findings in the Safer London consultation show that too many children and families are not getting the help they need. We also found too many examples of where children's needs and those of their families were not recognised, leaving them and others at risk. When we refer to risks this can sound abstract. But in this context, we are not only referring to harm but to potential loss of life and life-changing injuries.

The trauma experienced by children and their families cannot be underestimated. We welcome the government's announcement that it supports a preventative approach to serious youth violence, through the establishment of youth hubs and 'prevention partnerships' to identify children in need of care and support and to enable them to access it. We hope that the lessons from this JTAI and from the work of Safer London will inform decisions about how to ensure a safer future for all children and their families.

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1. We used the scope outlined in the government's serious violence strategy, which includes homicide and knife and gun crime: 'Serious violence strategy (https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/serious-violence-strategy)', Home Office, June 2018.
2. A wide sample of children was reviewed in each local area. Six children were then selected from each of the 6 local authorities for the purpose of tracking their experiences. A range of children were included in this sample, for whom the local authority and partner agencies believed that serious youth violence and/or criminal exploitation was a current or significant factor. Some had child in need status, some were on child protection plans, and some were looked-after children.
3. County lines is a form of criminal exploitation, involving gangs and organised criminal networks who often manipulate children into exporting illegal drugs into one or more areas (within the UK). The 'lines' relate to

dedicated mobile phone lines that they use to control the children and move the drugs. They are likely to exploit children and vulnerable adults to move (and store) the drugs and money and will often use coercion, intimidation, violence (including sexual violence) and weapons.

4. 'Guidance: joint targeted area inspections of the multi-agency response to serious youth violence (https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/joint-targeted-area-inspections-of-the-multi-agency-response-to-serious-youth-violence/joint-targeted-area-inspections-of-the-multi-agency-response-to-serious-youth-violence)', Ofsted, September 2023.
5. Safer London consulted 33 children and 10 parents in England.
6. 'Appendix tables: homicide in England and Wales (https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/datasets/appendixtableshomicideinenglandandwales)', Office for National Statistics, February 2024.
7. 'Beyond the headlines: trends in violence affecting children (https://youthendowmentfund.org.uk/reports/beyond-the-headlines-2024/)', Youth Endowment Fund, July 2024.
8. Children, violence and vulnerability 2023 (https://youthendowmentfund.org.uk/reports/children-violence-and-vulnerability-2023/), Youth Endowment Fund, 13 November 2023.
9. L Billingham and K Irwin-Rogers, 'Against youth violence: a social harm perspective', Bristol University Press, October 2022;

   P Gray, H Smithson, and D Jump, 'Serious youth violence and its relationship with adverse childhood experiences (https://e-space.mmu.ac.uk/627789/)', Manchester Metropolitan University, May 2021;

   'Family relationships (https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmiprobation/research/the-evidence-base-youth-offending-services/specific-areas-of-delivery/family-relationships/)', HM Inspectorate of Probation, March 2023.
10. 'Shattered lives, stolen futures: the Jay review of criminally exploited children (https://www.actionforchildren.org.uk/our-work-and-impact/policy-work-campaigns-and-research/policy-reports/the-jay-review-of-criminally-exploited-children/)', Action for Children, March 2024, pages 20 to 21.
11. 'How is youth diversion working for children with special educational needs and disabilities? (https://justiceinnovation.org/publications/how-youth-diversion-working-children-special-educational-needs-and-disabilities)', Centre for Justice Innovation, March 2024, page 4;

    A Franklin, L Bradley, J Greenaway, S Goff, S Atkins, and L Rylatt, 'Internal trafficking and exploitation of children with special educational needs and disability (https://www.modernslaverypec.org/resources/children-special-needs-disabilities)', Modern Slavery and Human Rights Policy Evidence Centre, May 2024, pages 5 to 7;

A Franklin, E Smeaton and, P Raws, 'Unprotected, overprotected: meeting the needs of young people with learning disabilities who experience, or are at risk of, sexual exploitation' (https://www.researchgate.net/publication/299490239_Unprotected_overprotected_meeting_the_needs_of_young_people_with_learning_disabilities_who_experience_or_are_at_risk_of_sexual_exploitation), September 2015, pages 30 to 31.

12. 'SEND review: right support, right place, right time' (https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/send-review-right-support-right-place-right-time), HM Government, March 2022, page 20;

    'Waiting times for assessment and support for ADHD, autism and other neurodevelopmental conditions (https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/resource/waiting-times-for-assessment-and-support-for-autism-adhd-and-other-neurodevelopmental-conditions/)', Children's Commissioner, October 2024.

13. 'New statistics on education, health and care plans (EHCP) for children with special educational needs (https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/blog/new-statistics-on-education-health-and-care-plans-ehcp-for-children-with-special-educational-needs/)', Children's Commissioner, January 2024;

    'Children's mental health services 2022-23 (https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/resource/childrens-mental-health-services-2022-23/)', Children's Commissioner, March 2024.

14. 'Feeling heard': partner agencies working together to make a difference for children with mental ill health (https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/feeling-heard-partner-agencies-working-together-to-make-a-difference-for-children-with-mental-ill-health)', Ofsted, HMIP, HMICFRS and CQC, December 2020.

15. A public health approach focuses on prevention and early intervention across the whole population of a local area. Strategies address the multiple factors that increase harm caused by violence and promote protective factors. This approach is explained in more detail later in this report and at 'Public health approaches to reducing violence (https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/public-health-approaches-reducing-violence)', Local Government Association, July 2018.

16. Adultification is treating or considering children as adults, so that they are seen as wholly responsible for their actions. It can include assuming a child to have a higher level of maturity or functioning than their developmental age.

17. 'Shattered lives, stolen futures: the Jay review of criminally exploited children (https://www.actionforchildren.org.uk/our-work-and-impact/policy-work-campaigns-and-research/criminally-exploited-children)', Action for Children, March 2024.

18. 'Double discrimination: Black care-experienced young adults navigating the criminal justice system' (https://www.barnardos.org.uk/research/black-care-experienced-young-adults-in-criminal-justice-system), Barnardo's, September 2023.

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20. 'Beyond the headlines: trends in violence affecting children (https://youthendowmentfund.org.uk/reports/beyond-the-headlines-2024/)', Youth Endowment Fund, July 2024;

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29. A Jay, M Evans, I Frank, and D Sharpling, 'The report of the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse (https://www.iicsa.org.uk/document/report-independent-inquiry-child-sexual-abuse-october-2022-0.html)', October 2022, page 147.
30. A multi-agency front door is a co-located hub of agencies that can enable timely information sharing, decision making and communication. It brings together children's social care, health services and the police, and sometimes other agencies, including education, probation, the YJS and housing. These arrangements are in place to respond to the initial contact from a professional or a member of the public about a concern for a child.
31. Being strengths-based and relationship-based means seeing a child or young person holistically and identifying their strengths and assets and the positive factors in their lives, rather than just seeing them as at risk, being harmed or causing harm to others. It also means understanding and using the positive power of relationships as a way to support growth and change. There is further information at 'Be strengths-based and relationship-based (https://tce.researchinpractice.org.uk/practice-principles/be-strengths-based-and-relationship-based/)', Tackling Child Exploitation, March 2023.
32. 'Contextual safeguarding research programme (https://www.contextualsafeguarding.org.uk/)', Durham University.
33. C Firmin, 'Risk outside of the home child protection pathways: learning from phase 2 pilots (https://www.contextualsafeguarding.org.uk/resources/toolkit-overview/roth-pathways-phase-2-pilots/)', February 2024 .
34. 'Multi-agency practice principles for responding to child exploitation and extra-familial harm (https://tce.researchinpractice.org.uk/)', Tackling Child Exploitation .

35. 'Focused deterrence (https://youthendowmentfund.org.uk/toolkit/focused-deterrence/)', Youth Endowment Fund.
36. The term out-of-court disposal refers to the different ways of resolving a situation without going to court. They can be either informal (non-statutory) or formal (statutory) and do not involve a decision made through a court process. 'Case management guidance: how to use out-of-court disposals (https://www.gov.uk/guidance/case-management-guidance/how-to-use-out-of-court-disposals)', Youth Justice Board for England and Wales, 12 October 2022.
37. 'Pre-court diversion (https://youthendowmentfund.org.uk/toolkit/pre-court-diversion/)', Youth Endowment Fund.
38. Members can include children's social care, education, police, YJS, health, voluntary and community sectors and housing.
39. The duty spells out what authorities and partners are expected do to prevent and reduce serious violence in their areas. 'Serious violence duty (https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/serious-violence-duty)', Home Office, June 2023.
40. 'Working together to safeguard children (https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/working-together-to-safeguard-children--2)', Department for Education, December 2023.
41. Anonymised health data is not regarded as personal data.
42. 'Shattered lives, stolen futures: the Jay review of criminally exploited children (https://www.actionforchildren.org.uk/our-work-and-impact/policy-work-campaigns-and-research/policy-re.ports/the-jay-review-of-criminally-exploited-children/)', Action for Children, March 2024; page 77.
43. 'SAFE taskforces (https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/safe-taskforces)', GOV.UK.
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46. 'A whole-system multi-agency approach to serious violence prevention: a resource for local system leaders in England (https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/preventing-serious-violence-a-multi-agency-approach)', Public Health England, Department of Health and Social Care and Home Office, October 2019.
47. 'About us: contextual safeguarding (https://www.contextualsafeguarding.org.uk/about-us/)', The contextual safeguarding programme, 2024.

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