



# Hidden in Plain Sight

## Gangs and Exploitation

A youth work response to COVID-19

May 2020

This report builds on the insights from NYA's 'Out of Sight?' research (April 2020) on the vulnerabilities of young people caused or exacerbated by COVID-19. Here, we take a deeper look at the scale of and response to gang-associated activity, the exploitation of young people through lockdown and the impact of COVID-19. Our report draws on the latest data and on valuable insights from partners based on their work with young people. We wish to acknowledge the work and detailed analysis of other reports produced in 2019–20, notably those of the Children's Society and the Office of the Children's Commissioner for England as well as parliamentary inquiries and commissions.

Our thanks in particular to Craig Pinkney and the NYA youth work experts group, some Violence Reduction Units, and for the continued support of the Children's Commissioner for England, the National Police Chiefs Council and a number of officials from DCMS, the Home Office and the Local Government Association.

We are grateful for the insights and time given to help compile this report by youth work practitioners and policing and service leaders from Bristol, Thames Valley, Stoke-on-Trent, Birmingham and London.

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# Foreword

'COVID-19 brought youth services in many areas to an abrupt halt, just at the time it was needed most. Headline data appears to show a fall in gang-associated activity and exploitation. However, as we highlight in this report, organised criminal gangs and street-gangs have been swift to adapt to the pandemic. Gangs are still very active locally, changing locations and grooming new recruits less visible to statutory services – hidden in plain sight. Without ready access to a youth worker we fear a surge in violence and exploitation post-lockdown.

The vital role of youth services, as a life line to young people from gang associated violence and exploitation, has been highlighted by recent cross-party reports and parliamentary inquiries. Each is united in their calls for substantial investment in youth services within a public health approach to support and incentivise youth work. As the insight of youth workers and experiences of young people included in this report make clear, youth workers are skilled at engaging young people who are often off the radar of the authorities: to engage, positively challenge, inspire and support the young person in a trusted relationship sustained over time.

We must act now; there is no time to waste. Youth work must be classified as an essential key service. Youth services need to be embedded in the guidance and strategies for Violence Reduction Units. Overall government must invest to rapidly increase the size of the youth work workforce over the next five years, sustained over the long term, underpinned by national standards and training for youth workers and to up-skill trusted adult volunteers.'



Leigh Middleton  
NYA, Chief Executive

'Local authority budgets are being increasingly consumed by statutory services, such as social care. By comparison youth work programmes are all too often fragmented and small-scale. There are some great examples of local provision to support young people at risk from exploitation and violence, ranging from specialist youth work at A&E hospitals at the point of crisis to community mentors providing early help to support those most at risk from school exclusions, for example. However such provision is patchy, the quality of interventions is inconsistent and it is often not effectively joined-up with other essential services in schools, social care, mental health and policing.

As many of us have been saying for some time there needs to be a cross-departmental government strategy to ensure those working with young people at risk are appropriately skilled in safeguarding and early help within a public health approach. This includes a 'youth service guarantee' for long term funding to secure trusted relationships, consistent over time, with young people vulnerable to and exploited by gangs.'

**Tim Loughton MP**  
**Home Affairs Select Committee**

'Lockdown removed many of the usual ways of identifying children at risk of being exploited by gangs. With the closure of schools and youth centres, thousands of vulnerable young people have simply gone off the radar. As rules are relaxed, there will be particular dangers for young people who are at risk of criminal exploitation, especially those not going back to school until the autumn. It will be vital that local agencies work together to reduce those risks and that youth workers are mobilised to identify early warning signs and help young people divert away from and exit gangs.'

**Anne Longfield**  
**Children's Commissioner for England**



'While we've seen a significant drop in serious youth violence incidents during lockdown, we have remained alert throughout the Covid-19 pandemic to the threats facing vulnerable young people at risk of criminal involvement and exploitation. The underlying causes of serious youth violence and child exploitation have not gone away and gang leaders are not sitting idly by waiting for lockdown to pass – they're adapting to target and exploit young people in new ways during a time when they are isolated from many of the services and groups there to protect them. That's why I welcome this new report, which provides timely and vital new insights into the risks facing young people in a society that has been fundamentally changed by Covid-19.

While a huge amount of good work is being done locally to embed a public health approach to protecting at-risk young people, ultimately this is a national crisis that needs a national response. I urge the Government to carefully consider this report, heed the calls from the front line and commit to a significant uplift in funding for the youth services and other community organisations that are essential to preventing more young people from becoming caught up in criminal exploitation as lockdown measures begin to lift.'

**Sophie Linden,**  
London Deputy Mayor

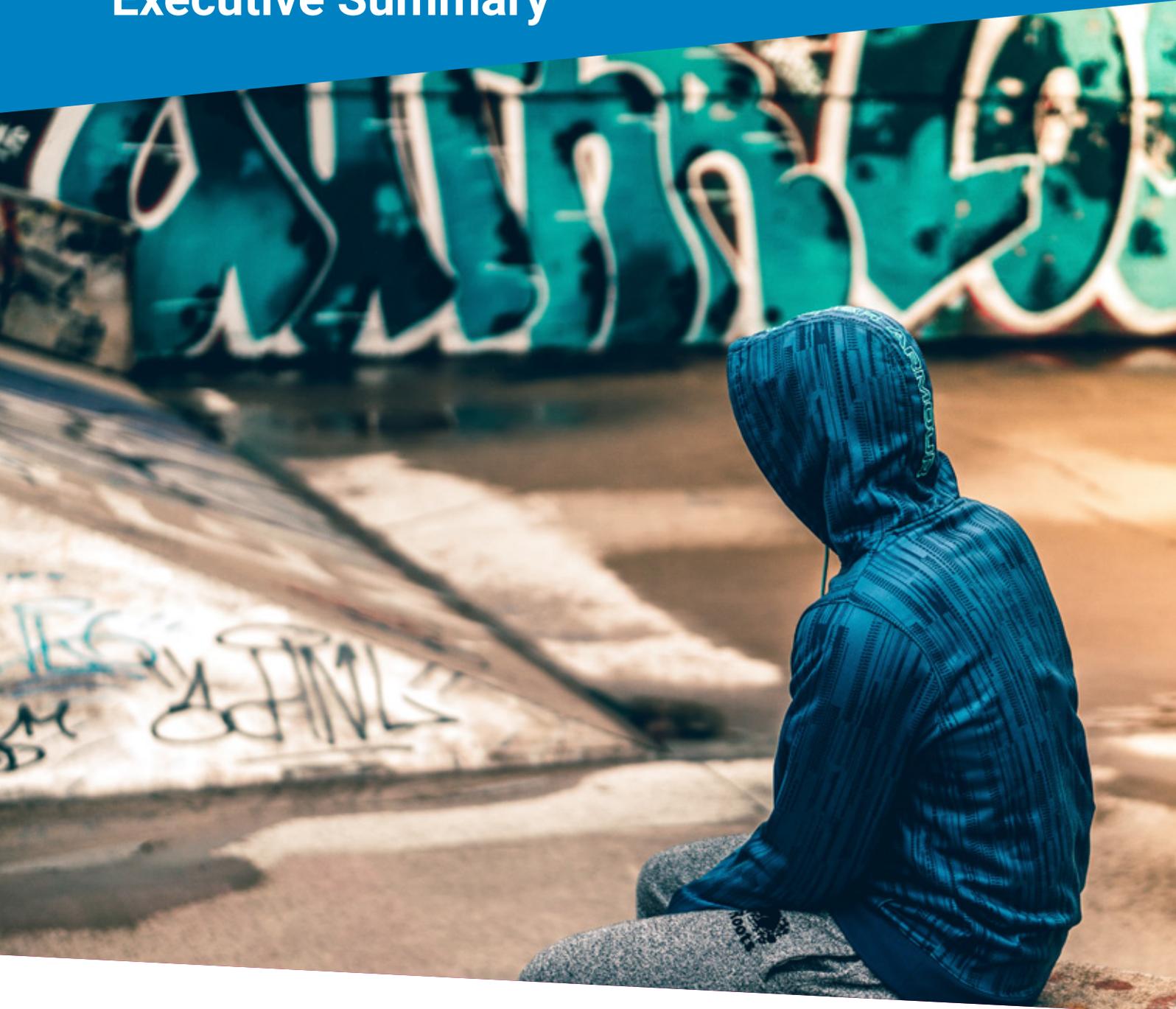
Policing is very keen to work closely with youth workers. They are often in a position to reach young people who are hidden to other services, and they play a vital part in engaging with them through building trust and confidence, in order to support them and assist with accessing the help they need at crucial moments in their lives. We want those young people who have been exposed to crimes or have been exploited, to have the trust and confidence in the police to talk to us whether directly or through third parties such as youth workers.'

**DCC Jo Shiner**  
National Police Chief's Council  
Lead for the policing of children and young people

This report highlights a vision of youth work practice which is shared by those who are concerned about the safety, security and wellbeing of young people during these uncertain times. There needs to be a fundamental shift in thinking to address the problems and conflicts associated with young people. This requires all of us to engage in new ways of hearing and listening to the concerns of young people and how we engage with them. It is therefore incumbent of policy makers, strategic bodies and youth work practitioners not to be passive observers, but to use this report as a call to action that acknowledges the power of youth work in the lives of young people who are most at risk of exploitation, street gangs or living in gang impacted environments.

**Craig Pinkney - Director - Solve: The Centre for Youth Violence and Conflict**

# Executive Summary



1. The national crisis in youth violence exposed the need for youth services after a decade of austerity. Those with an interest in the debate ranged from police chiefs, who want to see greater investment in youth services that support communities in response to violence and criminal exploitation, to the Children's Commissioner for England, who warned that county lines and gangs are fuelling the exploitation of thousands of looked-after children in care.
2. 'Gangs' is a broad term. It is important to recognise and not conflate, for example, 'street gangs' operating in a particular area that seek to cause harm to others from different area codes and 'organised crime gangs' involved in county lines. This also impacts on our understanding of recorded crimes as an indicator of gang-associated activities.
3. This report builds on research on the scale and prevalence of, and the vulnerabilities of young people to<sup>1</sup>, gang-associated activities and child criminal exploitation<sup>2</sup>. Taking a fresh look at official data through insights from youth work practitioners in local areas, we consider the issues, insights and trends through lockdown, how gangs have adapted and their patterns of behaviour. This is intended to respond immediate needs but also to help identify and support young people post-lockdown.

<sup>1</sup> NYA: Out of Sight? Vulnerable young people: COVID-19 response, April 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Children's Commissioner: Characteristics of gang-associated children and young people, 2019.

## Scale of needs

- 60,000 young people (aged 10–17) identify as a gang member or know a gang member who is a relative. This rises to over 300,000 when adding young people who know someone in a gang, and up to 500,000 when also including young people in groups exposed to 'risky behaviour' associated with gangs.
- With regard to those most at risk of gang-associated activities and exploitation, over one million young people come from a 'vulnerable family background', of which nearly 450,000 are unknown to formal or statutory services but are likely to be known by youth workers.
- The pandemic has amplified vulnerabilities and exposed more young people to gang-associated activities and exploitation. Over one million young people face risks from any of the so-called 'toxic trio' of living in households with addiction, poor mental health and domestic abuse. Moreover there are 83,000 young people living in temporary accommodation, while a further 380,000 are homeless or at risk of homelessness.
- While there is no consistent data on the number of young people experiencing or at risk of criminal exploitation, we know that looked-after children are especially vulnerable. Young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) and learning difficulties are also particularly vulnerable in some areas to gang-related activity or exploitation in cases of disruptive behaviour and non-compliance with lockdown or social distancing.
- With schools, colleges and youth centres closed, many young people are now in potentially unsafe environments. This adds to the 700,000 young people (aged 8–19) who are persistently absent from school or not in education, employment or training and will need sustained support post-lockdown.
- At the start of the lockdown, for example, drug dealers had to come more to the fore with young people unable to move around as much as before. There was a spike in arrests in some areas, but gangs have since adapted. Activity has been removed from the streets, thus becoming less visible, and, where some activity has 'paused', the gang members are simply storing up for a rapid return post-lockdown.
- Meanwhile, young people are still going missing from home, but some are not reported (due to parents not wanting to report breaking of lockdown/emergency measures) and others are going missing for shorter periods (there is a disruption to county lines, for example, with less access by public transport) but are still staying away from home while involved in gang activity. Young people who are known to be gang-associated are less visible, changing locations from the known hotspots to use empty B&Bs, hotels and show homes, and using hire cars or taxis, for example.
- There has been a switch to a new demographic for gang activity in public spaces, and those involved are less visible as their gang associations are largely 'unknown' by services (however, they are likely to be known by youth workers). This pattern will vary by area, but there is increased concern around the use of girls for gang activity as a phenomenon, as girls and young women find it easier to move around during lockdown while young men remain very visible.

## Emerging issues and trends

### Changes through lockdown

- This report considers street gangs in local areas and organised crime gangs linked with child criminal exploitation (ages 8–19).
- Headline statistics indicate a drop in gang activity and exploitation. They show a reduction in drug-related arrests as a proxy for gang activity, and a drop in children 'missing from home' and, therefore, a reduction in county lines as a form of child criminal exploitation. However, we have dug deeper, going beyond the headlines to establish that there has been a change in patterns of behaviour rather than necessarily an overall reduction. These patterns will vary by area and by region, but there is an emerging picture of gang activity throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Youth workers in some areas report that gangs are also using lockdown as cover for a 'recruitment drive' from among young people with vulnerabilities heightened through lockdown, including through the use of social media and cyber grooming. With venues closed and not much else to do, the 'glamour' of gang culture appeals directly to some young people – the money, the music and the sense of belonging, safety and security that their family homes don't fulfil.
- Gangs are active in grooming vulnerable young people outdoors in unsafe environments who have nowhere else to go. Many young people are still going out during lockdown when they are at risk from domestic abuse or strained family relationships at home or are simply bored, as they do not see going out as such a risk to their health.
- For other young people, lockdown has given them a reason to step back from gang activity, but in some cases, diversionary projects have stopped or the lack of a youth worker to talk to has restricted opportunities to exit gangs safely. However, in some areas, local gang activity and violence has continued or is being stoked up through social media, with fears of a surge in gang violence post-lockdown.

## A youth work response

17. The importance of youth services has been stressed by recent national reports and commissions on youth violence, gangs and exploitation. Youth workers are not seen as authority figures; thus, they are able to build trusting relationships with young people that are sustained over many months. This report highlights the role and nature of this work with young people who are part of or vulnerable to gangs and criminal exploitation.
18. Just at the time when they are needed the most, many youth work projects have stopped or become severely restricted due to COVID-19. There are fears that some services will not re-open post-lockdown unless youth work is recognised as an essential service and youth workers as key workers. During the lockdown, many charity youth workers have been furloughed, local authority youth workers have been redeployed and trusted adult volunteers are self-isolating.
19. When brought to an abrupt halt by the lockdown, some youth work moved online, but after initial contact many young people have been less willing to engage online, only have restricted access to technology/ devices/data, or have no safe space in which to talk confidentially or disclose sensitive information. The deployment of street-based, detached youth work is patchy, and door-step conversations lack confidentiality and are highly visible to other people nearby.
20. Where youth work has been sustained, it can be effectively deployed to engage with young people in new 'hotspot' areas of gang-associated activity, using local intelligence. For some young people self isolation has given a moment to step back - a pause - to consider an exit from gang activity, when also engaged with a youth worker. However, there are limited services and few/no opportunities that youth workers can currently help these young people to access, as most facilities are closed during lockdown.

## Recommendations

- a. Youth services are a vital lifeline for vulnerable young people. Youth work must be classified as an essential key service.
- b. NYA is calling for Home Office guidance for Violence Reduction Units to include youth services and for Police and Crime Commissioners to embed a youth work response for early help and prevention within public health approach strategies in local areas.
- c. There needs to be a cross-departmental Government strategy on child criminal exploitation, (CCE) backed up by changes to relevant statutory guidance and inclusive of youth services. This strategy must ensure that professionals working with young people are clear on the need for safeguarding and early help for those who are at risk or are criminally exploited, and for diversionary activities and youth work to support young people to exit gang activities.
- d. We support the call by the Home Affairs select committee and others for a Youth Service Guarantee. This approach requires significant investment in training, and up-skilling in response to COVID-19, on safeguarding, trauma and bereavement, and detached youth work.

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*"We are seeing more exploitation than before in modern times. For understandable reasons of austerity, state youth services have been vacated. This gap of youth provision between the school and family is the void that the exploiters are filling. Youth diversion services need to be hard wired in. Child criminal exploitation, it's all about family, creating feelings of security, self-worth and power. This gap between the school gate and the front door is where the exploiters are attractive to youngsters."*

**Shaun Sawyer, National police lead for modern slavery and human trafficking (2020)**

# Introduction

## Overview

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There is currently no statutory definition of child criminal exploitation (CCE). Although some guidance does exist, it covers the different issues of deception, bullying, manipulation, coercion and violence. Young people are forced to work in cannabis factories, move drugs or money across county lines, and systematically carry out crimes of theft or violence against other young people. We therefore use the definition from the Children's Society, as formulated by young people: 'when someone you trusted makes you commit crimes for their benefit'.<sup>3</sup>

The data on arrests of young people (aged 10–17) has been used as it represents the best proxy data available on children exploited by gangs. For example, in recent years, we have seen arrests for intent to supply outpacing the increase in young people arrested for possession alone. However, this does not hold fast during the pandemic, and the responses from different statutory agencies in different

parts of the country are inconsistent. While the data shows an apparent reduction in recorded cases of drug arrests, young people missing from home, youth violence and county lines, for example, this does not necessarily mean there has been an actual reduction in CCE or gang-associated activities. What is lacking in too many areas is sufficient youth workers – particularly detached, street-based youth workers – who can provide an alternative source of local insights and intelligence. The current report includes such insights from youth workers and services operating in Bristol, Birmingham, London, Thames Valley (Oxfordshire, Buckinghamshire, Berkshire and Milton Keynes) and Stoke-on-Trent.

At its heart, youth work provides a safe space in the community and trusted adults, skilled in supporting young people and providing a bridge to other specialist services.

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*“Early intervention to prevent gang involvement and youth violence includes [s]killed, trained facilitators, often working with children or young people as part of their professional role.”*

**Early Intervention Foundation (2018)**

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*“Councils are being forced to divert the limited funding they have left away from preventative work, including young offender teams and youth work, into services to protect children who are at immediate risk of harm.”*

**Local Government Association (2019)**

### A youth work response

Detached and outreach youth work should be encouraged as a way to engage young people in the community. The partial opening of youth projects for outreach and drop-in or small group sessions in line with social distancing measures should also be considered, in particular when young people are not at school and a non-formal setting is more appropriate. Within this approach, detached, street-based or on-road youth work remains pre-eminent and key-worker status is required to unlock insurance, PPE and other restrictions imposed during the pandemic.

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<sup>3</sup> Children's Society: Counting Lives – County Lines, 2019.

## Organised Crime Gangs and Exploitation

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The involvement of young people in organised criminal activity often develops over a long period and through the subtle gaining of 'trust' and 'loyalty' via gifts from criminals on the outskirts of organised crime groups. Young people who are vulnerable, lonely or have learning difficulties are especially targeted due to being more likely to want to form relationships with the exploiters. Once a trusting relationship is formed, the victims are required to perform increasingly exploitative tasks that embed them further into gang activities, leaving them in 'debt' to organised crime and further exploitation.

The prime motivators for young people's involvement include money, social status, a sense of belonging, power, dignity and protection as well as a lack of alternative opportunities for many. These drivers come from peer influence and pressure as the primary method for recruitment. Drug-running is the most common entry route for young people into gangs. Local mentoring through

trusted youth work relationships and positive role models are the key elements of the response.

Youth services provide an alternative route for young people to divert them from gang-associated activities and to help them exit gangs. The highest rates of success come from relationship-based practice with the opportunity for long-term support from a youth worker. This approach allows gang members and those vulnerable young people at risk from gang-associated activities to substitute the 'sense of belonging' that gangs can provide with the safety and security of the alternatives that youth services can offer. By default, youth workers will become one of their 'olders', like a brother, sister, auntie, mum, dad, grandma or granddad. The reality is that, if a youth worker is in a young person's life for a significant amount of time, they will drop all their barriers with them as they do with the code of the 'street'.

## Street gangs and violence

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The first thing to understand is that, when we think of youth violence, we must not assume that violence is only linked to young people in gangs. For example, young people that carry knives or firearms are not necessarily involved in gangs, but they may have a range of other reasons why they want to use weapons to settle a dispute, based on geography or street safety, for example. Therefore, the response cannot be a 'one-size-fits-all' approach. Education is important, but it has to meet young people where they are through street-based, detached youth work; if they are in school or college or using an alternative provision, or they live on a secure estate, then providing youth work in those settings through one-to-one or group work is recommended.

Second, youth work can tap into youth culture as a resource to share positive messages. It can also support young people to learn the skills to do this themselves using social media platforms, film-making, 'memes' and music, which can be used as a counter-narrative to violence and gang-associated activity.

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*"[We are calling for] a national commitment to, and investment in, providing help and support at the earliest possible opportunity: high quality youth services and facilities in local communities to reach young people where they live are vital here."*

**Association of Directors of Children's Services, 'Serious Youth Violence and Knife Crime' (2019)**

## Increased vulnerabilities through COVID-19

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There are issues emerging around vulnerable young people during lockdown<sup>4</sup> who are in unsafe environments and at greater risk from gang-associated activity. Whereas groomers find it easy to show young people the path they can take and its immediate reward – such as buying a new pair of trainers or drugs – in contrast, families and youth workers are struggling to compete. They are working with reduced services, youth centre closures and the prospect of a summer ahead with fewer residential opportunities, family outings and places to go. Social distancing has also led to a lack of visible positive, aspirational figures for young people in their own communities.

### Family relationships

There is increased anxiety around household harmony as self-isolation and social distancing are often not possible for families who live in single- or shared-bedroom accommodation with overcrowding and inadequate outside space.<sup>5</sup> There is also concern for homeless young people who are no longer able to 'sofa surf' at others' homes. Some parents are frustrated at their lack of influence and control as many young people are not abiding by the emergency measures<sup>6</sup>; some are overcompensating by trying to assert control, which is resulting in the breakdown of relationships. While the number of breaches is still relatively small, a third of the fines are being issued to young people aged 18–24. In addition, we do not know how many young people under the age of 18 (not subject to fines) are posing public health risks.

### Looked-after children

There is anecdotal evidence from a small sample of local authorities that less supervision of young people and staffing difficulties in care homes may lead to missing potential and actual incidences of child exploitation, exacerbated by a sharp increase in the use of online platforms and social media. Some are in unstable foster-care placements or homes where domestic violence occurs or where parents are dealing drugs themselves, and there is a heightened risk of relationships breaking down and young people leaving home.

In Thames Valley, the number of reports of 'missing' young people has reduced, but looked-after children are often still 'staying out' and now without regular contact with social workers or police, or even day-to-day contact with postal workers, for example, who are part of the formal and informal networks, respectively.

### Social media

During lockdown, use of social media platforms like Instagram, Snapchat and the new app Houseparty has increased. It has been reported in some areas, including Birmingham, that these channels are being used to taunt or trap rivals and, in many cases, to incite violence – including one case of a shooting as a direct result of street gangs using social media.<sup>7</sup>

Where youth work has been digitised through lockdown, online contact has worked well for those whose relationships were already established; however, it is more challenging for work that is starting remotely to reach 'new' young people. There are concerns around increased online exploitation, including through sharing of images.

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*"A lot of young people don't watch TV, so they're not scared of it. They don't think they'll get infected and they don't do social distancing. The problem is that everything is shut down, so they are bored, and that leads to risky behaviour."*  
**Craig Pinkney, Solve, The Centre for Youth Violence and Conflict (2020)**

### Youth violence

While official data shows a fall in youth violence, for some, the nature of the threat has merely changed. Lockdown has allowed street gangs to locate their targets much more easily as they know they will be either at home or close to a family address. Birmingham in particular has seen an increase in gang-related violence, with not all incidents being reported to the police. Anecdotally, there is also concern around violence by young people against parents/carers in their homes during lockdown.

### County lines

The difficulty with formal data on county lines as an indicator is that it is often interpreted on the basis of how many young people get found outside each region. Meanwhile, what is considered less thoroughly, or sometimes not at all, is the young people who are being

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4 NYA: Out of Sight? – Vulnerable young people: COVID-19 response, April 2020.

5 Shelter: Self-Isolation? Try it as a Homeless Family Living in One Room (Blog), 2020. <https://blog.shelter.org.uk/2020/03/self-isolation-try-it-as-a-homeless-family-living-in-one-room/>

6 Young Minds Parent Helpline: Calls from parents, March–April 2020.

7 Craig Pinkney, Centre for Youth Violence and Conflict. (2020) [https://www.vice.com/en\\_uk/article/7kz5kb/street-violence-lockdown-coronavirus-uk](https://www.vice.com/en_uk/article/7kz5kb/street-violence-lockdown-coronavirus-uk)

exploited on their own doorsteps and in regions such as Thames Valley, which has dense urban and rural areas across three counties.

Although they may not be on a county line, young people are still being exploited in their local areas, and this trend has been increasing. Some areas report a different pattern, with county lines continuing in Bristol, for example, due to its established drugs market, and likely to increase as travel restrictions are lifted.

## Drugs

We are aware that the drug markets have been hit just like other markets, meaning that the prices of cocaine and heroin have increased. Reports from Bristol reflect that, as drug prices have gone up and movement has become more limited, purchases are dropping dramatically. This is creating short-term problems for gangs in finding new markets, and a surplus of drugs is building up that will flood the streets when the country re-opens from lockdown.

Gangs will be looking to increase sales from the stocks they have left, which is a potential problem in terms of an expanding market of younger people. There is also a risk of street violence when drug movement is freed up, and a price war as gangs try to offload their stocks.

In Thames Valley (Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire), some areas are reporting an increase in violence between gangs where the drug supply chain has been affected. Gangs are competing for young people to carry and sell drugs, and thus to expand their reach with new supply lines. In addition, young people are carrying more cash, and some are struggling to obtain drugs for their own use at the higher prices, thereby increasing the risk of debt bondage.

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*“Young people are not enticed into gangs to be car park attendants; they are recruited as entrepreneurs to find and supply new markets.”*

**Youth worker, Bristol (2020)**

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*“We feel there has been more pressure from groomers on young people and debt bonded leverage has been further levied to force them into running and dealing drugs, as the price of drugs has increased.”*

**Service leader, Bristol (2020)**

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*“All the [violence] madness hasn't stopped it's just paused until things are back to normal.”*

**Young person, Bristol (2020)**



# Profile of young people's vulnerabilities



## 1. 'Staying away'/'missing' from home

A significant number of areas report seeing a reduction in the number of missing notifications and referrals. It is important to further explore the patterns of who is missing and from which regions. For example, some areas are reporting an increase in young people going missing who haven't previously done so. In other areas, there may be under-reporting due to fear of repercussions from breaking lockdown measures, or young people missing for shorter periods during lockdown than would normally constitute 'missing' in the formal data.



## 2. 'Missing from education'

Approximately 700,000 young people are persistently absent from school or not in education, employment or training (NEET).<sup>8</sup> These risks have been heightened; with schools only partially open and youth centres closed, as few as 5% of vulnerable young people<sup>9</sup> and just 1% of children overall were attending school at the start of lockdown, rising slightly post-Easter. All those not attending currently have limited or no access to youth work.



## 3. 'At risk, at home'

Over one million<sup>10</sup> young people are at risk from at least one of the so-called 'toxic trio' of addiction, mental health and domestic abuse. Despite this, child protection referrals have plummeted by 50% in some areas. A number of areas have reported a decrease in multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) referrals, raising concerns around under-reporting of abuse and what is being missed due to lockdown.



## 4. 'Risky behaviours'

Many young people are now in potentially unsafe environments. As well as the reported increase in isolation and loneliness they are experiencing, there are emerging issues and vulnerabilities around gang-related activity or exploitation as well as non-compliance with social distancing under the lengthy period of emergency measures. Even where there has been a reported reduction in youth violence – for example, there are fewer young people attending hospital A&E departments – there is nonetheless tension and a threat of violence bubbling under the surface, with issues expected to re-emerge post-lockdown.

<sup>8</sup> NYA: Out of Sight?, 2020; adjusted datasets for 8–19-year-olds, children excluded, children persistently absent, NEETs sources (Department for Education).

<sup>9</sup> From among 723,000 children who were known to children's social services in 2019 (Department for Education).

<sup>10</sup> 1.16m young people (aged 8–17) are in a household affected by at least one of the 'toxic trio' issues – Children's Commissioner Vulnerability Report: 'Estimating the prevalence of the toxic trio' (2018).



## Lockdown and release

To achieve the highest rates of success, relationship-based practice is required with the opportunity for long-term support from a youth worker as a relatable role model for young people who are vulnerable to involvement with crime. The relationship with a youth worker should stem from identification of a vulnerable young person or an individual already being groomed, especially at a critical moment in their lives.

However, just at the time it is most needed, most youth work projects 'stopped' or were severely restricted through lockdown. This broke the link for youth workers who had been building trust over at least six months with gang-associated young people and those 'at risk' of offending. This has been compounded by the loss or restriction of sports/fitness and well-being facilities as places to

engage young people and the closure of other services a youth worker would otherwise sign-post young people to or use to support them. The consequences include a lack of engagement, early help and diversionary activity, which de-motivates those associated with and looking for alternatives from gangs, and larger numbers of young people being placed at risk from gang exploitation in unsafe environments.

## A youth work response

Detached youth work has been utilised in a number of areas to offer ongoing support to young people and families who need it the most, with innovative ways of continuing group and direct work, including new tools devised for digital use.

There has been a move towards staying in touch virtually, but this is an ongoing challenge as it is less appropriate and more difficult to build trust digitally, especially where young people do not have a safe space to discuss confidential issues and make disclosures online. With changing guidance, youth workers can do more to stay in touch 'on the doorstep'. This is important personal contact, but it presents similar challenges in terms of confidentiality, disclosures and lack of access for referral to other services or sustained activities.

# The scale of needs

Children and young people displaying vulnerabilities such as poverty, family breakdown, lack of interaction with social services, frequent missing episodes and school exclusion are frequently targeted for criminal exploitation. As with the other factors identified, being excluded from school is not necessarily causative of exploitation, but it is a major contributing factor to the increased risks, both physical and material, facing vulnerable young people due to gangs.

- 60,000 young people (aged 10–17) identify as a gang member or know a gang member who is a relative. This rises to over 300,000 of young people when we add those who know someone in a gang, and reaches 450,000 when including young people in groups exposed to 'risky behaviour' associated with gangs.
- In terms of those most at risk of gang-associated activities and exploitation, over one million young people come from a 'vulnerable family background', of which nearly 450,000 are unknown to formal or statutory services but are likely to be known by youth workers.
- The pandemic has amplified vulnerabilities and exposed many young people to gang-associated activities and exploitation. Over one million face risks from living in households with at least one of the so-called 'toxic trio' of addiction, poor mental health and domestic abuse. Moreover there are 83,000 young people living in temporary accommodation, while a further 380,000 are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

There are heightened risk factors for serious and violent offending among young people, which include:<sup>20</sup>

- Family conflict with increased tensions during lockdown, including where parents take part in or approve of problem behaviour.
- Risky behaviour in an unsafe environment, with early initiation where friends engage in serious and violent juvenile offending.
- Fractured communities, with low levels of attachment to neighbourhoods and community organisations or lack of such community activity often associated with extreme economic deprivation.

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*"We feel there has been more pressure from groomers on young people and debt bonded leverage has been further levied to force them into running and dealing drugs, as the price of drugs has increased."*

**Service leader, Bristol (2020)**

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<sup>11</sup> National Crime Agency: County lines drug supply, vulnerability and harm, 2018.

<sup>12</sup> Children's Society: Counting Lives, 2019. <https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/counting-lives-report.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> Children's Commissioner for England: Keeping Kids Safe, 2019.

<sup>14</sup> Gangs/groups of risky behaviour (6% of 10–19-year-old population, based on Home Office: Offending, Crime & Justice Survey, 2004).

<sup>15</sup> Children's Commissioner for England: 1.24 million children (8–17) living with a 'vulnerable family background', 2019. <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/publication/childhood-vulnerability-in-england-2019/>

<sup>16</sup> Children's Commissioner for England: Living in a vulnerable family background: (8–17) pro-rata on population share, 2019. <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/publication/childhood-vulnerability-in-england-2019/>

<sup>17</sup> Children's Commissioner Vulnerability Report: – 'Estimating the prevalence of the toxic trio', 2018: 1.16m young people (8–17) are in a household affected by any of the 'toxic trio' issues

<sup>18</sup> Ministry of Housing and Local Government, September 2019; adjusted pro-rata on population share (8–19) (from NYA: Out of Sight?, 2020).

<sup>19</sup> Children's Commissioner for England: Bleak Houses, 2016–17; adjusted pro-rata on population share (8–19) (from NYA: Out of Sight?, 2020).

<sup>20</sup> Centre for Crime and Justice Studies, 2009. <https://www.crimeandjustice.org.uk/sites/crimeandjustice.org.uk/files/YP%20knives%20and%20guns.pdf>

**Table 1 vulnerabilities of young people associated with gangs**

The table below shows the scale and prevalence of vulnerabilities that gang-associated young people are more likely to experience<sup>21</sup> during the pandemic.

| Vulnerability                                | Scale of needs  |
|--|---|
| <b>Parental substance misuse</b>             | 68% more likely to have this identified than other young offenders; 41% more likely than other children assessed by children's services.  |
| <b>Neglect:</b>                              | 76% more likely to have their basic care needs not being met flagged as a concern than other young offenders; 48% more likely to have neglect identified at assessment than other children assessed by children's services.   |
| <b>Violence towards them within the home</b> | 41% more likely to have violence from a parent identified as a concern than other young offenders; 39% more likely to have domestic violence where the child is the subject recorded as a factor at assessment than other children assessed by children's services. |
| <b>Offending in the family</b>               | 60% more likely to have this flagged as a concern than other young offenders; twice as likely to be living with known offenders.  |
| <b>School instability</b>                    | =55% more likely to experience a mid-year school move in the 12 months prior to their assessment than other children assessed by children's services; 5 times more likely to have had a permanent exclusion in the previous academic year (aged 5–15).              |
| <b>Alternative Provision attendance</b>      | 6 times more likely to have been in alternative provision in the 12 months prior to their assessment than other children assessed by children's services (aged 5–15).   |
| <b>Mental health</b>                         | 77% more likely to have the child's mental health identified as a factor at assessment than other children assessed by children's services; 95% more likely to have social, emotional and mental health issues identified as a primary SEN.                         |
| <b>Housing instability</b>                   | Twice as likely to have short-term/temporary housing listed as a concern than other young offenders.  |
| <b>Going missing/staying away</b>            | 26% of gang-associated children and young people have absconding or staying away listed as a concern by practitioners in their YOT (youth offending team) assessments.  |
| <b>Drug/alcohol use</b>                      | 81% of gang-associated CYP had substance misuse concerns identified by practitioners at their latest YOT assessment.  |
| <b>Risk of sexual exploitation</b>           | 23% of gang-associated CYP were either judged to be at risk of sexual exploitation or had sexual exploitation recorded as a factor at their latest assessment.  |

21 Children's Commissioner for England: Keeping Kids Safe, 2019. <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/CCO-Gangs.pdf>

## There is also a range of other factors to consider.

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### Deprivation

Poverty and deprivation constitute another risk factor for child criminal exploitation (CCE). An estimated 2.8 million children are living in 'severe poverty' because their family income is below 50% of the median household, and 3.7 million children are living in absolute poverty, meaning that their families cannot afford basic needs like food and clothing.<sup>22</sup>

### SEND and learning difficulties

There has been also significant research into the experiences of young people with SEND (special educational needs and disabilities) in relation to child sexual exploitation, which outlines the multiple factors that increase the risks these young people face. The factors that are taken advantage of are mirrored in the context of criminal exploitation.<sup>23</sup>

### Gender imbalance

Studies investigating access and introduction into criminal networks have historically found that these processes are often enacted through male-dominated networks, with female participation often being temporary and peripheral,<sup>24</sup> but there is a widely reported trend towards higher prevalence of girls and young women. Of the children in England assessed by councils as being involved in gangs, two thirds are boys (66%) and one third are girls

(34%); however, estimates from the Office for National Statistics suggest a higher figure, with as many as half being girls.<sup>25</sup>

Usually, teachers, social workers, GPs and youth workers can do more to help girls get out of gangs; however, with the closure of schools, limited access to social workers and youth workers, and evidence suggesting that children and families are not accessing GPs for medical advice during lockdown, more girls and young women are trapped with nowhere to go. There is increased concern around the phenomenon of girls being used for gang activity as girls and young women are finding it easier to move around during lockdown, while young men remain very visible.

### Gang-exit

It is important to note that not all young people involved in and exploited by gangs are at risk in their family home. For some, home is a safe space where they are able to take 'time out' from gang activity or peer pressure, and the pause of lockdown has given them time to reflect on what they want from their lives. However, others are being forced to work behind closed doors and are extremely vulnerable. In both cases, the lack of access to or sustained contact from youth workers is critical, just at the time when they are needed most to help with advice, support and providing a bridge to other services.

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<sup>22</sup> Department for Work and Pensions: Households below average income (HBAI) [Data], 2019.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Becker, S. and McCorkel, J.A., The gender of criminal opportunity, 2011.

<sup>25</sup> BBC News: Girls in gangs 'failed by authorities', April 2019. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-47952075>

# The role of youth work and youth services

There have been a number of national inquiries and reports highlighting the loss of youth services as a contributory factor to the increase in serious violence, gangs and child criminal exploitation (CCE). The current report identifies 'what youth work does' in response to gangs and exploitation, and where greater investment and support is needed during the pandemic and its aftermath.

- a) Open-access youth work/ youth services: longer-term trusted relationships, agency of young people, community resilience.
- b) Targeted youth work: often by individuals or groups, including liaison and diversionary activities, troubled families, school exclusions,
- c) Detached youth work: 'street-based' or 'on-road' approaches can support outreach for open-access provision or targeted support by area. Trusted adults and community mentors are navigating sometimes unsafe environments.

The training, professional development and qualifications for youth work are supported by a curriculum and reflective practice when working with young people and community groups:

- Knowledge of how young people develop during adolescence and appropriate support.
- Trusted relationships and voluntary engagement of young people.
- Understanding how to establish boundaries, manage challenging behaviour and de-escalate conflict.
- The importance of safeguarding in providing a safe environment for young people.

Professional competencies and development include the ability to make informed judgments on complex ethical and professional issues, underpinned by targeted learning, in areas such as:

- Knowledge of physiological and psychological development, including self-identity.
- Situated learning (location of practice), including community and culturally sensitive practice.
- Experiential learning, including critical dialogue, citizenship, democracy and power relations.
- Group work, including peer education and co-production with young people.

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*"We recognise that the relationship between youth practitioners and young people is often the relationship that means most to a young person and is so often the relationship they point to as the reason they were diverted away from violence and crime and introduced to new opportunities."*

**London Violence Reduction Unit, Strategy (2020)**

**Table 2** below highlights aspects of youth work practice in response to the needs and vulnerabilities of young people associated with street gangs and organised crime gangs, and those subject to exploitation.

| Vulnerability                         | Required youth work practice response  |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| <b>Exploitation</b>                   | Identifying young people at risk and situations through detached and digital youth work; using existing relationships with trusted adults (youth workers) to provide support; informal education and provision of protective behaviours support. Youth workers to refer on to MASH and highlight risk of criminal exploitation to police; potential increase of time spent in digital spaces through lockdown will increase risk. This includes digital ‘money mules’, bitcoin fraud and hacking, and sharing of sexualised images.  |
| <b>Child criminal exploitation</b>    | Advice; guidance; awareness-raising; referrals; resilience and esteem building; health advice; personal safety and protective behaviours support.  |
| <b>Child sexual exploitation</b>      | Advice; guidance; awareness-raising; referrals; resilience and esteem building; health advice; personal safety and protective behaviours support.  |
| <b>Grooming</b>                       | Advice; guidance; awareness-raising; referrals; resilience and esteem building; health advice; personal safety and protective behaviours support.  |
| <b>Coercive relationships</b>         | Advice; guidance; awareness-raising; referrals; resilience and esteem building; health advice; personal safety and protective behaviours support.  |
| <b>Youth violence</b>                 | Not assuming that violence is linked only to young people in gangs; identifying high-risk young people and situations through detached support and allowing ongoing relationships in safe public places to minimise risk to young people from elders/gang masters/organised criminals. Working with police and social care/VRU/housing to co-ordinate responses and minimise pressure on other services.   |
| <b>Counter-culture and gangs</b>      | Using social media platforms like ‘Houseparty’, Instagram, Zoom and YouTube that are currently popular among young people. Making use of film/documentaries to push particular messages; posting these on social media platforms and spaces that are shared by young people and practitioners. Using art to create ‘memes’ that can also be used as a counter-narrative to highlight particular messages.  |
| <b>Organised criminal gangs (ocg)</b> | <p><b>‘Making money’</b> - focusing on entrepreneurship as young people’s minds are set on money; educating them to be financially literate; supporting them to set up businesses; inviting people who are local (with credibility in local areas) to talk about their journey; supporting young people to find opportunities to learn while they work (apprenticeships and sponsors).</p> <p><b>‘Power’</b> – understanding social status and language, behaviour and codes/honour, which can be aspects of a dominant youth culture that is not negative. Creating counter-narratives that match ‘toxic’ aspects of the culture but not the negative elements that are cultural expressions as an outlet for frustrations; for example, using the same slang, dressing in the latest brands and reflecting aspects of dominant local youth culture in relation to youth violence (e.g. drill music).</p> <p><b>‘Sense of belonging’</b> – creating surrogate relationships outside the young person’s family network where possible to foster acceptance, approval and permission, especially if the young person has missing or detached relationships.</p> <p><b>‘Safety and protection’</b> – implementing a series of measures such as out-of-working-hours contact (phone line for outside 9am–5pm) and detached youth work in areas where young people may feel in danger. Where possible, working with young people who have criminal pasts to provide support via mentoring, peer mentoring or just assistance with mediation if needed.</p> |

|                                |  |
|--------------------------------|--|
|                                | <b>'Family members: at risk of harm'</b> - parenting groups to enable parents to come together and vent/ share ideas and realistic strategies to support their children; community workshops to enable parents to understand new trends that may affect children and young people; out-of-hours support (phone line for outside 9am–5pm). Building community connections (social capital) with e.g. local pastors, imams, organisations, local leaders (key stakeholders) as they often know many of the families in need.   |
| <b>Lockdown non-compliance</b> | Identification of risk factors and hot spots; minimising disruption and pressure on emergency services by engaging with young people to share information and send home those that can go home safely; otherwise, refer on. Youth workers to connect into COVID-19 mutual aid groups to work in higher-risk areas where volunteers may not wish to engage.   |
| <b>Domestic abuse</b>          | Identifying those at additional risk; providing detached service to pick up those avoiding home as a place of non-safety; offering safety tips and a point of emergency contact.   |
| <b>Addiction</b>               | Moving to an outreach model of services for needle exchange, advice, guidance and harm reduction. Potential increase in this issue due to mental health, boredom and home-based stress factors.  |
| <b>Substance misuse</b>        | No harm-reduction mechanisms or preventative informal education currently in place for those experimenting with new or recreational substance misuse due to boredom and an increase in poor mental health. Further risks of accidental overdose and diversification of substance misuse due to additional pressures/access issues, e.g. moving from smoking cannabis to edibles, emerging drug patterns such as Lean. Up-skilled outreach and digital youth workers are needed to make contact with young people on social media platforms and in spaces where young people are operating. |
| <b>Poverty</b>                 | Distribution of resources to support families (gas and electric keys, etc.).   |
| <b>Housing/homelessness</b>    | Impact on care leavers and young people in housing poverty or becoming homeless during this crisis who are not able to access services to obtain housing. Youth workers as conduits and providing support by linking into services; carrying out initial assessment/referral work; helping high-risk young people to maintain tenancies and access support.  |

## A youth work response

Youth workers are uniquely placed to support young people who are at risk of gang association and violence;<sup>26</sup> however, the models that have been used over the last decade to deal with issues around youth violence are both outdated and inadequate. Evidence for this is seen in the steep rise in both youth criminal activity and youth violence. Therefore, we call for new and updated interventions that acknowledge the development of contemporary youth cultures but also consider issues of public health and desistance.

'On-road' youth work is one of many contemporary approaches being discussed as a direct response for engaging with the issue of youth violence in the United Kingdom. Practitioners are required to operate from an insider's perspective, drawing heavily on ethnographic and phenomenological accounts of subjects' lived experiences.

<sup>26</sup> National Youth Agency: Responding to youth violence through youth work, 2019. <https://nya.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Responding-to-Youth-Violence-Through-Youth-Work-final.pdf>

# Conclusion

This report draws from the latest data from the Children's Commissioner for England and builds on local area profiles of child vulnerability presented in '[We're All In This Together?](#)<sup>27</sup>' and NYA's report on young people's increased vulnerabilities during COVID-19, '[Out of Sight?](#)<sup>28</sup>'

It also considers desk research from other reports and a qualitative review conducted with youth workers and service leaders in Bristol, Thames Valley, Stoke-on-Trent, London and Birmingham.

## Recommendations

1. We are calling for a cross-departmental response from the Government to recognise youth services as an essential key service and to encourage local authorities and Violence Reduction Units (VRUs) to engage, deploy and up-skill youth workers in support of young people. We support the call by the Home Affairs select committee and others for a 'Youth Service Guarantee' with a substantial increase in services and ring-fenced funding from central Government.

- Youth services are a vital lifeline to vulnerable young people. Youth work must be classified as an essential key service, and its bridging role to other services must be recognised.

2. This report seeks to articulate the ingredients of youth work, which are hard to define when seeking to embed relevant provision in Violence Reduction Units (VRUs). We are therefore calling for Home Office guidance to include youth services in VRUs' remit.<sup>29</sup>

- Police and Crime Commissioners and local authorities should take the lead in embedding a youth work response for early help and prevention within a public health approach in local areas.

3. There needs to be a cross-departmental Government strategy on Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE), backed

up by changes to relevant statutory guidance and inclusive of youth services, to ensure that professionals working with young people are clear on the need for safeguarding and early help for those who are at risk or actively being criminally exploited. This should also support the role of diversionary activities and youth work in supporting young people to exit gang activities.

- This requires significant investment in training and up-skilling in response to COVID-19, including regarding safeguarding, trauma and bereavement, and detached youth work.

4. We need to recognise the traumatising impact of COVID-19 on youth workers themselves; both those on the frontline working with young people, and those who are furloughed or self-isolating, and thus disconnected from their long-term relationships with young people. There is a significant risk of losing youth workers as a result of trauma, service cuts or adult volunteers not returning.

- Youth workers need to be classified as 'essential key workers'. This will ensure that insurers provide them with cover and that risk assessments, care support and PPE will be provided during the pandemic.

As the national body for youth work in England (Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Body), NYA will publish a new curriculum for youth work in summer 2020 and provide qualifications and training, contextual practice, advice and guidance.

A new Ten Year Vision for youth work to be published by NYA in 2020–21 will support revised guidance on what is 'sufficient' youth work, newly framed in the context of COVID-19 as we emerge from the pandemic and must consider its legacy for young people and youth services.

<sup>27</sup> Children's Commissioner for England: We are all in this together?, 2020.

<sup>28</sup> NYA: Out of Sight?, 2020.

<sup>29</sup> Home Office: Violence Reduction Unit Interim Guidance, March 2020. We note that the interim guidance does not reference youth work aside from referencing the London VRU strategy. [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/876380/12VRU\\_Interim\\_Guidance\\_FINAL\\_\\_003\\_2732020.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/876380/12VRU_Interim_Guidance_FINAL__003_2732020.pdf)

## Policy timeline

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### National inquiries, commissions and reports

**2005:** Strathclyde launches first VRU, adopting a public health approach that treats violence as a disease. This expands to a national Scottish unit in 2006.

**2018:** Government publishes 'Serious Violence Strategy' to address violence issues. Establishes £22m Early Intervention Youth Fund, through which £17.7m has since been provided for 29 projects endorsed by police and crime commissioners. The strategy also includes a new £3.6m National County Lines Co-ordination Centre (launched September 2019).

**2018:** Youth Violence Commission publishes interim report citing the need for a fundamental reform in youth work as a response to youth violence.

**2018:** London sets up its VRU that references youth work as a key part of responding to serious youth violence (SYV).

**2019:** Children's Commissioner publishes 'Keeping Kids Safe', setting out scope of children and young people potentially affected by SYV.

**2019:** Supporting Families Against Youth Crime Fund: £9.5 million will be provided to support children and families vulnerable to knife crime and gang culture, with a further £300,000 available to train frontline staff.

**2019:** Prime minister's Serious Youth Violence Summit. Public consultation launched on a new legal duty to ensure that public bodies work together to protect young people at risk of becoming involved in knife crime, putting forward the public health approach. DCMS Secretary of State chairs discussion on identifying ways to support the youth sector.

**2019:** Home Affairs Committee publishes its report on Serious Youth Violence; putting forward a number of recommendations including the role of youth work.

**2020:** Youth Select Committee publishes report on knife crime and endorses Home Affairs Committee's recommendations on investment in youth work.

**2020:** All-Party Parliamentary Group on Knife Crime and Violence Reduction puts forward a number of recommendations on the importance of investment in and the role of youth work.

## Policy recommendations: youth work

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A review of recommendations for youth work and services: Recent national inquiries (2018–20)

### **The Youth Violence Commission interim report (2018)**

A fundamental reform of youth services within a national model for a Public Health Approach

- a)** The establishment of a National Youth Policy Framework which makes the provision of youth work a statutory duty for both local authorities and central government. This National Youth Framework should specify and require professional standards for youth workers to give them a recognised status and to validate their organisations. It should be underpinned by an inspection regime to ensure minimum standards and consistency of provision across the country and to foster a culture of continuous improvement.
- b)** Funding to be used to support and incentivise long term projects as these provide much needed security and consistency for vulnerable young people. We would like to see funders and large, national organisations, working more collaboratively with grassroots charities.

### **All-Party Parliamentary Group on Knife Crime and Violence Reduction: The role of youth services in tackling knife crime (2020)**

- a)** Conduct a national audit of youth services in England; assess what provision is currently available and whether it is meeting the needs of local children and young people, particularly in deprived communities.
- b)** Fund local authorities to invest in sustainable long-term youth work. The Government should commit to investing a minimum of £1.57billion in children and youth services in the budget and upcoming Spending Review to plug the current gap between funding and spending.
- c)** Introduce a clear statutory requirement to local authorities for a minimum level of professional youth services provision and provide a definition of what a sufficient and minimum level of youth service provision is
- d)** Invest in a professional youth workforce. Youth services are more than buildings. The Government should commit to introducing a workforce strategy for youth work including clear plans to develop the youth workforce, trained in trauma responsive practice and safeguarding to ensure they are well equipped to support young people who are at risk of or involved in serious youth violence.

## House of Commons Home Affairs Committee, Serious Youth Violence: Sixteenth Report of Session 2017–19

Witnesses to this inquiry were almost united in their calls for more youth services, but local authority budgets are being increasingly consumed by statutory services, such as social care. We welcome the Government's additional funding for youth intervention projects, such as the Youth Endowment Fund and the Supporting Families Against Youth Crime Fund, but these programmes are far too fragmented and small-scale. In addition, it is not at all clear how they fit together, where the strategic responsibility for youth interventions in each area lies, or whether communities and councils will get stuck in an endless bidding process to different departments simply to maintain existing services.

- a) The Government needs to introduce a fully-funded, statutory minimum of provision for youth outreach workers and community youth projects in all areas, co-designed with local young people.
- b) This would be a national Youth Service Guarantee,<sup>30</sup> with a substantial increase in services and ring-fenced funding from central Government. It should include enhanced provision in areas with higher-than-average risk factors linked to serious youth violence, such as under-25 knife crime and school exclusion. It must also be coupled with proper mental health provision for young people, informed by an understanding of the impact of trauma and other adverse childhood experiences.

## British Youth Council, Youth Select Committee: Our Generation's Epidemic – Knife Crime, 2019

- a) We recommend that funding guarantees are made over a longer period, of at least 5 years, to enable youth services to build their practices, develop effective ways of helping and reaching young people and establishing the trust of the young people in their local area. This will lead to young people having purposeful activity outside of education, keeping them off the streets.
- b) [A] National Youth Service Guarantee, with a substantial increase in services and ring-fenced funding from central Government.
- c) We are concerned by the absence of youth voice and understanding in the Government strategy, evidenced in the Minister's view on what constitutes appropriate role models: 'They are sports coaches, rap artists and people in the community who meet young people in their ordinary day-to-day lives, who can give perhaps a bit of light-touch advice in the midst of playing sport or rapping or whatever their specialism is'. We believe that this is a narrow and stereotypical view of specific demographics of young people and their aspirations.
- d) We recommend that the Government urgently commissions research to better understand the dangerous ways in which social media can be used to spread violence and increase fear amongst young people, and what could be done to mitigate these dangers. This research should be completed, and findings published no later than March 2021.
- e) We recommend that the Government should adopt the use of 'teachable moments' as a national tactic, funding organisations to provide targeted interventions to young people in hospital or police custody following a knife-crime-related incident.

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<sup>30</sup> This recommendation was further endorsed by the British Youth Council's inquiry and report 'Our Generation's Epidemic: Knife Crime', 2019. <https://www.byc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Youth-Select-Committee-Our-Generations-Epidemic-Knife-Crime.pdf>

# Appendix Three

## What the papers say

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### A review of recent policy briefings and media reports

#### A public health approach

BBC News: 'Poverty link' to youth violence – Mayor of London, 2019

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-48982989>

The Guardian: Levels of child criminal exploitation (almost back to Victorian times), 2020

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/jan/02/levels-child-criminal-exploitation-almost-back-to-victorian-times>

Catch 22: What does a 'Public Health' approach to violence really mean?, 2018

<https://www.catch-22.org.uk/news/public-health-approach-to-violence/>

Local Government Association: Public health approaches to reducing violence, 2018

[https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/15.32%20-%20Reducing%20family%20violence\\_03.pdf](https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/15.32%20-%20Reducing%20family%20violence_03.pdf)

#### The voice of young people

British Youth Council: Our Generation's Epidemic: Knife crime, 2019

<https://www.byc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Youth-Select-Committee-Our-Generations-Epidemic-Knife-Crime.pdf>

UK Youth: Harnessing lived experience – A youth-led consultation on the causes and solutions to serious violence against young people, 2019

<https://www.ukyouth.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Serious-Violence-NLCF-Report-final-version.pdf>

#### Youth work

##### **The Guardian: Do youth clubs really deter violence?, 2019**

'If you take away the youth clubs, you take away those places where people can touch base with someone else. You are just leaving them to work it out for themselves with all of the pressures they have on them.'

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/mar/11/violence-gangs-youth-clubs>

##### **Children and Young People Now: Youth work – Policy context, 2020**

How the last few years has seen youth work ascend the government policy agenda in response to rising concerns over levels of serious youth violence linked to street gangs and organised crime. Experts' views on youth work.

<https://www.cypnow.co.uk/features/article/youth-work-policy-context>

##### **Centrepoint: Quality youth work is key to preventing crisis for young people, 2019**

<https://centrepoint.org.uk/about-us/blog/quality-youth-work-is-key-to-preventing-crisis-for-young-people/>

##### **National Centre for Gang Research, University of West London:**

Statutory youth services – Place all youth services on a statutory footing with improved service provision, inventive engagement and fresh innovative delivery

<https://www.uwl.ac.uk/research/research-centres/national-centre-gang-research>

##### **NYA Responding to youth violence through youth work 2019**

'On Road' Youth Work as a direct response to engaging the issue of youth violence in the United Kingdom

<https://nya.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Responding-to-Youth-Violence-Through-Youth-Work-final.pdf>

#### COVID-19

##### **Children and Young People Now: Violence and youth work cuts, 2020**

'Youth work delivers results and needs investment for the long term... In the post-Covid-19 world, the need for youth and play work will not be diminished. In fact, as this report shows, and as any youth worker will tell you, it will only have increased.'

<https://www.cypnow.co.uk/analysis/article/violence-and-youth-work-cuts>

##### **BBC News, 2020**

Prof Harding: 'Street gangs are being forced to find new tactics, such as shifting grooming and recruitment online, to social media.'

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-52535549>

##### **The Guardian: Meeting my youth worker is the only other time I eat a meal with another person, 2020**

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/apr/29/youth-worker-coronavirus-youth-services-young-people-pandemic>

##### **Hackney Citizen: Coronavirus – How the pandemic is changing the fight against child exploitation, 2020.**

An urgent strategy is needed to safeguard young people.

<https://www.hackneycitizen.co.uk/2020/04/14/coronavirus-how-pandemic-changing-fight-child-exploitation/>

# About National Youth Agency

NYA is the national body for youth work in England (Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Body), as the lead partner for Government, Local Government Association, national youth organisations and non-government bodies (teaching, policing, social care).

Contextualised advice and guidance is published and regularly updated in response to COVID-19 to support youth work - <https://youthworksupport.co.uk> (in partnership with The Mix and UK Youth)

[NYA Youth Covenant](#) is 'a promise from the nation' for all young people to be safe and secure in the modern world, and treated fairly; supporting young people in the present and ambitious for their future:

- Skilled and equipped to learn and earn
- Positive health and wellbeing
- Active members of their communities
- Happy and confident in their future.

## More from NYA

- [Generic guidance for youth work](#)
- [Detached youth work guidance](#)
- [Safeguarding online youth work](#)
- [Introduction to Detached Youth Work during COVID-19](#)
- [Out of Sight?](#) – Vulnerable young people: COVID-19 response
- [Responding to youth violence through youth work](#)

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