'Youth Violence and Us: The Culture of Youth Violence in Merseyside'

PEER ACTION COLLECTIVE

YPAS Young Person's Advisory Service

Merseyside Youth Association

L.F.C.

Foundation THE CLUB'S OFFICIAL CHARITY

Targeted Services For Young People *Positive about Communities*

LIVERPOOL SAFEGUARDING CHILDREN PARTNERSHIP LSCP

MERSEYSIDE Violence Reduction Partnership

CO OP

Proudly supporting youth social action #iwill

Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport

COMMUNITY FUND

YOUTH ENDOWMENT FUND

PAC Merseyside Findings Report 2021-2023

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INTRODUCTION

The Peer Action Collective is a £5.2 million programme, which aims to give young people the chance to make their communities safer, fairer places to live.

It is funded by the Youth Endowment Fund, the #iwill Fund (a joint investment between The National Lottery Community Fund and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport) and the Co-op Group. PAC is here to support young people to take the lead. It's a ground-breaking network of peer researchers. That means that young people will be in charge of asking questions and finding out what needs to happen to make their area a better place for to live. But it's about more than learning about what needs to change. Being part of the PAC means young people will get support to take their research and turn it into action.

Supported by 10 regional Delivery Partners across England and Wales, PAC consisted of 120 Peer Researchers aged 16-25. PAC Merseyside consisted of 14 Peer Researchers to begin with and retained 12 Peer Researchers until the end of the project. Trained and employed as Peer Researchers through the North West's Delivery Partner Young Person's Advisory Service (YPAS), young people were encouraged to engage in their communities, to consider what works and what doesn't work, and to turn their findings into action.

For more on PAC's work nationally, please see: **PAC-Leading-research-driving-change-1.pdf (peeractioncollective.com)**

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

OUR
PARTNERS

Nationally, the PAC Project is funded by the Youth Endowment Fund (YEF), the #iwill fund, and the Co-op Group. Each does crucial work in enabling social and community projects that drive action.

NATIONAL PARTNERS	DETAILS
	Established in 2019 by the children's charity Impetus, the Youth Endowment Fund is a charity with a £200 million endowment and a mission that matters. They're here to prevent children and young people becoming involved in violence. They do this by finding out what works and building a movement to put this knowledge into practice.[1] For more on the Youth Endowment Fund: <u>About the toolkit - Youth Endowment Fund</u>.
	The #iwill Fund is made possible thanks to £54 million joint investment from The National Lottery Community Fund and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) to support young people to access high quality social action opportunities.[2] For more on the work the #iwill Fund has supported: <u>#iwill Fund | The National Lottery Community Fund (tnlcommunityfund.org.uk)</u>.
	One of the world's largest consumer co-operatives, owned by millions of members. They're a recognised leader for our social goals and community-led programmes. They exist to meet members' needs and stand up for the things they believe in..[3] For more on the Co-Op's work with young people: <u>Game changers - Co-operate (coop.co.uk)</u>.

[1] The Youth Endowment Fund, <About us - Youth Endowment Fund> [accessed 19th December 2022].
[2] #iwill Fund, <#iwill Fund | The National Lottery Community Fund (tnlcommunityfund.org.uk)> [accessed 19th December 2022].
[3] Co-operate, <About - Co-operate (coop.co.uk)> [accessed 19th December 2022].

Locally, Merseyside PAC have been supported by lead delivery partner YPAS, and consortium partners the Merseyside Violence Reduction Partnership (MVRP), The Liverpool Football Club (LFC) Foundation, Merseyside Youth Association (MYA), Liverpool Targeted Services for Young People, and Liverpool Safeguarding Children Partnership (LSCP).
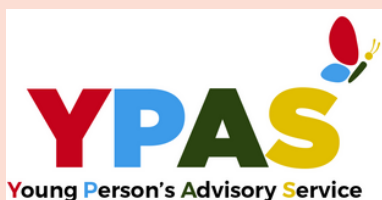
LOCAL PARTNERS	DETAILS
	YPAS offers a wide range of support, wellbeing and therapeutic services for children, young people and families in Merseyside.[4] YPAS have been instrumental to the delivery of this project and in supporting peer researchers with employment and training. The personal development of peer researchers through the role was aided through regular keep in touch meetings and supervisions, along with access to counselling and wellbeing services. Within a collaborative and accessible work environment, YPAS also assisted in networking and reaching participants. Peer researchers would agree that working within YPAS their personal understanding of the third sector has grown, and ultimately their confidence in future career prospects.
	The MVRP are helping the government to deliver its Serious Violence Strategy (2018) through bringing together Merseyside Police, Merseyside Fire and Rescue, local government, National Probation Service and the country's Youth Offending Service, health and education professionals, community leaders and other key partners.[5] They have offered peer researchers their expertise around youth violence, including talks on public health and evidence based approaches. Research and statistics from across Merseyside were also provided to engage with, along with key contacts for networking and promotion.
	The official charity of Liverpool Football Club, the LFC Foundation has the aim to create life changing opportunities for children and young people.[6] With our other partners, the LFC Foundation have supported peer researchers in recruiting 160 research participants and 50 changemakers. Often through their youth groups, the Foundation have enabled Peer Researchers to deliver social action projects and run events.

[4] YPAS, <Young Person's Advisory Service – Young Person's Advisory Service (ypas.org.uk)> [accessed 20th December 2022].
[5] 'Who We Are,' Merseyside Violence Reduction Partnership, <Who We Are | Merseyside Violence Reduction Partnership (merseysidevrp.com)> [accessed 20th December 2022].
[6] 'About Us,' LFC Foundation, <About Us (liverpoolfc.com)> [accessed 20th December 2022].

LOCAL PARTNERS	DETAILS

MYA are a longstanding organisation within the region, providing innovative and practical support to young people since 1890. Delivering a wide range of early intervention, prevention projects and workforce development across Merseyside[7], MYA provided training to Peer Researchers around issues such as child sexual abuse and child criminal exploitation. They have further assisted us with access to venues, access to statistics around forms of violence and support in recruiting 160 research participants and 50 changemakers, along with our other partners.

The LSCP is made up of a Strategic and Decision-Making Group and several sub-groups responsible for undertaking and overseeing work streams of the Board.[8] Their Young Advisors have provided training to Peer Researchers around safeguarding, data collection and report writing, and have assisted networking opportunities with other young people and within Liverpool City Council.

A multi-agency service, Liverpool Targeted Services for Young People work with young people aged between 10-18, who are either at risk of becoming involved in the criminal justice system or who have offended and received out of court disposals or court orders.[9]Liverpool Targeted Services for Young People offered Peer Researchers support in recruiting 160 research participants and 50 changemakers, and networking opportunities within Merseyside Participation Leads.

[7] 'About MYA,' MYA, <ABOUT MYA | Merseyside Youth Association> [accessed 13th January 2023].
[8] 'About Us,' Liverpool Safeguarding Children Partnership, <Liverpool Safeguarding Children Partnership (LSCP) - About Us (liverpoolscp.org.uk)> [accessed 13th January 2023].
[9] 'Liverpool Targeted Services for Young People,' Liverpool City Council, <Liverpool Targeted Services for Young People - Liverpool City Council> [accessed 13th January 2023].

MERSEYSIDE
CONTEXT

While conducting the PAC Project between September 2021 and March 2023, several major incidents occurred within Merseyside. The murders of Ava White[10], Olivia Pratt Korbel, Ashley Dale, Sam Rimmer[11] and Elle Edwards[12] highlighted the issue of violence within the region, garnering attention nationally.

Violence has seen innocent young people hurt or die because of its growing normalisation. Attacks can be unprovoked and the victims unknown to the perpetrators, as seen when 23-year-old Duncan Browne died from being punched twice after waiting for a taxi after a night out in July 2021. Judge David Aubrey described the violence as an 'unprovoked and gratuitous attack.' [13] Alternatively, attacks can be accidental and 'reckless', as Det Supt Rachel Wilson described 19-year-old Rio Jones' actions when accidentally shot a 15-year-old girl who was waiting at a bus stop, while he was caught up in a gang dispute in March 2022.[14]

The murder of 18-year-old Michael Toohey in April 2022 displayed the targeted nature attacks can take on, especially in relation to gangs. Believed to be in response to a dispute over drugs, Toohey was attacked by the Williams brothers at an Internet Cafe. Senior Crown Prosecutor Rachel Barber noted the public nature of the attack, stating, 'Michael Toohey was targeted and killed in an attack that was carried out in daylight, in a public area and without any concern that people going about their daily business might see what was happening.'[15]

Historically, gangs have been an issue in Merseyside, drawing both young perpetrators and victims. In 2007, 11-year-old Rhys Jones was mistakenly shot by 16-year-old Sean Mercer, who was taking aim at a rival gang member.[16] Mercer was part of the Croxteth Crew, or 'Crocky Crew,' a gang involved in the murder of rival 19-year-old Strand Gang member Liam Smith in 2006.[17] More recently, a 2018-19 social services assessment of 16,132 children in Merseyside revealed that 546 were involved in a gang, or at risk of joining one or of experiencing gang-related violence.

[10] 'Ava White,' BBC News, <Ava White: Liverpool murder arrests after girl stabbed to death - BBC News> [accessed 13th January 2023].
[11] 'Liverpool Shootings,' BBC News, <Liverpool shootings: Are UK gun crimes on the rise again? - BBC News> [accessed 13th January 2023].
[12] 'Wallasey pub shooting,' BBC News, <Wallasey pub shooting: Christmas Eve attack victim named - BBC News> [accessed 13th January 2023].
[13] 'Duncan Browne death,' BBC News, <Duncan Browne death: Man jailed for killing England fan after game - BBC News> [accessed 21st January 2023].
[14] 'Toxteth gunman who shot schoolgirl bystander in neck jailed,' BBC News, <Toxteth gunman who shot schoolgirl bystander in neck jailed - BBC News> [accessed 21st January 2023].
[15] 'Gang guilty of the murder of a teenager in an internet café,' The Crown Prosecution Service, <Gang guilty of the murder of a teenager in an internet cafe | The Crown Prosecution Service (cps.gov.uk)> [accessed 21st January 2023].
[16] 'Rhys Jones murder,' BBC News, <Rhys Jones murder 'no watershed for Liverpool gun crime' - BBC News> [accessed 20th January 2023].
[17] 'Who are Liverpool's feuding gangs?' Sky News, <Who are Liverpool's feuding gangs? | UK News | Sky News> [accessed 20th January 2023].

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There are two common types of gang structures: street gangs of young people engaging in anti-social behaviour, and structured, hierarchical gangs with links to adult organised crime.[18] Robert Hasketh's research into Merseyside gangs observed the issue of network poverty - the inability to make pro-social connections, which shape how young people view other's welfare. Push and pull factors lead to deviant entrepreneurship, the process of making money illegally. This is often in response to poverty and deprivation, a form of escape where 'the line between employment and criminality' becomes blurred.[19]

Living through poverty and deprivation can increase the likelihood of experiencing an adverse childhood experience (ACE). ACES are generally defined as stresses children and young people suffer while growing up, including physical, sexual, or emotional abuse, neglect, exposure to violence, parental separation, parental mental illness, and parental substance use. Studies have found high levels of ACEs among the prisoner population, particularly juvenile, serious, and chronic offenders.[20] The Merseyside Violence Reduction Partnership, however, note that ACEs are a 'golden thread' that underpin risk factors in helping us to understand 'how, where and when interventions can be effective, but they cannot be used to identify children, young people and families in need of support.' Young people can experience violence without experiencing ACEs, and vice versa.[21]

During the PAC Project, there have been the after-effects of a pandemic and an ongoing cost-of-living crisis, increasing such risk factors. In July 2022, the Guardian noted that nearly 60% of Liverpool's children live in wards that are defined as among the poorest 10% in England, while 30% are eligible for free school meals, which is higher than England's 20%.[22] Statistics such as this should be used to consider levels of vulnerability within certain communities, impacting a young person's ability to be resilient if protective factors are outweighed by risk factors.

But we are proud of our city, and we hope to make a difference. There is a lot to celebrate already. Whilst working on the PAC Project in Merseyside from September 2021-December 2022, we were not doing so in isolation. Throughout the region, other organisations and projects were also focusing on the issue of youth violence within Merseyside.

[18]Robert Hasketh, 'Scouse Soldiers,' the conversation, <Scouse Soldiers: the organised crime gangs of Merseyside (theconversation.com)> [accessed 20th January 2023].
[19]Ibid.
[20] Mark A. Bellis, Sara Wood, Karen Hughes, Zara Quigg, Nadia Butler,'Tackling Adverse Childhood Experiences: State of the Art and Options for Action,' LJMU, 2023, 2023-01-state-of-the-art-report-eng.pdf (ljmu.ac.uk), p.21.
[21] 'Every Contact Counts Executive Summary,' Merseyside Violence Reduction Partnership, <ecc-executive-summary.pdf (merseysidevrp.com)> p.5.
[22] Josh Halliday, 'Liverpool food banks confront rising hunger,' <'There's nothing else to give them': Liverpool food banks confront rising hunger | Food banks | The Guardian> [accessed 22nd January 2023].

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Gender based violence has become a focus for Liverpool City Council, who recently released their 2023-25 Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy. This has five ambitions and responsibilities and recognises that as a result of the cost-of-living crisis and economic insecurity, there is likely to be an increase in domestic abuse situations. The report evidences this by noting that studies following the 2008 recession found a correlation between household financial strain and reports of domestic violence, stating that 'financial hardship was found to entrap domestic abuse survivors in an abusive relationship.'[23] The recognition of overlapping vulnerabilities and risk factors here is a step in taking pro-active measures, rather than reactive measures.

The MYA Raise team deliver a range of training to professionals in partnership with CAMHS, including training on ACES and trauma informed practices, post-traumatic stress disorder, post-traumatic growth, child sexual exploitation and child criminal exploitation. They additionally run the Mentors in Violence Prevention (MVP) programme, providing young people with the language and framework to explore and challenge attitudes, beliefs and cultural norms that surround forms of violence through peer education.[24]

Further to their preventative work, MYA deliver a targeted approach through their Navigators programme. Navigators are youth workers deployed in A&E departments in Alder Hey Children's, The Royal Liverpool University and Aintree hospitals. They support victims and perpetrators of violence by connecting them to support agencies, and by sourcing guidance to improve their health, wellbeing, and resilience.[25]

Catch 22 is another service working with young people in the region who are at risk of harm or exploitation through their Pan Merseyside Child Exploitation Service. Through either 1-1 or group work, the service supports young people who are involved in child sexual exploitation, child criminal exploitation, gangs, and trafficking. Long term support is also provided to reduce any further risk.[26]

[23] 'Responding to Violence Against Women and Girls: Mayoral Strategy for Liverpool 2023-2026,' Liverpool City Council, <vawg-mayoral-strategy.pdf (liverpool.gov.uk)> [accessed 15th March 2023], p.12.
[24] 'Mentors in Violence Prevention,' MYA, <https://educationmvp.co.uk> [accessed 29th April 2023].
[25] 'Youth Work In A&E,' Merseyside Violence Reduction Partnership, <Medics Against Violence | Merseyside Violence Reduction Partnership (merseysidevrp.com)> [accessed 12th April 2023].
[26] 'Pan Merseyside Child Exploitation Service,' Catch 22, <Pan Merseyside Child Exploitation Service - Catch22 (catch-22.org.uk)> [accessed 12th April 2023].

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Grassroots work through charities and foundations highlights how those in Merseyside wish to shape their community. In response to his murder in 2005, The Anthony Walker Foundation was set up to tackle racism and hate crime so that Anthony's death wouldn't be in vain. The Foundation runs the Speak out! Stop Hate project, which is aimed to support people to report hate crimes and spread the awareness of prejudicial views.[27]

Working for safer and fairer communities, creative community organisation Comics Youth launched their Safe Spaces Trail in September 2021. The trail consisted of artwork by marginalised young people aged 11-25, commissioned by Comics Youth under mentorship of trained professionals.[28] They highlight that 'safety is not a privilege, it is a right,' and young people nominating spaces, creating artwork for the trail, and narrating a podcast to go with it enables this right for others.

When a wave of homophobic attacks occurred in the summer of 2021, the LGBTQ+ community across Merseyside gathered to protest and show solidarity. Feeling knife crime was on the rise in Merseyside, Blaen Roberts founded the biking community Liver Pedlaa Pool to steer young people away from criminality and gangs through workshops, positive role models and cycling activities.[29] These community level acts of organising and advocacy prove that everyone has a role to play in reducing and preventing youth violence. Regardless of who we are and where we are, our small acts can add up to make a difference in the lives of all young people.

[27] 'Our Educational Services,' Anthony Walker Foundation, <Hate Crime Educational Services | Anthony Walker Foundation> [13th April 2023].
[28] 'Safe Spaces Trail,' Comics Youth, <Safe Spaces Trail – Comics Youth CIC> [accessed 13th April 2023].
[29] 'Liver Pedlaa Pool,' <Liver Pedlaa Pool - #knivesdownbikesup - Supporting Youth Of Merseyside!> [accessed 15th April 2023].

APPROACH
& METHODOLOGY

Beginning work in September 2021, the team met virtually three times a week in a development stage, getting to know one another through team building activities. After exploring the fundamentals of Peer Research, including looking at past projects for inspiration and guidance, the process of successfully conducting qualitative research was broken down further.

Group training included:

No. 01 — **The 10 principles of Peer Research**

No. 02 — **Working in a trauma informed way**

Being strength based and inclusive, taking care of yourself, looking out for cues other than what is being said.

No. 03 — **Avoiding Bias**

Ask open questions, clarify cliches and vague terms.

No. 04 — **Question Types**

Open, closed and leading.

No. 05 — **Active Listening**

The importance of not interrupting, reflecting back what you've heard and being ok with silences.

No. 06 — **Interview Laddering**

The process of repeatedly asking variations of the questions 'why' and 'how' to gain a deeper insight of the subject's understanding on a topic and to engage them in a solution-focused manner.

APPROACH
& METHODOLOGY

As a participatory research approach, Peer Research should actively involve members of the researched community (in this case, young people). The aim is to work with young people, not to do to them, and one way of reducing this binary is by engaging them as valued partners in the process. Consequently, in the early stages of the project, Peer Researchers recognised the significance of drawing on their own experiences of violence, of being a young person in Merseyside and of accessing services to shape the focus of the research project. YEF provided guidance requiring the research to explore the drivers and causes of youth violence, the impact of youth violence on young people and their communities, and what young people consider works in terms of solutions. Using this general framework, Peer Researchers thought collectively about their respective communities, placing the issues facing them within broader themes they would want to explore through their research.

To develop these themes further and to specify the focus of the research, a Pilot Project was conducted in two Liverpool Primary Schools in December 2021. In the form of focus groups, young people were asked broad questions around youth violence and safety, allowing Peer Researchers a general insight into levels of understanding and experiences within two communities. Alongside this, Peer Researchers carried out a literature review to discern what research on youth violence within Merseyside had already been conducted. The MVRP had a wealth of resources around exclusion and trauma informed approaches, while the Child of the North report[30] provided a crucial insight into the social, economic, and living conditions of young people in the three regions of the North. Outside of this, other research conducted cover violence either nationally or with a more local focus, for example the Glasgow and Birmingham models of tackling violence.

On finding that little research had been completed on the wider Merseyside area within the last decade, and that young people interviewed within the Pilot Project had a vague understanding of the phrase 'youth violence,' Peer Researchers decided to keep their main research topic as open as possible, as not to exclude any topics or experiences young people wished to talk about. 'The Culture of Youth Violence in Merseyside' contained seven questions, all with individual laddering prompts.

Questions:
1. **Do you feel safe in Merseyside?**
2. **Would you mind telling me a little bit about what growing up has been like for you?**
3. **What is your experience of support services in Merseyside?**
4. **Can you name any types of youth violence?**
5. **Have you had any experience of youth violence?**
6. **If you were at risk of youth violence, who would you tell, if anyone?**
7. **If you could change one thing to reduce youth violence, what would it be?**

[30] Kate Pickett, David Taylor-Robinson, 'Child of the North: Building a fairer future after Covid-19,' The Northern Health Science Alliance and N8 Research Partnership (2021), <Child-of-the-North-Report-FINAL-1.pdf (thenhsa.co.uk)>

APPROACH
& METHODOLOGY

Beginning the main research project in March 2022, young people aged 10-20 were asked these questions through various methods, including in person 1-1 interviews, virtual 1-1 interviews, focus groups, creative focus groups and surveys. Data was recorded in Here I Am's ethical research platform Fatima, where Peer Researchers would transcribe and analyse the findings.

As the Delivery Phase began, the team had to find ways to work efficiently and effectively. Peer Researchers were spread across Merseyside carrying out interviews, focus groups and social action activities. Our virtual meeting spaces helped to coordinate this, as well as a skills audit which served to highlight the strengths of every team member and to encourage them to step outside of their comfort zone. Reviewing the audit, teams were then produced to encompass everyone's individual skills and to ensure each section of work was given adequate attention. This saw the creation of a Social Media Team, a Data Team, and a Social Action Team within the wider PAC team.

Our approach to collecting data was constantly in transition, as young people responded differently to each method depending on their learning styles and interests. We learned that young people who completed 1-1 interviews tended to reach out to us after learning of the project, whereas young people who wanted to share their views without talking to someone engaged well with the online survey. When we did not know what a focus group was going to be like, we quickly recognised the importance of being able to adapt to a group's needs, and therefore began attending with a bank of physical and creative activities in mind. Working on instinct, a focus group could easily go from a group discussion to a safety mapping exercise or a poster making exercise if a group were struggling to engage with a discussion alone.

Broadening our outreach, each Peer Researcher created an asset map of their own areas, for example, Knowsley, Old Swan, Birkenhead, etc. The maps consisted of local schools, charities, youth groups, community centres, and public spaces (parks/libraries). Peer Researchers identified which organisations and spaces might know young people who could engage in the project as research participants, which spaces in-person interviews might be held, and which spaces might work alongside PAC in social action. When contacted, a virtual PAC poster and letter would be sent, alongside a link for young people to sign up to the project and stay in touch.

Essential to engaging with other young people in the region were our own personal networks, a benefit of peer research being the ability to reach people who potentially would not have been involved in research in another setting. It is important to recognise, however, that young people interviewing young people is not a guarantee of breaking down boundaries as we all have varying backgrounds and have had different life experiences. Young people are not one homogeneous group, and the need to build trust between Peer Researchers and participants was crucial. Cooperation, communication, and transparency were key in assuring young people that the process of engagement was entirely optional. Ensuring that after taking part in an interview, focus group or the survey a young person would have further opportunities to be involved in the project, as well as posting updates on social media, closed a feedback loop. Young people could be as active in the project as they wished to be, and we hope that through the project being peer led that young people felt as in control of their involvement as possible.

FINDINGS
INTRODUCTION

Collected from our 1-1 interviews, focus groups and survey, the transcripts below have not been paraphrased as to maintain the integrity of what young people told Peer Researchers.

Contents:

Identity and Background
-Experiences of Homophobia
-Experiences of Racism
-Violence Against Women and Girls

Safety and Fear

Experiences and Levels of Support
-Funding
-Factors Affecting Trust and Accessibility
-Positive Examples of Support

Factors Contributing to Youth Violence
-Trauma and ACEs
-Place, Isolation and Peer Pressure

Culture of Youth Violence
-Perceptions
-Gangs, Grassing and Snitch Culture
-Drink and Drug Use

Hope and Hopelessness

Solutions

Of the 338 young people we surveyed, 90% said they had seen or been affected by youth violence.

11%
between the ages of 6-10

23%
between the ages of 11-15

63%
between the ages of 16-20

FINDINGS
ANALYSIS

Identity and Background

The theme of Identity and Background highlights that a young person's identity can influence whether they become victims or perpetrators of violence, based on certain privileges or disadvantages associated with their identities.

[Interviewer] Well that that was kind of bringing me on to my next question. Do you think that all young people have a similar experience?

[Respondent] Um no, so like my... No definitely not like depending on race, sexuality and gender etc. I feel like women and probably males who aren't straight - So straight males probably have it a lot easier than those who don't fit into that group. I'd say like my friend for example, he's a trans-male and um I feel like it's probably difficult for him, um well definitely difficult for him. Even like, I know this doesn't fit into Merseyside but when we've went on holiday or whatever just recently and it's that constant thing of people referring to us as a group of girls and he's sitting there. And like he does get upset about it um so it's kind of the same thing here. Um obviously I know it's a bit different being away because it's a different setting and then maybe the place that we were at weren't as familiar with trans people as we are here.

Experiences of Homophobia

[Respondent] Because like I am a member of the LGBT+ community, but like there's a lot of people that like to get the bus near where I am and like they make comments on things.

[Interviewer] Ok, do you mind me asking what what sort of comments?

[Respondent] They may come on like, cos they don't understand what the LGBT is so they make jokes about being gay, about like what people wear and that they're being gay and then because I have people from my school who get the same bus they make comments about me and they like oh look there's a gay person.

[Interviewer] Ok, that's really helpful. Thank you. So how - how does that make you feel when you kind of hear those comments?

[Respondent] They kind of just it kind of puts me down cos like it's usually first thing in the morning, so it kind of ruins my day.

- Young people from diverse communities, such as the LGBTQ+ community, face additional challenges and fears in relation to youth violence and can often feel intimidated or targeted due to their identity.

- Whilst comments such as those outlined in here may not be considered violent or abusive, they are highly exclusionary in nature and rooted in a culture of ignorance.

- The more hurtful comments towards people from marginalised backgrounds are passed off as merely jokes or 'banter,' the more negative attitudes attached to this are allowed to persist.

Homophobia, racism and other forms of discrimination become enabled and accepted. It is unclear whether anyone else intervened to call this behaviour out. This could be because they are fearful of the ramifications this would have on their own safety, but also part of the problem is that many groups who feel particularly unsafe especially on public transport feel as though their experiences are broadly inevitable and so do not feel comfortable challenging it. One way in which this could be changed is to perhaps place additional security measures on public transport and have a designated contact number to call if somebody needs help.

[Respondent] Like my friends for example who are um gay and more gay presenting. Can I say that? I don't know. But they would say like openly that they've experienced like more homophobia or like um just abuse as they're going through town than the likes of me on my other friends who may appear straight, I don't know, to other people.

There are often complex social and emotional reasons that lay behind occurrences of youth violence. Instances of racism, homophobia and other forms of discrimination which fall into the category of microaggressions may not be picked up on from others who are not part of those respective communities. One potential way of dealing with this is to ensure that professionals in all sectors have access to ongoing training around unconscious bias and how to recognise discriminatory behaviour targeted at people from marginalised backgrounds and diverse communities.

[Interviewer] So do you feel safe in Merseyside?

[Respondent] I'm gonna say a strong no on that one.

[Interviewer] OK. Why is that?

[Respondent] It doesn't like you know. Considering I'm not only goth but trans as well. It's not like again it's not looking straight a lot. So, it's not very easy.

Not only does this young person feel unsafe in Merseyside because of their trans identity, but also because they identify themselves as a goth, which informs us that difference on a broader level is being targeted. Promotion of safe spaces and inclusivity across Merseyside is key – young people need to feel reassured that they have places they can access if they feel unsafe. Police and other support services should continue to work as much as possible with those of all diverse backgrounds so they can truly understand the issues these young people are facing.

[Respondent] For me, I'd say personally the past couple of years, especially after like lockdown and during lockdown, there's a lot of like a violent attacks towards the LGBTQ+ community. And especially like around town and around a lot of clubs and pubs and as I am part of that, and me and my girlfriend she's from Manchester she's not from around here. It does set that kind of fear that something could happen and obviously like a lot of things that have happened in the past couple of years the number of people like young and old like it doesn't necessarily have to be your problem. It's just sometimes a case of wrong place, wrong time, but it shouldn't actually have to be like that, if that makes sense.

Again, fear is displayed specifically from young people within the LGBTQ+ community based on threats of violent attacks. The impact of media is referred to here, with young people hearing about instances of crime particularly against their own community or wondering if they could be next. This is not a bad thing as young people should of course be careful, yet hearing about youth violence more through social media may lead to them being hyper-vigilant and not feeling safe anywhere. This respondent mentions being in the 'wrong place, wrong time' which again shows there is a sense that young people recognise this kind of violence could happen anywhere and is not limited to specific areas.

Experiences of Racism

Greater education around diversity and accepting or celebrating difference from an early age could tackle the wider issue in the long-term of people being specifically excluded due to an aspect of their identity.

[Interviewer] Ok question five is have you had any experience with youth violence?

[Respondent] Um personally as-as a child I definitely experienced quite like a lot of racism. But growing up it definitely hasn't happened as often as it did, but there are still people who like run past me shouting slurs.

[Interviewer] I'm really sorry to hear that. Can I ask how, if at all, do you think those experiences could have been avoided?

[Respondent] As in things like racism were more like discussed in schools, since most of the time the reason I experience it from like really young students is who probably learn from their parents.

- Similar to other responses which discuss homophobia as well as other forms of discrimination and how they continue to be normalised especially when perpetrators target their comments or actions in a way which is dismissed by some as banter, racism is also treated in a similar way.

- As this response refers to hearing racist slurs from 'really young students who probably learn from their parents,' it is crucial that schools and the education sector more broadly play a key role in breaking down stigma between different groups of people and adopting a culture of inclusion for children from an early age so that this instead is normalised.

The importance of parental influence, and how young people's views around youth violence are passed onto their children also stood out in responses - an inescapable generational cycle of prejudice, unless broken by education, support, and learned understanding of others, particularly adults in positions of authority.

[Interviewer] What types do you think are the most common here in Merseyside?

[Respondent] Stabbing and racism.

[Interviewer] Yeah. Have you heard about them much? Have you seen any of like any of that happen?

[Respondent] Yeah, I've heard of them.

[Interviewer] Yeah, where do you hear about it?

[Respondent] From a friend… a classmate said that she would beat the black out of her and I think that's very not nice.

[Interviewer] Yeah. So how big of a problem the do you think like issues like racism are?

[Respondent] Very big because people can be racist without realising it.

[Interviewer] And how does that make you feel?

[Respondent] It makes me feel kind of not safe and makes me feel like I'm like I don't fit in sometimes.

Education and awareness raising is of the upmost importance in relation to issues such as racism and other forms of discrimination. Whilst there is certainly a more explicit element of racism in which individuals are threatened with physical violence, the problem as suggested here is often even bigger than some realise as microaggressions may not be picked up on by those who are not affected by it. This feeds into the idea that issues of discrimination are often systemic in nature and so it is vital that the root causes of these problems are stamped out. It would be useful for schools particularly to encourage diversity and for this to be embedded into wider curriculum so that it is seen as part of a wider context rather than a one-dimensional issue which is discussed in a few sessions but then moved on from. Lived experience must also be championed as a key method of learning about such topics. Although care must be taken to ensure that this approach does not re-traumatise those involved or cause secondary trauma for others.

[Respondent] Um I guess it probably fits into that same thing of like marginalised groups and stuff, but I guess it's not so much violence, but I guess it's like my friend for example who's Muslim and Pakistani. Like last year, she was just in central library and she like someone came up to her who she was offering her seat to cos it was busy like an older man. And he was saying to her like um… I know this is not my story to tell. So, I feel… I don't know. But she told me about.

[Interviewer] No but it's your experience and it's based off not only your own personal experience but things you might have heard from Friends etc. So yeah, it definitely links in don't worry.

[Respondent] Yeah, and he was asking like where she's from and she knew straight away that what he meant by that question, so she said straight away like she's born in England, she said she was Pakistani and then like he kept on asking her questions and like as if she wasn't from here even though it's clear. It's clear by her voice and stuff. She is from England, and that like… it was like the first time like she said she's openly felt like she's experienced some sort of racism here in Liverpool. which I feel like it's strange because it it's obviously more modern times, so you'd imagine that she'd experienced it earlier in life maybe but now it's I don't know still occurring.

There are often complex social and emotional reasons that lay behind occurrences of youth violence. Instances of racism, homophobia and other forms of discrimination which fall into the category of microaggressions may not be picked up on from others who are not part of those respective communities. One potential way of dealing with this is to ensure that professionals in all sectors have access to ongoing training around unconscious bias and how to recognise discriminatory behaviour targeted at people from marginalised backgrounds and diverse communities.

[Interviewer] Yeah that makes perfect sense um so what types of violence do you think of the most common in Merseyside then? Which… in your experience, what do you think are the biggest problems?

[Respondent] I'd say like knife crime um but then obviously if it's more personal like close to me experiences the people around me I'd say like I hate crime seems to happen like more often and sometimes it's not even like it's that thing of you know people aren't openly like or outwardly saying like racist things but it's the way that like… that thing of like unconscious bias and stuff. Would that be included in youth violence… I don't know. But like um… so yeah, it's like deeply rooted, is that even a phrase? I don't know.

[Interviewer] And do you think that that's a big problem of maybe not recognising the effect that has on individuals who are um subject to that kind of abuse?

[Respondent] Yeah 100%, like it's almost normalised could you say? Like obviously when things such as knife crime happens or like there's like open violence and you know like it's automatically like that's awful obviously but like these little microaggressions aren't picked up on as much, and as I said previously, and I keep on saying like my friends have experienced like a little comments to them quite often. That isn't… like not much is done after that happens, so yeah.

Violence Against Women and Girls

Discrimination, particularly in the form of microaggressions, sadly remain a common occurrence for young people of marginalised backgrounds and identities. It also reflects how young people from these backgrounds are often questioned regarding their identity or made to feel invalidated for who they are.

[Interviewer] How do you experience life in Merseyside as a young woman, how does that sort of make you feel on from the day to day if that makes sense?

[Respondent] Um generally I feel like pretty comfortable. Maybe that's just like the time of day or whatever. I feel like it goes back to that thing of like even in town or whatever of like men like say things to young girls that they wouldn't say to another male because there's the like that male would probably turn around and maybe whack them or whatever and they're more intimidated. So, like I feel like if I'm walking down the street, they're more likely to just say stupid things than they would be to like my older brother. Do you know what I mean?

The respondent also describes how gender may be a factor in how groups of young people experience youth violence albeit in a different and specific way. There is a sense that whilst physical altercations and violence may be more likely between males as they may feel more intimidated and therefore comfortable or able to retaliate with violence, whilst they are more likely to respond to females with unwanted comments.

[Interviewer] Do you think that your kind of perception of Merseyside or you know your experience of the local community has changed or developed since you were a child, or do you think it's largely still the same?

[Respondent] I'd say it changes as you become more aware of the things that you need to do like when you when you're older like if you're on the night out you need to cover your drink. You need to watch this or look out for this; you need to stay with a group of people. Don't let anyone go to the toilet by themselves - those like those things that I now know. And probably when I was younger, I didn't think it was such a big importance because maybe I was a bit more naive and thought like it's all, I don't know, pretty safe. When I look around it probably has changed – yeah - for me to become more aware and like on edge, right. I guess yeah.

This again touches on the idea that youth violence can impact people differently depending on gender and perceived social norms surrounding their gender. The intimidation aimed towards women and girls feeds into a wider culture in which women are taught a series of precautionary measures to avoid potential instances of violence and protect their safety, which links to the idea of victim blaming and perhaps not enough work being done to deter the perpetrators of crimes against women and girls. Some young people clearly feel as though violence is highly anticipated and normalised. As children grow older their attitude shifts and changes as they become more aware of wider perceptions regarding their safety (or often lack of safety).

To tackle this, increased security or other precautionary measures could be made available within bars, clubs, and other venues to ensure safety, and shift the culture so victims or potential victims of crime or violence are not expected to take complete responsibility. Violence against women and girls is often not discussed seriously enough or referred to as youth violence as there is a prevailing culture which almost sees these instances of violent acts as inevitable. In response to this, Merseyside Police,[31] the Police and Crime Commissioner[32] and the Mayor of Liverpool[33] have all respectively released strategies and delivery plans outlining their ambitions and priorities.

[31] 'Our commitment to keeping women and girls safe in Merseyside,' Merseyside Police, <Introduction | Our commitment to keeping women and girls safe in Merseyside | Merseyside Police> [accessed 15th March 2023].
[32] 'Working in Partnership to Tackle Violence Against Women and Girls across Merseyside: Delivery Plan 2022-2025,' <vawg-delivery-plan-electronic-version-final.pdf (merseysidepcc.info)> [accessed 15th March 2023].
[33] 'Responding to Violence Against Women and Girls: Mayoral Strategy for Liverpool 2023-2026,' Liverpool City Council, <vawg-mayoral-strategy.pdf (liverpool.gov.uk)> [accessed 15th March 2023].

Moreover, early intervention as well as higher levels of diversionary activities could be made available for all young people, but especially for young men. This could come in many forms, though boxing clubs and sports facilities act as one example, as there is an ongoing problem with young men wanting to express anger and prove themselves as worthy in some way. Further, Merseyside's Police and Crime Commissioner announced in February 2023 that nearly £500,000 has been invested through the Merseyside Violence Reduction Partnership as The Sports, Arts and Culture Fund to focus on areas that have faced cuts in recent years.[34]

[Respondent] Yeah, so I'd say like I haven't experienced any er outward like physical violence but in terms of like feeling intimidated or being around people in the local area. Sorry, it's just reminded me. Like once, ok, in Year 11, another story a little bit off tangent. I was on the bus and obviously this is Year 11, and it was lads like messing about but one of them made a comment and then I ended up like maybe having an argument with them on the bus. But like they were sitting around me, and they were like messing about on the bus. And then one of them um and I was just I had my earphones in, and I was like 'ah this is awful like I have to choose to sit here on the bus, didn't I? And they all had to sit around me'. And then one of them like kicked my seat and said like - they said ok, sorry this is a bit over um… they said 'why you touching her lad' or something. 'Are you gonna rape her?' You know, just as you do, just as you do on the bus. Um, to which I was like sat there like well um – 'What do I do here?' And like it carried on. Do you know that general like lads banter? For the bus journey home. So, I guess in cases like that I've experienced that…that's but I don't know if that's for youth violence. But I've felt intimidated, or you know like sat there uncomfortable um by like other young people.

[Interviewer] It totally is it and all of this is really relevant to the conversation um and really relevant to our sort of research, because you know for you as a young woman to be sat there and to hear that kind of extreme language being spoken so casually, I suppose that's what's shocking, isn't it?

[Respondent] Yeah, that's what it was, it was like I don't know just a general joke like I just don't get it. So yeah. Well, I said something after a while after a while of sitting there on the bus and being like dead uncomfortable but then even the fact that I had to say something to these people and then they answered, like obviously gave cheek back to me, but I don't know - whatever, I guess. But why is it, I guess that's also the whole point of this project like why is it that like my friends or whatever or like on the bus then like that just happened, then you just brush it off and then it's just another day or like my friend who like experience like slurs shouted at them or whatever when they're out and about. And then it's just like oh well that just happened like is that it?

…

[Respondent] Hmm I guess in terms of like things around women. It's just that like culture of like lads and I guess it all stems back to this thing of toxic masculinity. Not all youth violence but like I do think that that plays a big role in it, the fact that like…just men…

[34] 'Violence Reduction Partnership invests nearly £500,000 to give young people better opportunities,' News, Merseyside Police and Crime Commissioner, <Violence Reduction Partnership invests nearly £500,000 to give young people better opportunities: Merseyside Police and Crime Commissioner (merseysidepcc.info)> [accessed 15th March 2023].

There is a major casualisation of extreme or highly vulgar and offensive language towards women and girls. To challenge toxic masculinity, we must not only tackle how young men view themselves, how they view women, and how they view the relationship of masculinity to femininity. When looking at action that must be taken to help with this, there should be greater education around consent and healthy relationships with friends, parents, etc, from an early age, regardless of gender or sexuality. This does not have to be explicitly linked with sex education - for younger children it could just be a matter of discussing respecting personal boundaries.

As well as this, professionals in all areas involving young people, though especially teachers and educational leaders, need to be kept informed on how to deal with potential radicalisation of young males through social media platforms such as TikTok and the influence of public figures including Andrew Tate. Young people are also consuming harmful content through online pornography which means they are accessing this material without the knowledge of adults around them, and often possess a warped yet high level of knowledge or awareness of such matters as a result. In Liverpool, the Prevent team have a dedicated education officer who works with schools to address this as a part of Safer Streets Merseyside.[35]
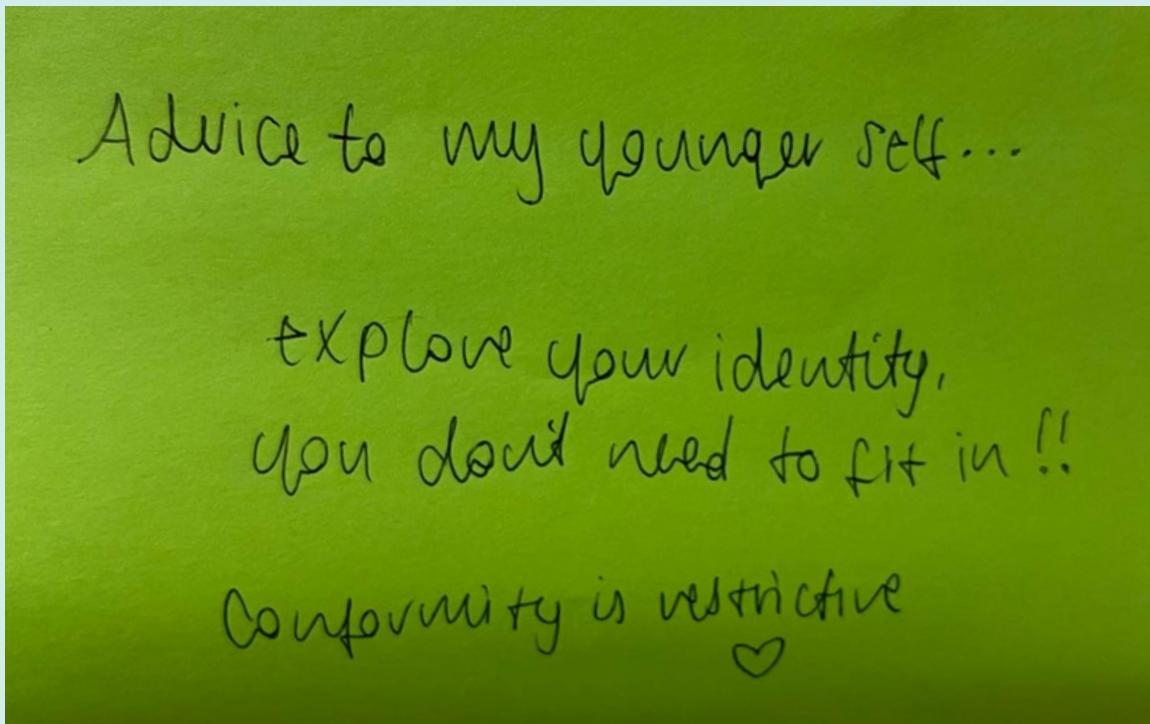
Reflection from a young person at a PAC hosted Pride Event in Liverpool

[35] Safer Streets Merseyside, <Safer Streets Merseyside - Sexual Violence Support> [accessed 16th March 2023].

FINDINGS
ANALYSIS

Safety and Fear

Levels of safety can be influenced by numerous factors, including identity, trust in support services, past experience and peer relationships.

[Interviewer] So do you think, you said you don't have to worry cos you're around brothers and mates, do you think being around males make you feel safer?

[Respondent] Um I'd say so yeah, the like more willing to fight if anything that's happened and stuff like that.

[Interviewer] Yeah, so why do you think that being around males make people feel safe because you're not the only female who has said that. So, speaking for females why does it make women feel safe being around males?

[Respondent] I'd say it's because um people are more likely to avoid messing if there's like a group of guys there, whereas if it was a group of girls they probably even more like, there'd be a higher chance that they can go over and start and leave them and stuff like that.

- Some female participants often felt reassured or generally safer when around males that they know, such as friends or brothers as they felt this may prevent them being personally intimidated.

- Perhaps this also speaks of the pressure on young men to behave in a certain way and keep up the image and/or reputation of being protective.

- As mentioned in other responses, males are **'more willing to fight'** – perhaps there is an expectation for men to be able to fight if needed and so some young males are more alert to this which could feed into the culture around carrying knives 'just in case' etc.

[Interviewer] So the question is what would make you feel safer?

[Respondent] Yeah, that's it. It's - I think just be able to have confidence and trust in local police and local authority generally and the council.

Particularly prevalent in Merseyside, there is a lack of trust or confidence in authority, with this response specifically mentioning police and local councils. Essentially, many of these organisations or services are seen as part of the same entity, which alludes to a wider theme of apathy and a sense that individuals and communities more broadly have things imposed upon them rather than working in collaboration. After feeling as if they have been failed by services for a certain amount of time, people come to expect more of the same and so their standards and expectations slowly decrease over time.

[Interviewer] What was it about the police that like made the situation worse?

[Respondent] I don't know I think maybe it was doing the maybe the legal the realness about it rather than the fact that it was them I think because like I went through certain like um levels of getting like restraining orders and like certain things you know whether it eventually would have gone to court and stuff. And I think the impression the bigger um pressure from the police and the courts made and a positive contribution to the situation rather than an active. Cos it pushed him away from me in in a good way like so he didn't bother me anymore.

…

[Respondent] There was obviously something in order to protect me and to keep me safe, but then sometimes the law doesn't stop people from doing what they want, especially if it is to get what he wants. And cos obviously like he's still - he still tried to contact me sometimes and it just shows possibly even though I'd already contacted the police it didn't make me feel safe because the way I was like hands on or active.

There needs to be a conscious effort from services and figures of authority to rebuild trust. It cannot be underestimated the role of adults in authority and the power they have to influence and drastically change young people's futures through support, respect, and understanding. Our responses highlight the outcomes of positive inspiration and influence of adults as role models in young people's lives, as well as contrastingly negative experiences of mishandled, and therefore unfortunately ineffective responses to conflicts involving young people.

[Interviewer] Ok. And like how would your life personally be different do you think if if there wasn't any violence?

[Respondent] If it had never had like all of my experience have never had happened?

[Interviewer] Yeah.

[Respondent] I'd have less mental health issues for a start. I think I'd think differently. I'd feel safer, less anxious about leaving the house. And do you know what, I probably wouldn't even be in this home where I am now - I'd probably be at home with my family. Just be a happier life.

[Interviewer] So like would you say you kind of think about violence happening? If you ever need to go out of the house, like are you worried about that happening?

[Respondent] Yeah, a lot.

[Interviewer] What sort of things do you worry about?

[Respondent] I worry - I just worry about if anything happens and I was on my own, if I could deal with it, if I was strong enough to face the person if anyone was trying to hurt me. I worry about - I think I I just worry about every single scenario that could happen. Because in Liverpool you have to you have to think about anything and everything that could happen while you're out, because you've had people who've just walked out the house and they haven't had the clue what was going on and look what happens to them.

This speaks of the traumatic impact violence can have on an individual evoking issues such as poor mental health and persistent anxiety, reinforcing how exposure to violence has the power to alter somebody's mind. There is also a feeling of uncertainty with some young people questioning every scenario, meaning they never actually feel safe anywhere, a concerning and detrimental factor to their health and wellbeing.

Perhaps this highlights the importance of organisations practicing a trauma-informed approach, particularly in areas such as education and healthcare, as this type of approach is grounded in the understanding that exposure to trauma can impact an individual's neurological, biological, psychological, and social development. Having staff that are trauma informed is much more essential than many support services realise. Understanding the effects of trauma on an individual, but specifically a young person, will help members of authority to anticipate any additional accessibility requirements, understand circumstances and their effects, and to improve support services that are lacking in public repute. Creating similar initiatives to Sure Start Children's Centres, which not only supported young people but also their parents and family to enhance their health and wellbeing, will increase the likelihood of young people having safe spaces and act as a layer of protection against childhood trauma.

[Respondent] Yeah. Yeah, yeah cool so like for my experience when I was 17. I was in a group of people like used to smoke and drink and just skate around town and just do I do wanted and a lot of the people that I knew were actually a lot older than me maybe like in the early 20s and I actually ended up dating a boy who was 21 when I was 17 and I dated them until about last year so I would have been 19 and like I went through quite a lot with him. He was quite violent in many ways. I think maybe because he thought he was older than me and so you might have thought that he had the upper hand but I knew that I was very wise so he couldn't have got that far.

There is a potential danger of young people being influenced by older peers and subsequently replicating behaviours such as smoking and drinking. Safety may come from safety in numbers, but at the same time this can lead to peer pressure and a sense of isolation from within. The complicated picture that this paints suggests the tension young people face in navigating peer relationships.

[Interviewer] Yeah, so what would make you feel safer in Merseyside?

[Respondent] If there was like maybe more restrictions on kids being out after certain time and stuff like that. [Interviewer] Ok. Do you think all young people have a similar experience to you?

[Respondent] Oh, oh, I won't say all but a lot of the people that I've spoken to um usually tend to avoid going out as well.

For some young people, there is fear attached to going out after certain times or even going out at all, though this may be caused by intimidation of other groups of young people. This demonstrates a divide amongst young people themselves – between those who dominate particular areas, e.g streets, parks, etc. and those who do not feel comfortable going out due to safety concerns or fear.

Perhaps increased security in places where young people are known to frequent could help with this, with potential curfews enforced if severe disruption continues to arise, though we know this is not a tactic favoured by all. Whilst reactionary measures may offer a solution in the short-term future, preventative measures and fixing these problems before they escalate out of control is why we feel early intervention is so important.

Another solution could be an increase in the level of diversionary activities on offer for young people as this could potentially divert them away from places where they may take part in dangerous or disruptive activity or offer a safe space to those who do not feel safe in other areas. Crucially, these need to be available at times suited to young people (e.g more night sessions). Following on from this, youth services need to be funded and workers empowered and valued enough for these types of sessions to be able to take place in communities where they are most needed. More street lighting could also be placed in areas which may feel unsafe to some young people, e.g dark paths, parks etc.

Overall, more funding for both youth services and community policing is needed, so there may be more protection and vigilance around playground behaviour correcting, as parks are one example of an already existing free activity for young people. With more free or much more affordable activities for young people to access, this will provide a crucial outlet for young people's emotions in a safe environment; a young person we interviewed wished to open a centre to cater for different needs of young people, as youth centres are on the decline.
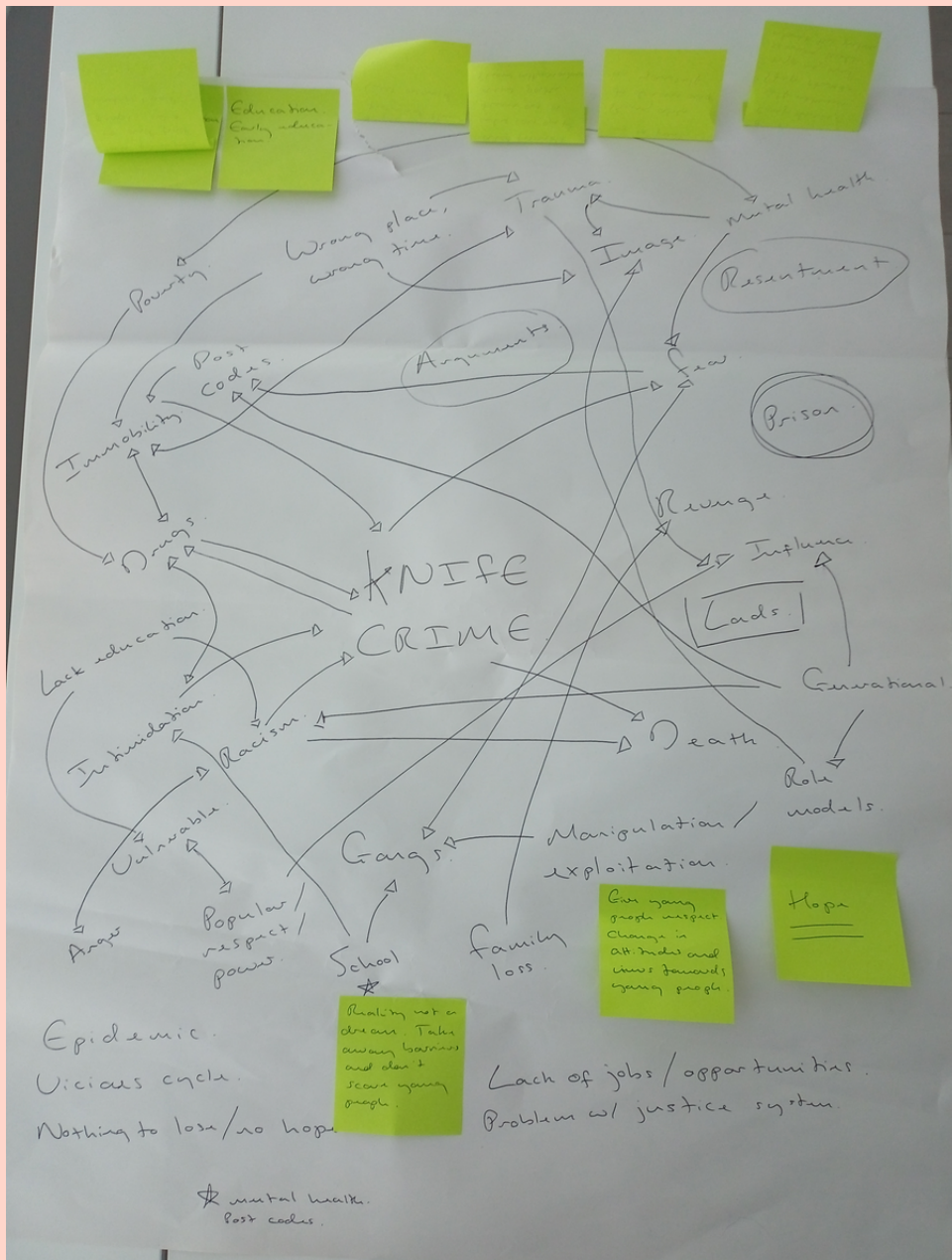
Connection circle created from focus group discussion with young people
in Liverpool

FINDINGS ANALYSIS

Experiences and Levels of Support

This theme was raised by young people when speaking about their own personal experiences of support systems or known experiences, our research found that young people have had varying levels of experience of support services ranging from very good to very poor.

Funding

If resources and funding aren't adequately provided, services cannot do what they do best – offer a place of compassion and guidance to young people who may be lacking this elsewhere. Organisations working with young people often provide an alternative viewpoint, taken seriously when trust has been built up over time.

[Respondent] Funding is always a big issue. Especially around youth services because there's always been stuff for like young kids and there's always stuff for adults, but there's never anything for the in between and I think the in between is so important cos when you go to secondary school as I said before you mix with all these different people and that's how like most of your personality and how your future is formed like in that in them years and to not have anything like a youth club or something like that. Just to kind of like if you do go down a wrong path to kind of stir you, bring you back and reel you back in. Or give you a reality check if you've done something bad. If you haven't got that then obviously you are gonna think that what you're doing is alright. Cos you haven't been told otherwise.

By breaking down barriers and stigmas between young people and the police, for example, support services open up a pathway to a more integrated and compassionate community, one that works together and mutually respects individuals within it. Breaking down such barriers at an early age prevents such attitudes from becoming entrenched, and potentially generational.

[Respondent] Our youth club was like open five nights a week Monday to Friday, and even like we had the police office, like it was in the same building so like um the community officers that are based on our estate were in the same building as the youth club, so… and even they'd come in and like chat to us and stuff like that. Now if you hadn't been going to that youthie and the police come in you'd completely be reserved straight away, but because of that youth club like the police would walk around the estate when you weren't in the youth club and you'd be like 'oh hiya such and such, hiya such and such' and you knew them by name and you'd have a little chat with them and then you'd carry on walking. That doesn't happen anymore because the kids just see the uniform and think one thing, so it was just like it was, it broke down so many barriers that you didn't even realise and then we went from five nights a week to absolutely nothing.'

'We went from five nights a week to absolutely nothing'

Taking away a young person's safe space due to a lack of funding will not only damage trust in adults, but will also hinder educational opportunities, development in life skills and soft skills. This runs the risk of a young person finding a negative and possibly dangerous alternative.

[Respondent] More funding so that they can reach more people, I guess. Cos a lot of people don't get a chance to get to the support services before their piled off on to someone else.
[Interviewer] Yeah, would you feel comfortable using those services if you needed to?

[Respondent] Yeah, but it's not certain that you would receive the support that you need which is a bit -

There is a sense here of things being done over young people's heads, that there is a lack of active engagement with them. If a service cannot provide what is needed, there should be transparency around why this is and how else the young person can receive support. Yet young people often feel as if they are just numbers on a page, and if they do not feel protected from danger or risk then it can have a significant impact on their mental health.

Factors Affecting Trust and Accessibility

Young people can lack support in their own home, knowing what they can and can't say. For some young people, if they are experiencing an issue, telling certain adults can compound the problem.

[Interviewer] Thank you, is there anyone that you wouldn't talk to? You wouldn't feel comfortable to reach out to?

[Respondent] If it was something about the LGBT then I definitely wouldn't tell my parents.

[Interviewer] If you're comfortable to share, can I ask why not?

[Respondent] They're really homophobic and transphobic, so.

[Interviewer] Well, I'm really sorry to hear that. Could I ask if there's anything that would make it easier to talk to - say your parents, or other support services, or depending as you said on the kind of circumstances?

[Respondent] I feel like there should be like something where as well as like educating young children in school, they would also be able to educate adults.

[Interviewer] That's really interesting. Do you have any ideas of what that could look like?

[Respondent] Um, I'm not really sure, but I'd say using - I've seen more adults definitely using social media a lot, so things focused on helping adults accept things would be nice.

This sense of restriction indicates how the level of support young people receive may be influenced by their identity, possibly in turn affecting their sense of safety and trust. When efforts of adults or support services are limited, young people can become apathetic towards what is being offered.

[Interviewer] So you touched on bullying happening a lot in your school. Can I ask how you feel that's being dealt with or maybe the kind of reputation it has?

[Respondent] To be honest it's not being dealt with at all we have like a lot of different things like oh mental health awareness assembly, anti-bullying assembly but no one no one pays attention like at all. No one listens to what they actually say it's just another one of those things as far as people are concerned but I think it's just like impacting a lot of people because I see it practically on a week. Not even really a weekly basis like a daily basis, and it's just like affecting a lot of people and not much is being done about it.

Disengagement seems to stem from when the proportion of support to the scale of problems does not feel balanced. Certainly, this may become monotonous if the same approach is taken each time. Talking about the issue to young people does not seem to be effective – a lot of the time they already know what the issue is. Dynamic and engaging support can provide an alternative to this, offering a much-needed space where young people can just be themselves.

[Respondent] Oh, I felt really thrown away. You know even after the heart transplant, there was no mental health help, there was no guidance, they just almost basically said here you go [name], go home after months and months and months and months of having a complete different lifestyle. It was really it was really horrible, and it was really hard to adjust back to normal and I couldn't even sleep my own bed at home for umm for quite a long time.

[Interviewer] OK. How - do you wish maybe the government or the hospital or the school just in general people would have dealt or handled that?

[Respondent] Um, I don't know cos I do see it as I don't feel like it was a malicious way… But um you know CAMHS has a lot of um has a lot of people around UK and it obviously it was really hard to fit spaces in but um even after one visit they just discarded me and sent me back home.

- The NHS have a commitment to 'Make Every Contact Count.' One person who listens can change a young person's perspective on what is available to them. Young people need to know that wherever they choose to reach out for help, quality will be the same across the board.

- What makes up strong support is often repeated as **'people that care about you and that love you and want the best for you in life.'** It is important for professionals to understand that school, home, or a relative's house are not always guaranteed to be safe spaces for young people, and we recommend that every professional, whether working for the NHS, strives to make every contact count.

- An organisation may want to take this a step further, by creating an environment of participation and open dialogue with young people and service users.

[Respondent] Pretty much trying to change it to become a place that people do want to go, and people feel safe, and they feel supported, and I think that was a good start. And I think another good thing is starting to do training for the employees from young people, so people to deliver a whole session talking about what young people want, how they want you to talk to them, like how they want you to ask [questions].

If a service or organisation does not feel welcoming or child-friendly, this may worsen the issue the young person is dealing with. Giving young people the autonomy to influence the services they access is not only good practice for the service, but it will also ensure that young people will get the most out of their time with the organisation. Young people are experts by experience, and by giving them opportunities for meaningful participation they will feel that they are being taken seriously and it will enable them to be active members of their community.

Positive Examples of Support

[Interviewer] Just trying to think. So, the way you said there isn't enough, are the ones that are here so like any places where people can do hobbies, activities. Do you think they're good enough?

[Respondent] Like the ones I like I know like the gym I used to go to Aspire like a Aspire combat sports academy. Like they do like one of the best youth programs. They do an alternative provision and stuff like that and getting kids off the street. And I know like about friends inside the gym who have been like, had a whole life of crime that they've had like before I've even got to the gym. And the people they are today and it's like you would never have guessed because they've done that good of a job with them. So, it's really crazy.

Note the phrase **'getting kids off the street'** here, and what it suggests about young people having little to do or places to go where they feel content. The long-term benefit of receiving positive support is evident, suggesting that through strong role models, ambitions can be raised, and energies can be diverted from negative outlets into positive ones.

[Interviewer] MVP is that mentors in violence reduction?

[Respondent] Yeah.

[Interviewer] Yeah, that can be a support service. Yeah.

[Respondent] Yeah, that's the one that's the one I know, they came to my school.

[Interviewer] Okay, so did you like them?

[Respondent] Yeah. I was in the I was in the group that talked to year sevens.

[Interviewer] Okay brilliant, how like - what was your experience of that like? Did you enjoy it?

[Respondent] Yeah it was really fun and like it actually brought me like out of my comfort zone because I don't usually like to speak to loads of people. But it was like very fun to speak to like different people.

When young people can actively participate in a project, this can boost their confidence and wellbeing through the feeling of being productive and engaged with something that can make a difference. The significance of MYA's Mentors in Violence Prevention programme is its inter-agency collaboration, making support services more accessible to young people through bringing their project to schools. Going to spaces where young people spend time ensures that they are aware of what is available to them and gives them more of prospect to try something new. We encourage services to promote the projects and programmes of others, not just to celebrate the good work out there, but to relieve any information gap in the public. Services need to be respectful of young people, however the first step is to ensure that young people know the service is available in the first place.

The understanding of youth violence that young people have is greatly underestimated, and their valuable experiences and solutions are not taken as seriously by authority figures who have the power to change things for the better. Young people have made it clear that education around this topic is imperative in reducing youth violence for future generations, and early exposure to youth violence is especially impactful - they feel education around bullying and diversity would reduce prejudice as a catalyst of some forms of youth violence. Young people felt validated by our interviewing process, that we collaborated in creating a safe space that did not feel tokenistic or exploitative, compensating young people for their time, and keeping them in our feedback loop of social action progress.

[Respondent] Thank you for interviewing me, I've enjoyed it. It's felt like I've, not done something positive, but like... yeah like been involved in the bigger issue. So, thank you.

PAC Merseyside Team Members with Funders and Partners at a local conference in 2022

FINDINGS ANALYSIS

Factors Contributing to Youth Violence

Strongly relating to the later theme of Hope and Hopelessness, factors contributing to youth violence denote the lack of viable alternatives for young people. Young people involved in violence often experience multiple risk factors and lack the protective ones needed to counter this.

Trauma and ACEs

Violence can become normalised in several ways, but particularly when this is seen at home. Article 19 of the UNCRC states that children and young people should be protected from all forms of violence by those who are looking after them,[36] however exposure to violence may influence their behaviour early on.

[Interviewer] Oh, fab, do you think any groups of young people are more or less at risk of youth violence?

[Respondent] So I think young people that don't have a very strong support system. Maybe young people with mental health problems as well probably. And in the like no in like the lack of support thing maybe this person who's like become almost accustomed to violence - so for example kids in like domestic violence situations - cos I guess they might be desensitized to things like that.

Adversity in childhood can cause young people to 'switch off' their empathy, lacking the resilience to control impulses which result in violence or aggression. Made vulnerable to violence, young people may also begin to see this behaviour as natural, as a way people engage with one another, and begin to assume this behaviour themselves.

[Interviewer] Would you say a lot of people involved in in gangs and stuff uh are because of other people being involved, like their family or friends?

[Respondent] Yeah. A lot of it, and I think that if obviously if you brought up in a family where your mum or your dad if they're involved and things like that, and you're seeing that and you're seeing well they're protecting themselves and I should do that too because that's what they're doing and they're adults and know what's right for me. Obviously, you're gonna start doing it and if your parents are like that there's less people who have the big influence on you to tell you not to do it, why it's not safe.

[36]'A Summary Of The UN Convention On The Rights Of The Child,' UNICEF, UN Convention on the Rights of the Child - UNICEF UK, <accessed 26th February 2023>

[Interviewer] And how difficult do you think it is kind of break out of that cycle and not follow family and stuff?

[Respondent] I think it's probably really difficult. If the people that you look up to and you're influenced by are doing something, like say if you had a family and you were very like, they went to church and did charity, and you're seeing that is a good thing cos they're people who influence you, then obviously you're gonna grow to be like "I want to help people. I want to do what my parents to do." And it's the exact same if it's a bad way because say like, even violence, if if you've got a person in your family who is very violent and do things like that, if that's what you're seeing, you're growing up with thinking it's right when you're really young and your mind's like not fully knowing right and wrong yet. That's what you think is, that's what you think is normal.

It is suggested here that violence can be generational, and if this cycle is not broken the experience may be passed onto their children as well. If this is viewed as an adverse childhood experience (ACE), a consequence of this may be on a young person's brain development. Positive and negative experiences stimulate neurological pathways and develop cognitive and behavioural functions. Impacting the autonomic nervous system, which detects if there is an external threat, young people who experience ACEs can spend a lot of time in a hyper arousal state and emotional distress. Unable to regulate their emotions, this issue may be compounded by the amount of support they receive from organisations and professionals.

[Respondent] I just think that like if they have bad mental health and they're really struggling with it and they don't really have anyone else to turn to, and services like schools and just other services are just turning them away because they don't know how to help them, then they might just kind of not - I don't know how to explain it, like they just might not want to associate themselves anymore. Or like they might feel anger towards society as a whole and just might turn to crime as this kind of resolution towards it.

[Interviewer] Yeah, that's really interesting. Thank you for sharing that. I guess really quickly you touched on anger and feeling anger towards society, and you know turning to crime, as you said, as a resolution. What are your thoughts about anger and crime?

[Respondent] I mean I feel like a lot of crimes may be committed out of anger, but I mean, I feel like emotions do play quite a big part in certain crimes, like whether you feel jealous towards someone you decide to hurt them or angry towards someone so it again you decide to inflict harm or verbal abuse or anything I feel like emotions do have quite a big part in it.

The focus on anger here seems to imply a hopelessness, of being let down by those who are meant to have your best interests at heart. If they are already feeling isolated as a result of their mental health, home life, or trauma, not having a safe space to process this may push young people further into social exclusion. Mental health support should be treated with parity of esteem to reduce any stigma around it, and to allow young people to deal with their emotions in a healthy way. As much as possible, we should avoid shaming young people for their behaviours, and instead assume a trauma informed practice.

[Interviewer] Yeah, can I ask, you know with people being excluded from school for example, you also said from activities and friend groups, and you said that it can affect their mental health - why and how do you think it affects it?

[Respondent] Oh, I guess like not having people to rely on, and good friends or teachers who you can trust, and that kind of an environment. I guess it's just kind of like a black hole that just kind of sucks you in. And like you don't really have anyone who you can go to, you don't have anyone you can talk to, and you kind of exclude yourself in a sense at the same time because in activities you don't want to partake in them, because you don't have anyone to partake in them with. and yeah, it's just kind of - like one thing can lead to another, and they just become a lot more antisocial and… Yeah.

[Interviewer] Yeah, so am I right and saying, you know you've touched on one thing leading to another and that it's like a black hole: could you go into a bit more detail of what you mean by that?

[Respondent] Um I guess I just mean like - if someone is getting excluded from a group, and they obviously don't really have anyone to confide in anymore, then they're less likely to want to partake in just school activities or anything because they're just struggling, because they don't really have any company, or any one, and they just they don't want to partake in any of the school life. And like teachers may see them as just really quiet, and they didn't want to join in with the activities, so the teachers end up excluding them as well, and it just kind of - it's kind of really mentally damages people, because when they come out of school and when they go home, they don't really have anything to do or anyone to talk to. And it just kind of it. Just kind of goes a bit downhill.

The lack of control young people have over their own situation reflects the lack of focus on their rights, their autonomy as individuals. When decisions made about them do not involve them, when there is no transparency behind a professional's actions, they may begin to feel imposed upon or stifled. Consequently, to them, it may be that they see no other viable alternative to violence, whether as a release of their emotions, a way to protect themselves, or as a way of finding a place in society. Without the protective factors of the ability to emotionally regulate, the feeling of belonging and opportunities for engagement, peer influence may also become a defining factor influencing behaviour.

Place, Isolation and Peer Pressure

[Respondent] I think the media has got something to do with it because obviously if someone's going out and they're going "oh yeah I'm going to kill another person from another gang," then obviously if they're getting recognized they think that's good for their people, and then obviously more people are gonna go and do it because it looks good on them. It looks like they're protecting people or protecting themselves, when really, they're putting people at harm.

Sensationalist media can fuel the cycle of violence, working on young people's fear and pride. The assumption may become that it is better to be on the inside than on the outside of this, as the perceived benefits might outweigh the costs of intimidation or appearing weak. Stereotypical attitudes of what constitutes as a provider must be tackled, to avoid generating a toxic insecurity that can be easily manipulated.

[Interviewer] What do you think motivates people to like to be involved in youth violence?

[Respondent] I think a big part is definitely like, like if there's a group of them. Like cos when you just feel more inclined to do something they're saying also like impress them.

[Interviewer] Yeah.

[Respondent] So all I can think of really is just like a lot of people doing one thing.

[Interviewer] Do you think like that can be like the most prominent influence like the large group of numbers of people?

[Respondent] Yeah.

[Interviewer] Just like that's a big influence.

[Respondent] Yeah. I think it is because like peer pressure and stuff like. And if they're really young then obviously going to get like sucked into it and be peer pressured to do stuff. Cos if they're all shouting at you, yeah go on do it, do it, then it's just kind of like you don't want to say no because they'd be like oh.

The desire to have a sense of place and to feel a sense of respect may push young people to join groups or gangs that engage in violent behaviour. Being safe from intimidation through strength and safety in numbers suggests an underlying vulnerability that they are attempting to mitigate. Positive role models, trusted adults and safe spaces can act as a counter to this, alleviating a sense of isolation and hopelessness.

[Interviewer] Do you think that like any groups of certain young people are more, or less at risk of youth violence?

[Respondent] Um I think I think it's more like cos I want to say boys in like really like rough areas, that's lower-class areas cos it's like they've got nothing better to do. But like they all just come together and they just like basically cause trouble because like just why not?

The bonds formed from isolation, boredom and listlessness highlight the influence of someone's identity, particularly working-class men and boys, on their behaviour. Whatever negative stereotypes are held about them, if young, working-class men and boys feel disrespected and unable to find anything else available, they may lose respect for the environment and people around them. To them, it may almost become an inevitability that they are to end up as what they are stereotyped as, and they may accept this either as a last resort or due to a lack of positive role models.

Positive role models, trusted adults and safe spaces can alleviate a sense of isolation and hopelessness

[Interviewer] Do you think any groups of young people are more at risk of youth violence?

[Respondent] Yeah, probably like working class boys. Maybe not as like a stereotype, just as like that's probably the group that more people are gonna, you know, resort to like violence and stuff like that. Just because of like how you know the education system treats them, and how society treats them. Yeah.

The repeated theme of hopelessness connotes a sentiment of immobility, that society almost expects nothing less of these young men. The more young people are stigmatised, the more they will move into a collective, searching for solidarity and protection. Push and pull factors surrounding groups and gangs are crucial to understand here. It must be considered that young people may feel they are lacking (especially in a cost-of-living crisis) as a result of their class status - whether this be the opportunity to provide for themselves or their family, a sense of connection with others, or a stable home life. In turn, the popularity that comes with gangs, the tax-free money, and being given a role that they are trusted with may feel like a stark contrast to what they are trying to escape.

[Interviewer] So you think it's kind of groups of young men maybe egging each other on, like you know bringing out that side of each other I suppose?

[Respondent] Yeah definitely. But in terms of like I guess what else influences it, is like parents and it goes back to that thing of like maybe social media. There's people looking at different outlets and like, I don't know, they think that that's normal to be acting or saying like things from a young age uh but, yeah, just that general thing of like young like lads just shouting things, from as young as like… I can remember walking home from primary school and just not saying anything like offensive I guess but just that thing of like lads shouting things as you're walking across the street and being like intimidated. But at the time they were literally just 11 and so was I, but like I guess it's that thing of role models too. Maybe that's stuff that their parents or like a father figure might do. I don't know, but um a number of factors influence why a person might act like that, but it's just role models, what they've seen around them growing up, the whole like yeah, just political views. I don't know yeah.

A number of factors can and do influence young people's behaviour, as highlighted throughout this section. Individual, social and community risk factors may work together to put young people at a disadvantage, and negatively influence their behaviour. However, professionals can avoid making the outcome of this worse by adopting a child rights approach and a trauma informed approach. We do not know what has gone on in a young person's life, but we can listen, respect their dignity, and create spaces for open and transparent dialogue. This support can build resilience, rather than apathy.

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Culture of Youth Violence

Due to the history and normalisation of youth violence in Merseyside, it seems to have developed its own culture. Language, behaviours, postcode wars, gangs, and certain material objects (Nike 110s, e-scooters, North Face jackets) have become associated with young perpetrators of violence. However, other than tackling the violent behaviour associated with this culture, by probing what we have come to accept, we may recognise all of the above to be signals of risk factors that have occurred in lieu of protective ones.

Perceptions

[Interviewer] Okay. And so, do you think any kind of groups of people are more likely to be involved in youth violence, either as a victim or as like the perpetrator?

[Respondent] Most people I see that are involved, there's like you know, bunch of people on bikes with like stupid hoods on. I don't know what that point is, but people like that.

What may be deemed a staple of this culture are young people regarded as 'scallies.'The implied culture of 'scallies' brings a lot of intimidation with it, often seen as the troublemakers and dangerous. Young people are reminded to stay wary of them, but this signals that we are taught to generalise and assume the identity of others for our own safety.

[Interviewer] Okay, um. What type of bullying have you like witnessed?

[Respondent] Physical. Like I'd say more like emotional kind of, like mental. You know like it's one of them were like you like walk into a room and like you know people are like talking about you, and like stuff like that. And like, cos maybe you've not like you've not got like a pair of 110s, and like a brand-new set of shoes and stuff like that. You're like not seen as very cool, so people just don't really like you and just take that as what it is. But you know yeah, it's very stupid. And like physical, I get like you know what I mean like a lot of, especially in the same sex schools, like I said, there's like a lot of fights that go on and it's like very stupid for yeah.

[Interviewer] Um am I right in thinking there's an importance of image tied to bullying?

[Respondent] Yeah definitely.

As image can be associated with bullying, this suggests the economic factors associated with youth violence. There may be a pressure to fit a certain image, further amplified possibly because of a young person's background and the threat of social exclusion. A young person will often have little control over their income and ultimately what they are able to purchase. In a material culture, this can be a vulnerability as a young person's perception of themselves may become skewed and they may become more susceptible to grooming.

[Interviewer] Yeah, yeah, that's great. Thank you. Where don't you feel safe and who don't you feel safe with?

[Respondent] The place that I least feel safe is actually around my own area. And I would say, I'm not sure of the word, but erm, if I see lads. You know the kind of lads that's on bicycles, wearing tracksuits? Those kinds of lads, those-

[Interviewer] Yeah.

[Respondent] - don't make me feel safe.

[Interviewer] Yeah, I completely understand that. What would make you feel safer in those situations?

[Respondent] Well, for the ones round mine, getting to know them a bit better helped a lot. So, I actually know some of them now and so feel safer around them because I know what kind of people that are. I wouldn't know what else would.

- It is important to recognise that through generalising young people we can create an 'us and them' dichotomy, which will only serve to further any existing social divides. As put by this young person, we cannot know why a young person dresses a certain way, or who they are, without actually getting to know them.

- Breaking boundaries can break misconceptions, in turn alleviating fear on both sides of this perceived divide. Instead of stigmatizing young people, our perceptions should be stripped back to consider all of the possibilities related to image, unless violent behaviour is displayed outright.

- Even then, judgement will not change behaviour when violence is so normalised.

Gangs, Grooming and Snitch Culture

[Respondent] Well, yeah like maybe like well we like even in my street like two days ago, like some guy like one of my neighbours like bikes got robbed. And it was kind of kind of funny, but like they can't really do nothing about it cos they don't know the kids. Which is just gonna end up causing more violence probably because they're just gonna end up having a fight in the middle of nowhere, and that can never end good can it? So yeah.

[Interviewer] Yeah, do you think the potential fear of escalation can put people off seeking some form of justice?

[Respondent] I think seeking a form of justice is not to do with anything like that. I think it's more like more like being a snitch. And like knowing that like and like you know cos especially like around places it's like it's like everyone everyone knows everything. If you go and tell on someone, they're gonna know you've told on them at the end of the day. And they're gonna know who knows and who doesn't, in certain scenarios in scenarios and stuff like that. So, if anyone goes and like tells someone it's kind of looked at like stupid, like oh you snitched like you're not, you know and that that'll spread.

[Interviewer] So would that then negatively impact how you're perceived in your community?

[Respondent] Yeah, but also it could make more crime like that like the their like friends and stuff like might of fought so have no friends. And then like the people they snitched on will end up trying to hurt them, you know though. You know what I mean, so yeah.

The fear of carrying the label of being a 'snitch' or a 'grass' is a particular problem reflected in the rhetoric of young people from Merseyside. More fear inducing than actually being involved in the crime, young people often feel too scared to report crimes due to the implications their community will brand them with. Nobody wants to feel like a stranger in their own community. Hostility is expected from those around you if they feel like they have been betrayed by one of their own.

[Interviewer] Right, have you kind of heard things about places then that makes you feel that they're not safe.

[Respondent] Well yeah, obviously it's like there's like attacks and stuff like that that goes on like they can even be little or it can be down to like being on the news. Like my cousin come in the other day and he was like 'oh my god someone just got with a… knife in front of me and I had to walk the other way.' Like it's dead common, but not many people report it.

[Interviewer] Why don't you think people report it?

[Respondent] Cos it's so common, it's like looked at as an everyday thing, like it's so normal here, it's like guns in America really. Because if they reported it, they'd get called a grass and all that, and then stuff might happen to them if they report it.

[Interviewer] Would you say that being called a grass is quite common here?

[Respondent] Yeah, and people are scared of it because anything could happen. I know my dad's reported something and then his girlfriend's windows got blown in while - I mean, my little sister is in there. It's just really common.

[Interviewer] And how does that kind of make you feel - all these things happening?

[Respondent] Like you're unsafe in your own home really, like you've got a worry about everyone. Like if anything happens to you, yeah, you can't report it, but you can't keep it to yourself cos you might put yourself in more danger.

[Interviewer] Yeah, ok that makes sense. Um, do you think that all kind of young people around Merseyside around your age, do you think they all have a similar experience to you, or do you think it's kind of different?

[Respondent] No, I feel like they all do you know, I think even anxiety about going out things like you feel like it's more common here whereas it wouldn't be in a more safe environment. I feel like people are worried to go out, worried to go out on their own. Women, not even women - men. No one can like go out at night in case anything happens to them.

'Snitch' and 'grass' culture appear strongly related to a normalisation of violence, further tying into a sense of hopelessness that anything can change. Fear of escalation adds another boundary between young people and support services, encouraging the cycle of violence to continue in the present but also in the long term. If both perpetrators and victims try to deal with an issue on their own, the fear will become internalised. Whether young people decide to talk to someone or not, they are in a bind, as each choice has its own potential negative ramifications.

[Interviewer] Why do you think it is like more here in Merseyside than other places in the country? Do you do you think there's any reason why?

[Respondent] I'm not sure. I don't whether it's just like how we've always been I just think it's like people feel the need to protect themselves more, so they do more harmful things to protect themselves. I think there's also like a background of gangs, even like before me and you were born. Do you know what I mean?

Part of the reason for 'snitch' culture may be how it is reinforced generationally. Young people might hear historic cases of violence from relatives, or recent incidents which impact their sense of safety. Knowing that the issue has always existed, changing over time, and seeing fear even in adults will instil a sense of uncertainty in young people that they will be protected and lead to an acceptance of this culture.

[Interviewer] Yeah. Can I - why do you think some people don't tell anyone at all?

[Respondent] I think some people don't tell anyone because they don't like trouble from the person that's doing it. They don't want to like to face the consequences. For example, people hating them, telling them that they're not going to get any mates and anything that they're weird for snitching. People just say oh you're a snitch, that's why you're telling your mom. So, they'll keep it to themselves to prove a point that they're not a snitch.

[Interviewer] Is being a snitch quite a big thing that you've heard in Merseyside?

[Respondent] Yeah, many people always say don't be a snitch, don't be a rat. But it doesn't really matter because if you keep it - if you be a snitch, then things can be like solved. It's not it doesn't need to be called being a snitch, it can be like be you're being honest to people, not it's not it's not called being a snitch.

- The respondent here was not born in Merseyside but had moved recently. Their confusion over the negative connotations of reporting a crime implies that 'snitch' and 'grass' culture is not as common elsewhere, and has become an embedded feature of language and behaviour in Merseyside.

- It is imperative that the stigma around language is broken to tackle young people's perspectives around betrayal and respect. Young people should feel respected enough to not have to earn it through violence, which begs the question as to why so much weight is given to being a 'snitch.'

- If risk factors are allowed to prevail unfettered, it will facilitate a negative perception of what a community is and is for.

Drink and Drug Use

[Respondent] Obviously there's fights in schools, and then there's like drug dealing and there's loads that goes on in secondary school.

[Interviewer] Would you be able to go into any more detail on kind of some of the things that have happened, or you've seen?

[Respondent] Yeah, I won't give any names, like I just know that people - I know that there's people who sell drugs before school. I know that there's people who sell things in school. I know those people who've done things in school and obviously been expelled for them. Cos they were so bad. I know there's people who hang around with gang people and they put themselves a lot of risk doing so, especially when they go to like - I go to parties, but I don't go to the types of parties they go to, where they do loads of drugs, get really drunk, see boys and stuff like that. I go to an all-girls school.

[Interviewer] Ok, would you say drugs are kind of common then at your age?

[Respondent] It's very common. Yeah, like more common than anyone realizes.

[Interviewer] Right and where do they kind of where are they more common? Would you say?

[Respondent] What do you mean? Like in school, in people's homes?

[Interviewer] Yeah, like where whereabouts do you see people doing drugs or dealing drugs?

[Respondent] A lot of parties, like loads of parties which are like called gaffs, everyone goes to these places and there'll be loads of drugs and stuff like that. I know people do drugs and drink in school and somehow they don't get caught. But it's mostly at parties.

[Interviewer] Do you think that adults and teachers are aware of this happening or not?

[Respondent] I don't think they're stupid, I don't think - I just think they know, but obviously they can't go questioning everyone because they've got really nothing to base it on unless you hear anything.

[Interviewer] Yeah. So, would you ever like report that or not?

[Respondent] No, because that's the same thing the same type of people that goes to the parties are the people who you get called a grass or something would happen to you.

[Interviewer] Yeah.

(Respondent) They would just he find out somehow.

[Interviewer] What do you think being labelled as a grass can mean like what would happen then?

[Respondent] It's like, obviously if it's dangerous and it's putting people at risk you've got to report it, but then if you're not reporting it, then you won't get all these bad things done to you. Like I know people who maybe called the police because they felt unsafe at a party, and then once they've got found out to be calling the police, they've had people follow them and stuff, and trying to hurt them trying to come into their house. It was just it was a big mad thing.

[Interviewer] So, would you say like it's safer for you just not to report it.

[Respondent] It's easier yeah.

Adding to this culture is drink and drugs, and the reasons why young people use must be addressed. Rather than cornering a young person about the issue, if a professional feels that they lack evidence of alcohol and drug use, it may be best to employ a trauma informed approach. There is no use in targeting a young person, to make them feel that what they are doing is wrong, if there is still time for intervention before things go too far. Rather than punish, we should advocate for young people and look into the root of the issue. With gangs and grooming, for example, the use of drugs to numb emotions, or the concept owing someone a favour, can heavily influence a young person's behaviour.

[Interviewer] Can I ask what types of violence you think may be the most common in Merseyside?

[Respondent] I'd say probably things to do with like drug abuse.

[Interviewer] Can I ask why you think that?

[Respondent] Walking down the street with my friends sometimes there's like - you can always smell weed coming from somewhere.

What may appear commonplace in Merseyside, whether that be language or drug use, reflects wider issues young people are contending with.

Social isolation, fear and peer pressure, the inaccessibility of support services, and economic deprivation are factors that all interact with one another to cultivate a culture with its own rules and expectations, and where any young person can be at risk. The facets of this culture are not the only thing that need to be tackled, but the wider social issues that nurture them.

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Hope and Hopelessness

When discussing hope and hopelessness, the young people interviewed and surveyed felt differently about their own future and the future of youth violence. Without hope in a young person's life, there is space instead for listlessness and boredom, as well as a rise in apathy.

As mentioned in previous sections of this report, making every contact count not only ensures young people are more likely to receive quality support, but it also influences young people's outlook on their safety and security. It is this hopelessness that violence will not be dealt with which feeds into the normalisation of it in young people's lives.

[Respondent] Um I also know people that have been stabbed twice in one week who reported to the police and the police haven't been bothered at all. I feel like they're quite um stereotypical. I think they judge people straight away.

[Interviewer] What do you mean by that?

[Respondent] I mean if I was from Woolton and I got stabbed twice, it'd be a really huge problem compared to if I was from Croxteth and I got stabbed twice. And I was a kid that you know yeah.

[Interviewer] Why do you think that?

[Respondent] Well like I said about the profiling from especially the Matrix van… cos they might suspect gang violence when it comes to knives and guns. So usually, they they'll see maybe an area with high gang violence, and they'll think they're scum of the earth, and they won't bat an eyelid. And compared to if it was a kid in Woolton that got mugged and stabbed they - I reckon I do feel like they would put their best-efforts in.

As a result of their background or identity, here it is class-related, young people may begin to see that others are treated with more worth and respect than they are. Comparing themselves to others or knowing that they will not be helped to grow from a mistake, can become demoralising. Being involved in violence as a young person is never deserved, whether a victim or a perpetrator, and when professional's behaviour demonstrates they believe this is not the case, they are cherry-picking which young people have rights.

[Respondent] In school there was people like that ignorant because like I told one of the teachers that I had epilepsy to put down in the medical notes. That like somehow got out to school, don't know why… School bullies like aimed full bottles of water at my head and heavy things cause seizures, which I don't know why you'd want to try and kill me or something, but I had many stages of that through school which was dangerous for me.

[Interviewer] Ok, was there anything done about it in school?

[Respondent] The teachers just pulled them to the side and tell them off and told them to stay away from me, but they just don't listen. It's like it goes through them.

[Interviewer] Okay, so yeah this is a probably an obvious question but how do you think it could have been avoided?

[Respondent] Don't think there could have been any way to avoid it because like I'd stay away from them, they come and find me. See if it didn't happen in school, it would happen on the bus on the way home, it's not really avoidable.

Hopelessness can stem from negative experiences with support services, damaging young people's trust in others' ability to help them in the future. If they cannot be supported, the assumption becomes that things cannot change. As a result of this hopelessness, they may choose to deal with the problem on their own, to avoid it not being dealt with effectively or at all by professionals.

[Respondent] It was basically my school offered to give me a referral to CAHMS basically and it was at the time that I was having all those sorts of issues, so I didn't [accept the referral] because I didn't feel like I was listened to or supported by the school - I was too scared to get any help from anyone else basically cos I thought I'd just have the same experience of not being listened to and then the problem is just aggravating.

Apathy towards services can come from a fear of traumatisation after having to tell the same story over again to a different person. If there is no one trusted adult a young person can rely on, or if every contact is not made to count, young people may take things into their own hands.

[Respondent] Um cos I know loads of people who carry knives around with them. It's very um…I don't know I just don't feel safe.

[Interviewer] Why do you think they carry knives around with them?

[Respondent] Because they're with gangs and they feel like they are protecting themselves.

[Interviewer] So they protect themselves by carrying knives?

[Respondent] Yeah, but it just puts more other people at danger.

Hopelessness can become a counterproductive force, as young people either see the issue of youth violence as so large, or the issue as not being dealt with sufficiently, that they may become contributors to the issue themselves. A feeling of vulnerability suggests a need and a desire to survive, rather than live their lives fully as young people, trusting of adults around them and unafraid. The significance of a trusted adult and a safe space in a young person's life is key in ameliorating fear.

[Interviewer] Ok, so where were your kind of safe places to go to as a child, if you needed someone to speak to or if you needed somewhere to go where would you go?

[Respondent] Um I believe me nan's house. I think that was me main safe space to be honest.

[Interviewer] What kind of made you feel safe there?

[Respondent] I feel like it was more like the reasons that I would come to my nan's house were like I knew them very well and there were no strangers in the home. It was like, she was very I don't know how to explain me nan, she was very like she wasn't scared of anything, so if anything ever happened I knew that she'd like protect us all.

Knowing that no matter what, someone will be there for you, can help young people move away from the need to survive in the present moment, their hopelessness having potentially detrimental outcomes for theirs or other's futures.

Without protective measures throughout young people's lives, factors contributing to them becoming involved in youth violence and also becoming victims of youth violence begin to spiral more and more out of their control. If protective measures are not put into place, 'one thing can lead to another' and life becomes a **'black hole that just kind of sucks you in.'** Article 6 of the UNCRC states that 'every child has the right to life,' meaning they must be supported to their full potential.[37] That young people feel ignored, dismissed, lost, and unprotected suggests this is Article is not being promoted by key organisations and individuals who are meant to protect them and encourage their growth.

A feeling of vulnerability suggests a need and a desire to survive, rather than live their lives fully as young people, trusting of adults around them and unafraid.

[37]'A Summary Of The UN Convention On The Rights Of The Child,' UNICEF, <UN Convention on the Rights of the Child - UNICEF UK> [accessed 26th February 2023].

'I don't think anyone carrying knives thinks they have a future.'

[Respondent] I live big on hope and optimism, like I always know at the end of the day tomorrow might be a better day and I feel like if people see that in the community and know that there are places for your kids to go. Like I used to go to after school clubs and youth clubs and all sorts and I knew that my community was safer because I had people around me.

If a young person's environment respects them, they will respect it. The co-existence and co-production that can happen within a community that works together can stimulate an atmosphere of change for the better, rather than despondency towards a situation they may be struggling with. If a community is encouraged to community organise, for example, and is given the correct resources to do this, there will be a space for young people to become well-rounded individuals, surrounded by positive role models and reminded that they have power and control over their own lives and futures.

[Respondent] I don't have a job, and I do have a girlfriend and I've got a family and I have so much better respect for the people around me and my city… I love history, and I love to learn about the history, and like behind meanings, and like just the meaning of everything really. So, I am on my little path, and I think being where I am from like I do sometimes dream like imagine if I did wake up one day and I lived a completely different way, in a completely different country. I think my life would be completely different and I don't think I would want that. I think I would want the life I've got because even though people do assume that like Liverpool itself is not a nice place, it is amazing place and I as much as I did struggle growing up, I think I still had a good life and I still I'm having a good life if that.

A sense of place is clearly highlighted here, created by the people this young person has around them and the ability they've had to overcome difficulties as a result. Knowing that there is a meaning to life, and their life in particular, is indicative of what Article 6 represents. Knowing that they have a future worth living for, that there is reason to have ambition, is all that is needed to turn hopelessness into hope.

[Respondent] Cos I don't think I think just the young people in general, nowadays, they don't really have that ambition of the dream like I can remember learning about like Martin Luther King's dream of changing the world and that was just one person's voice, and I think more people can change that and that can change with the way young people view their life as well. Like, I have a younger sister, she's 16 and she is incredible, like she's got the whole world at her hand, she can do so much with it, with a life, and I think she knows that. But at the same time, she still wants to look like the girls on Instagram and she's still wants to be glamorous and buy all the nice clothes. But I think that is very materialistic and a lot of the time people need to see sometimes the bigger picture and like see at the end goal like in 50 years. Where are you gonna be - still gonna be working in the same corner shop or speaking to the same people? And it's the same thing with following trends.

When we encourage young people to be themselves and provide them with the resources to do what they enjoy, we are adhering to Article 31, the right to leisure, play and culture,[38] which is equally as important as the rights to life, safety, and protection from forms of abuse. Having opportunities to explore hobbies and interests with a trusted adult can build resilience from an early age, so that if things go wrong a young person will have a strong sense of self and trust in others which they can rely on to move forwards. Self-worth and self-achievement are key in influencing a young person's outlook on life.
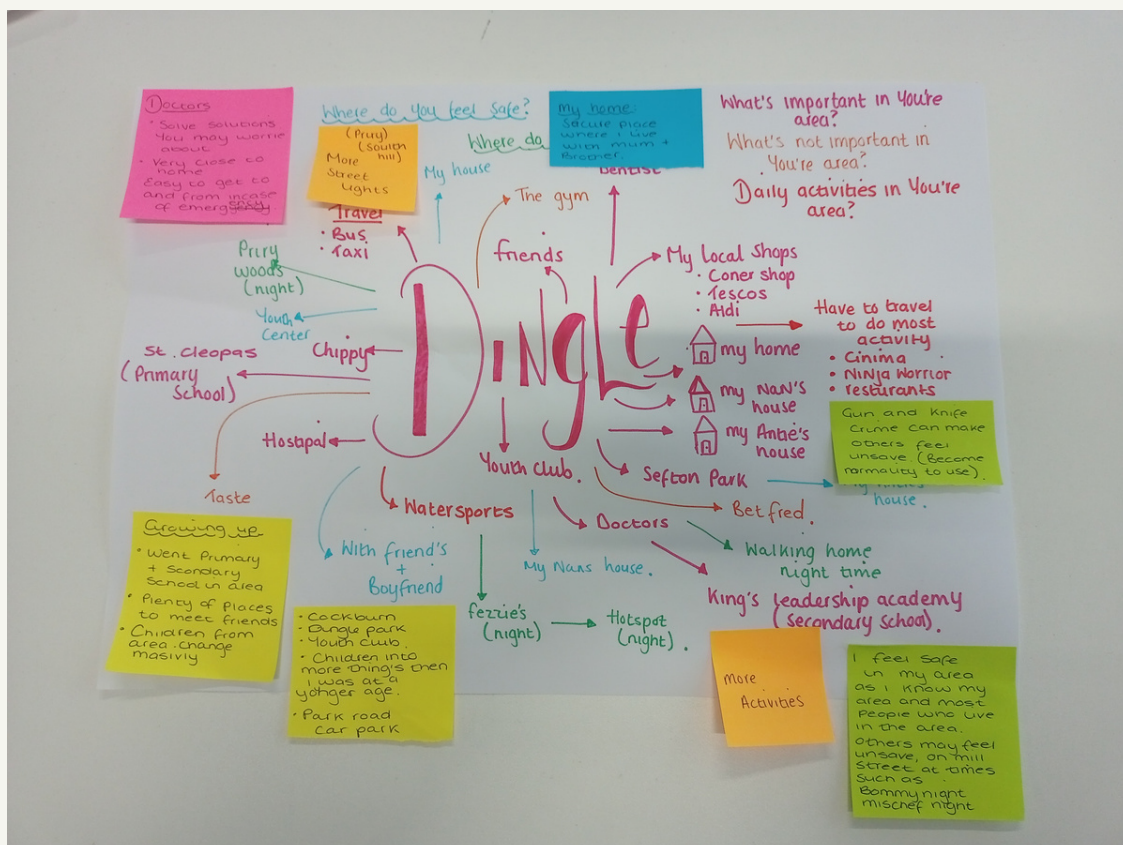
Safety Map created by a young person in a focus group in Liverpool

[38]'A Summary Of The UN Convention On The Rights Of The Child,' UNICEF, <UN Convention on the Rights of the Child - UNICEF UK> [accessed 28th February 2023].

FINDINGS
ANALYSIS

Solutions

Violent behaviour can be destructive to both individuals and communities. Prevention is essential to ensuring violence does not become commonplace, and as much as possible we need to be proactive rather than reactive. Young people we spoke to had many suggestions of what can be done to mitigate the consequences of violence right now, however they also recognised the structural changes that need to be made politically, socially and economically to ensure long-term change.

[Respondent] Erm, say if say if something happens um what my teacher will do, so she'll basically -we used to do detentions, but now we do reflections. Say if they do something that they shouldn't have done, she keeps them in and then she makes them like this worksheet and it's like it's like why they've done it. And then she like sort of like calms them down in a way and she's like really nice to them. And in Year Four they used to get called out and they used to go with this teacher into our old sensory room, and they used to like talk about everything, but they used to like play with um like toys. They always used to play with like sand in like this little box. It really used to calm them.

[Interviewer] So, I'm really interested in what you said when you said they used to do detention, but now they do reflections. Because obviously detention sounds a bit more yeah negative, and reflection sounds like positive. Isn't it?

[Respondent] So basically, we used to have this thing called a board and if you'd done something bad you wrote your name on it. But then if you've done it two more, say if you've done something bad two more times then you get a tick, and then if you done something bad again, you get another tick, then you get in a detention. But that wasn't really helping, so she like when we came into Year Five, she changed it into reflections, and you got like a warning instead of like getting your name on the board.

Using a trauma informed approach as an exploration into why a young person has acted can be a thoughtful way to teach empathy and healthily acknowledge emotions. Switching the narrative solely from punishment and reward to a response of understanding and empathy can encourage self-realisation and de-escalation rather than retaliation. It is crucial that our practice with young people does not fuel future disengagement from them feeling shamed or embarrassed.

[Respondent] Um it'd probably be speaking to um all young people um and like from a young age. Obviously, it's the way in which you deal with it from a young age. So, whether that's just in primary school approaching a lot… a bit more of a sensitive way. Or maybe like explaining that certain ways that like young men might speak about women… I know it's a lot more than that um or just like little things of like from a young age like maybe young men knowing that there's other ways to deal with their issues rather than you know fighting or whatever. Or like the fact that um there's always people to speak to in education on like the sort of places to go, um I think if that was to be continued um maybe having people like from outside the schools coming in to speak about stuff. And I think if that's continued throughout someone's school life, so it's not just something like one assembly and then that's that, but rather like maybe a yearly thing, like it's continued.

By promoting healthy relationships early on, as well as celebrating diversity and focusing on wellbeing, we are in turn promoting the rights of young people. Respecting the rights of young people continuously, not just periodically, will give them strong foundations from which to grow and give them the resilience to bounce back when older. Unfortunately, not all young people will be treated equally when growing up, as seen throughout this report. For whatever reason a young person is at risk of or is involved in youth violence, it is never too late to intervene and highlight the reality of fear and loss.

[Respondent] Someone came in [to school] and he was a doctor, um I think he's been on the news and stuff at times. He was a doctor, um I think it might be in the Royal, and he spoke about, and he showed pictures of like, like quite explicit pictures like of knife crime and just like talks like that. I can't remember what the man was called but he was involved in - not involved in - he like responded to you know Sam Cook, the one in the nightclub. He like responded to him and he had to tell Sam's parents like that unfortunately he had died. And it was really like, I imagine that if young people who were involved in knife crime, it would have had a great impact on them. Cos, he showed like how it impacts the families, he showed like how, you know, like even if you carry a knife like the chances of you um like of anything happening to you from your own life.

- Learning about the consequences of youth violence can be a great deterrent for those who have been desensitised to it.

- Young people seemed enthusiastic about hearing from people with lived experiences, arguing that this would be accurate and authentic.

- Another solution was to have a form of social roleplay within schools to really prepare our young people for situations that may one day occur.

- Having theory-based education may work with some young people, but a more 'hands on' practical approach can be just as useful an educational resource.

[Respondent] Um I guess if children were more educated on how things like that could affect someone, and could hurt their feelings, and could really, I don't know just really upset them, then I guess that could have been avoided.

[Interviewer] Do you know how they could be educated to be more informed on the effects?

[Respondent] I wouldn't say like assemblies or anything because it's just people talking at you and you're not really participating. I think something getting children more involved and interacting with the situation like asking how certain things would make them feel if it happened to them could really help them understand personally how it could affect people when they say it.

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Apathy normalises youth violence therefore making it seem inevitable, while empathy can ground and remind individuals of their commonality with others. In this sense, education is not enough alone. Young people need to have positive role models to take influence from, along with a positive understanding of what a community is. They deserve a space to feel cared for and listened to, but as previously mentioned there is an alarming decrease in places for young people to go for recreational activities.

[Respondent] Maybe putting more like - if the government put more funding into like community centres and like general kind of hangout areas for youth to just create a bit more community cohesion, in a sense. Just to stop like - just like the anti-social kind of behaviours, like exclusion from happening, and just build a greater sense of trust in the community, and just help people in general.

[Interviewer] That's fantastic. Can I ask, you know, you said about community cohesion and that there's been my anti-social behaviour: can I ask is there anywhere specific that anti-specific - sorry, anti-social behaviour you've seen or experienced?

[Respondent] Um I've seen like a lot of people at school especially being excluded from activities or friend groups. Or just from like school in general, from being like shunned basically, by their peers and I've seen just how… people can be affected by it, and how bad their mental health has gotten due to it, and I just feel like - like a greater sense of just community cohesion would just - just like more inclusion, would just be good.

The power of community cohesion should never be overlooked, when a community of people feel heard and understood great things can come from this. For example, when speaking to young people about their opinions on the police we had some responses about how they would feel happier to call the police in times of need if there was a closer police bond with the community.

[Interviewer] So the final question is if you could change one thing to reduce youth violence what was it be?

[Respondent] Um, I think the one thing I would do is bring back all of the youth centres because I see so many places that have been shut down and like people don't use them in parts certain parts of the community anymore and I think that they are a big thing. Like I used to volunteer in the youth club but it's for like people with disabilities and mental health and being there and working there and being part of like a group… and speaking to them, like it made such an impact on my life. And I feel like by having more places where young people can go and older people within the community can definitely make a change.

[Interviewer] They're like bringing people together?

[Respondent] Definitely, yeah. Like I think but obviously like back in the day, there would have been loads, but there's obviously not that many people nowadays that may take certain roles to to do it. But like one of my big dreams would definitely be to open a certain type of youth centre just open to all people to do numerous different types of things.

Not only do youth centres keep our young people off the streets, but they also provide a sense of purpose. In terms of tackling hopelessness, funding community centres and ensuring that they are advertised adequately can provide a safe space where divisions can be tackled respectfully. These centres can be productive spaces in many ways, whether that be to provide mental health support, educational and vocational support, volunteering opportunities or community organising. There is possibility here, and that is what many young people feel they are lacking. Either feeling stifled by their environment, the education system or professionals, young people need a space to explore who they are, what they believe and what they enjoy. This is a way to show young people that we as a society care about them and respect them.
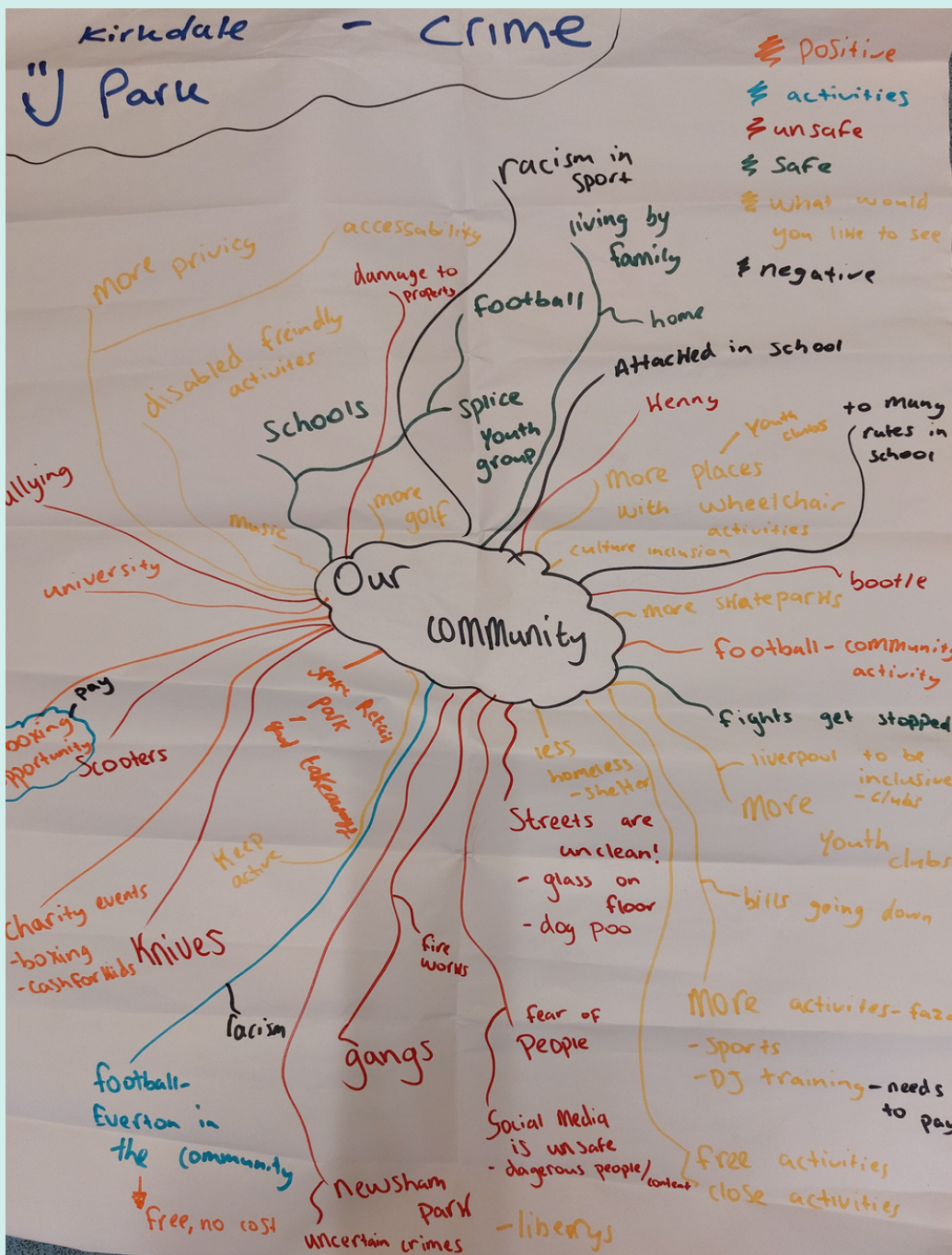
Safety Map created by young people in a focus group in Liverpool

ACTION

The #iwill Movement define high quality youth social action by six principles. Action should be:

1. Reflective – Recognising contributions as well as valuing critical reflection and learning.

2. Challenging – Stretching and ambitious as well as enjoyable and enabling.

3. Youth-led – Led, owned, and shaped by young people's needs, ideas and decision making.

4. Socially impactful – Have a clear intended benefit to a community, cause, or social problem.

5. Progressive – Sustained and providing links to the other activities and opportunities.

6. Embedded – Accessible to all, and well-integrated to existing pathways to become a habit for life. [39]

PAC Members at the YPAS Full Staff Conference in 2022

PAC Members after recording an episode of the Comics Youth Safe Spaces Podcast

[39] Youth Social Action, <Youth social action - iwill> [accessed 16th April 2023].

ACTION

Working in conjunction with the MVRP, Merseyside PAC contributed to their three-year strategic plan, sharing research findings and influencing the strategy to reduce violence perpetrated and experienced by young people across the area. This was the first-time young people had been involved in creating the plan, setting a positive example for youth involvement in decision-making that affects young people.

Merseyside PAC Changemakers also launched several awareness campaigns. They created a podcast 'The PAC-Cast' to discuss the research and youth violence and give young people a platform in order to combat the hopelessness felt by many participants in relation to influencing change in the local community. They also worked with the Hope Collective and the Museum of Liverpool to host a popup event around making a change which featured a hope tree and encouraged participants to write to their MPs about issues in their local community, giving young people in the area a platform to be heard. Merseyside PAC hosted a series of sessions with Year 6 pupils to explore their thoughts on youth violence and supporting them to articulate these thoughts clearly. These were recorded during the final session and turned into a multi-functional soundbite to be shared to highlight young people's views.

YPAS ran a wellbeing stall which showcased the PAC research and social action at the Now Festival where the theme was mental health and violence. Merseyside Peer Researchers also spoke at a Co-op fringe event during the Labour Conference in Liverpool.

Merseyside PAC also responded to the prevalence of mistrust of police in the research by breaking down barriers and including police as part of the Changemaker's training schedule, involving police officers in the group activities. This helped to help create a less intimidating environment for engagement which allowed for a productive pizza and Q&A session going both ways between police and young people, aiming to address negative perceptions of each party from both sides and promote a better relationship between the two groups to ensure greater community safety. [40]

PAC Merseyside Members at the SEND Conference in Liverpool with Councillor Tomas Logan

[40] Luise Watson, Leading Research, Driving Change: Youth insights and solutions from the Peer Action Collective, LeadingResearch_PAC-Report.pdf (peeractioncollective.com), p.39-40.

COMMENTARY
& REFLECTION ON PEER RESEARCH

The team were asked to contribute to a series of questions regarding their time as Peer Researchers, including what they have learned, advice they would give and how they would change the process.

'What advice would you give to someone becoming a Peer Researcher?'

We discussed the importance of being prepared for change and adapting at short notice. Due to the fast paced and multifaceted nature of the role, we all agreed that this was an aspect we found challenging, and that new Peer Researchers should be prepared to learn. We also spoke about how prospective Peer Researchers should ensure they have the time to complete the requirements of the role, especially if they have other commitments.

As a result of this, it was also highlighted that new Peer Researchers should try to ask for help and support as soon as possible, when it is needed. 'Imposter syndrome' was a common theme that was experienced by most Peer Researchers at the beginning of the project and has been a challenging obstacle to overcome for many. We discussed examples of when we had waited to ask for support with a part of the role we found challenging, and how this made it more difficult to fix any problems that occurred. Whilst it may seem daunting to ask for help in a work environment, especially because for many of us it was our first experience of employment, we agreed that it was vital that new Peer Researchers feel comfortable and confident in reaching out for support due to the many different skills and experiences that they will be exposed to, and also that it is important to learn that mistakes are okay.

In addition to this, another piece of advice that would be given to new Peer Researchers would be to 'come in with an open mind'. This would allow Peer Researchers the space and opportunity to grow personally and professionally, which we have all achieved during our time working on PAC.

Not only does an open mind relate to learning new skills, meeting new people, and trying different things such as public speaking, social action, and research, but it also means that Peer Researchers can widen their understanding of young people's views and experiences. New Peer Researchers should expect to hear a diverse range of views and opinions and be open to this.

'What are some of the key things that you have learned during PAC?'

The responses to this question generally fell into two main categories: personal and professional. Starting with personal development, one Peer Researcher explained how they initially felt anxious about challenging others, however throughout the course of the project, they had gained the confidence and skills to be able to do this respectfully. They stated that they felt the ability to challenge, and the ability to constructively feedback, was vital in the success of a project.

Another personal development shared from one of the Peer Researchers was their ability to perform under pressure and despite feelings of anxiety - "I can do things even if they make me anxious and I can do them well." An important learning shared following this was the significance of ensuring a healthy balance between work and personal life, not taking on too much responsibility and having the ability and trust in others when needing to focus on themselves. This is especially relevant due to the nature of the role of a Peer Researcher, considering some of the heavy topics that are covered, experiences that are heard and pressure of deadlines.

Professionally, responses focused on the training opportunities offered, for example being trauma informed, child's rights training, social action training, and also workplace related skills such as organisation, technological skills and interview skills.

'If you had the power to do the project all over again, what would you change?'

One of the main responses surrounded the duration of the project, with Peer Researchers stating they believe the project should have lasted longer. Due to the limited time to complete research, some felt they were unable to fully maximise the potential of the project and how sometimes, due to the many different factors and circumstances, we were limited in what we could achieve. A major consequence of this was that, because of the short time for research, we were often unable to build relationships with young people, which would have been especially helpful for those who struggle with trust and anxiety, and therefore we may have missed their full views and opinions.

The similar age between Peer Researchers and participants was helpful in reducing some of these barriers, however it was not sufficient on its own and more time would be necessary to ensure that young people who need more time to engage can fully do so, so that as many voices as possible are heard. We recognised that we would have started thinking about social action and recruiting young people sooner and changed the timeline of the project if we were allowed that flexibility, so that it didn't feel rushed, and to ensure we could make as much of an impact as possible.

'Has PAC changed the way you think about/see things in any way?'

Overwhelmingly, the consensus was that our mindsets and the way we think has changed as a result of PAC. We were given unique insights into insights into youth violence from professionals within the region who work directly with perpetrators and victims. This was bolstered by our own engagement with young people from different backgrounds and upbringings, as well as the work we completed looking at existing research projects. We ultimately developed an understanding and awareness that is much greater than when we started our roles. A few of the responses were as follows:

"Yes! I think a lot about what people's upbringings have been like and I think a lot more about how I respond to the people I meet in everyday life."

"I have learned a lot of different opinions and I feel more insightful."

"I feel more aware of people's cultures when taking part in tasks or events."

"It has been eye-opening to see the norm for other people in the area."

As evidenced with the quotations above, Peer Researchers have developed an understanding and appreciation for other young people's experiences and differences throughout their time working on PAC, and we hope that this can continue in future versions of the project.

Overall, upon reflecting on the research and project as a whole in a group setting, we have discovered that despite the limitations that we faced as a result of time constraints, the challenging and developing nature of our roles, and personal circumstances, Peer Researchers have predominantly had the opportunity to develop significantly, both personally and professionally, expressing a sense of achievement and growth as a result of the project and research. These findings give immense hope that any future generation of PAC, if implemented with the necessary fundamental changes, can provide an environment where young people can thrive and flourish in their roles to an even greater extent, whilst making a more significant and longer-lasting impact upon their communities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For Tackling Discrimination

- Professionals to feel confident in challenging microaggressions, in recognising unconscious bias and discriminatory behaviour.

- Continuing the conversation around violence against women and girls to evaluate how much progress has been made and is yet to be made in relation to the local strategies referenced from Merseyside Police, the Police and Crime Commissioner and the Mayor of Liverpool. The voice of women and girls must be considered throughout by consultation and evaluation.

- Educational spaces to promote diversity from an early age in a curriculum that celebrates difference and promotes a culture of inclusion. This should be alongside education around consent, respecting boundaries, and healthy relationships with friends, parents/carers and partners. We encourage a curriculum that challenges social norms and stereotypes, and that promotes respect for the self and others.

- Professionals working with young people should be aware of current influential public figures and the content young people may be engaging with to recognise signs of radicalisation.

- Security and precautionary measures should be made available in places where young people frequent to shift a culture of victim blaming.
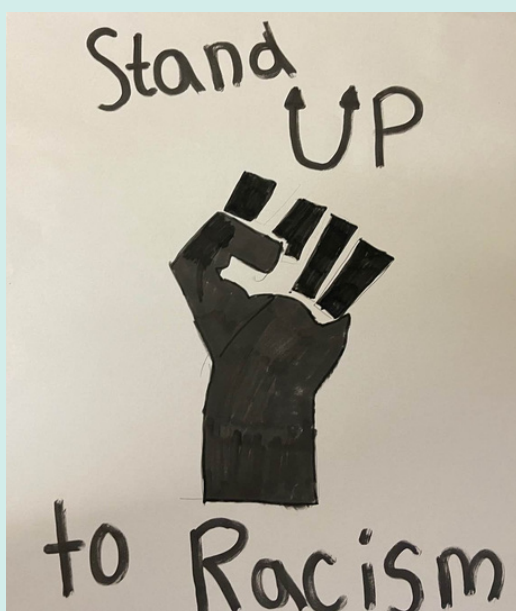
Artwork by a young person created in a focus group in Speke


Merseyside PAC Members attending Liverpool Pride 2022

RECOMMENDATIONS

For Reducing Fear and Apathy

- All young people should feel that they have a safe space and a trusted adult who they can turn to. This can be achieved when all organisations and services working with young people understand, recognise, and adhere to the UNCRC.

- When following the UNCRC, the voices and visions of young people should be included in decisions that affect them. Opportunities for participation and open dialogue encourage hope rather than apathy and fear.

- Adopting a trauma informed approach should become a standard for all professionals who work with young people, reducing judgement in their practice and instead tackling the reasons behind why young people use drugs, for example. Rather than punish, the aim should be to look at the root of whatever issue a young person is experiencing.
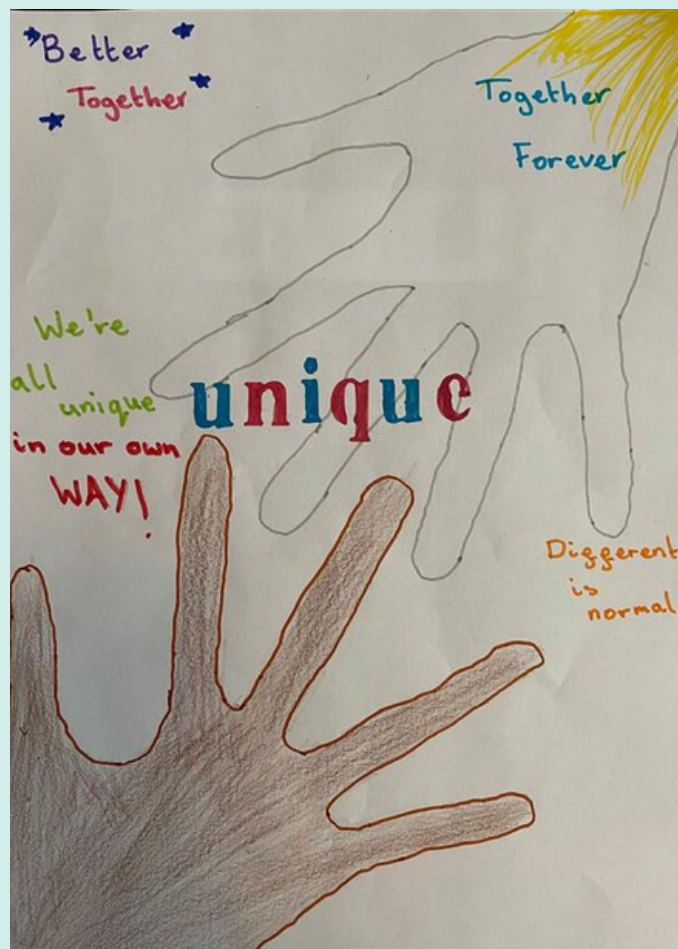
Artwork created by a young person during the Pilot Project in 2021

Merseyside PAC Members taking part in a panel at the 2022 Labour Party Conference

- Organisations and services outside of the NHS to adopt the commitment to 'Make Every Contact Count.' Taking this approach can build resilience and self-worth.

- Organisations working with young people to develop a culture of parity of esteem surrounding mental health support with the aim of reducing stigma around it.

- Support for parents and carers in contextualising sensationalized media young people may be accessing, to help mitigate hypervigilance and fear.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For Achieving a Sense of Place, Resilience and Hope

- A range of financially accessible diversionary activities should be made available for young people. Opportunities such as boxing, cycling groups, and community action groups offer spaces where young people can be young people.

- Young people should be aware of what services are available to them, otherwise the service becomes redundant. Inter-agency collaboration is strongly encouraged to achieve this.

- Youth services and provisions should be sustainably funded to offer a consistent and quality presence.

- Educational spaces to provide pathway support for older young people, tailored to their needs and interests. Focus on this is encouraged to help young people feel confident that they achieve secure economic opportunities.

- Community co-production should be encouraged and engaged with by organisations to empower individuals and build trust with those services who there may be some apathy towards.

- A whole family approach to wellbeing to become standard in practice, aiming to challenge any rhetoric that is passed on generationally and to mitigate the likelihood of childhood trauma. This will contribute to breaking down barriers between young people, especially in the context of postcode wars.

PAC Members visiting the Houses of Parliament in 2023

PAC Members hosting a stall at an event in Birkenhead