Social Media as a Catalyst and Trigger for Youth Violence

About Catch22

Catch22 is a social business, a not for profit business with a social mission. For over 200 years we have designed and delivered services that build resilience and aspiration in people and communities. Our vision is a strong society where everyone has a good place to live, a purpose and good people around them. We exist to ensure these are achievable for everyone, no matter what their background.

Our 1800 colleagues work at every stage of the social welfare cycle, supporting 30,000 individuals from cradle to career. Today we deliver alternative education (through our multi academy trust and nine schools), apprenticeships and employability programmes, justice and rehabilitation services (in 22 prisons and in the community), gangs intervention work, emotional wellbeing and substance misuse, and children's social care programmes.

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Foreword

Baroness Susan Greenfield, CBE

It has been often said that for every complex problem there's always a simple answer, - and it's always wrong. Surely this scenario could never be truer than for the complex and challenging world presented today by screen technologies: this new world, after all, is more like a parallel universe where an individual in our society can wake up, go to work, go shopping and dating and play games, all without encountering another human being face to face.

Since the 21st Century is delivering a vast range of new technologies that are transforming our environment in unprecedented ways, it follows that the human brain, and thus our minds, could also be undergoing unprecedented changes, from youth through to old age. If we are indeed anticipating more decades of long and healthy life than ever before, we need to devise the best ways for harnessing the power of the screen to ensure creative thinking and the optimum fulfilment of each individual's potential. Because screen technologies offer a new way of living, this new daily existence is as multifaceted as life itself. We need to unpack the different questions that now confront us, and then address each in turn.

One such is the possible link with social media in driving youth violence, the specific and highly focussed issue of this report. This timely document is based on a substantial analysis of the most popular social media platforms, discussions with key stakeholders and, finally, an international review of the literature. It is therefore as wide-ranging and thorough as is possible and its subsequent conclusions urgent reading for anyone with an interest in the well-being of future generations. As such the authors should be commended and, as they themselves suggest, the content be used as a springboard for further discussion, research and above all, action.

Foreword

Chris Wright,
Chief Executive, Catch22

We must never underestimate how much social media is shaping young people's experiences and identities - many have never known life before it. The arrival of social networking sites has irreversibly changed the way people use technology to communicate and share their lives, and while this presents a unique opportunity for innovation and positive transformation, it does not come without risks. As boundaries between real and virtual worlds become blurred, the associated risks become less familiar and more troubling.

A significant risk, and the focus of this report, is how social media is linked to violence. It looks at how violence is shared and glamorised across social media platforms and how it can lead to violence in the real world. When young people, especially those who are involved in or exposed to youth violence, are left unprotected in a world we don't fully understand, they are increasingly vulnerable. It is only now that we are beginning to recognise the consequences.

We must accept that social media is developing at pace and attempts to disrupt its path would be futile. In fact, as an organisation, Catch22 welcomes innovation and new ways of doing things. We actively encourage our service users to form new relationships and networks and in many ways, social media is an excellent tool for doing this. But we are also committed to safeguarding young people and that includes online. It is tempting for adults and professionals to disengage from conversations about the digital world. It is too easy to say, 'This is young people's space, we will never understand it'. But we must. We need an urgent conversation about how young people are engaging in this new space and what can be done to support positive experiences and safety online. This must start with understanding.

The report has two main aims: first, to understand this problematic phenomenon. What is actually happening and why? From analysing young people's social media use and then talking to them about it, the research presents for the first time a detailed picture of this aspect of young people's online lives. Second, the report aims to get us thinking about how to mitigate the risks and protect young people from potentially dangerous consequences. We have developed a number of recommendations around prevention, intervention and suppression, which we hope will act as a starting point to open up this discussion and engage others in it.
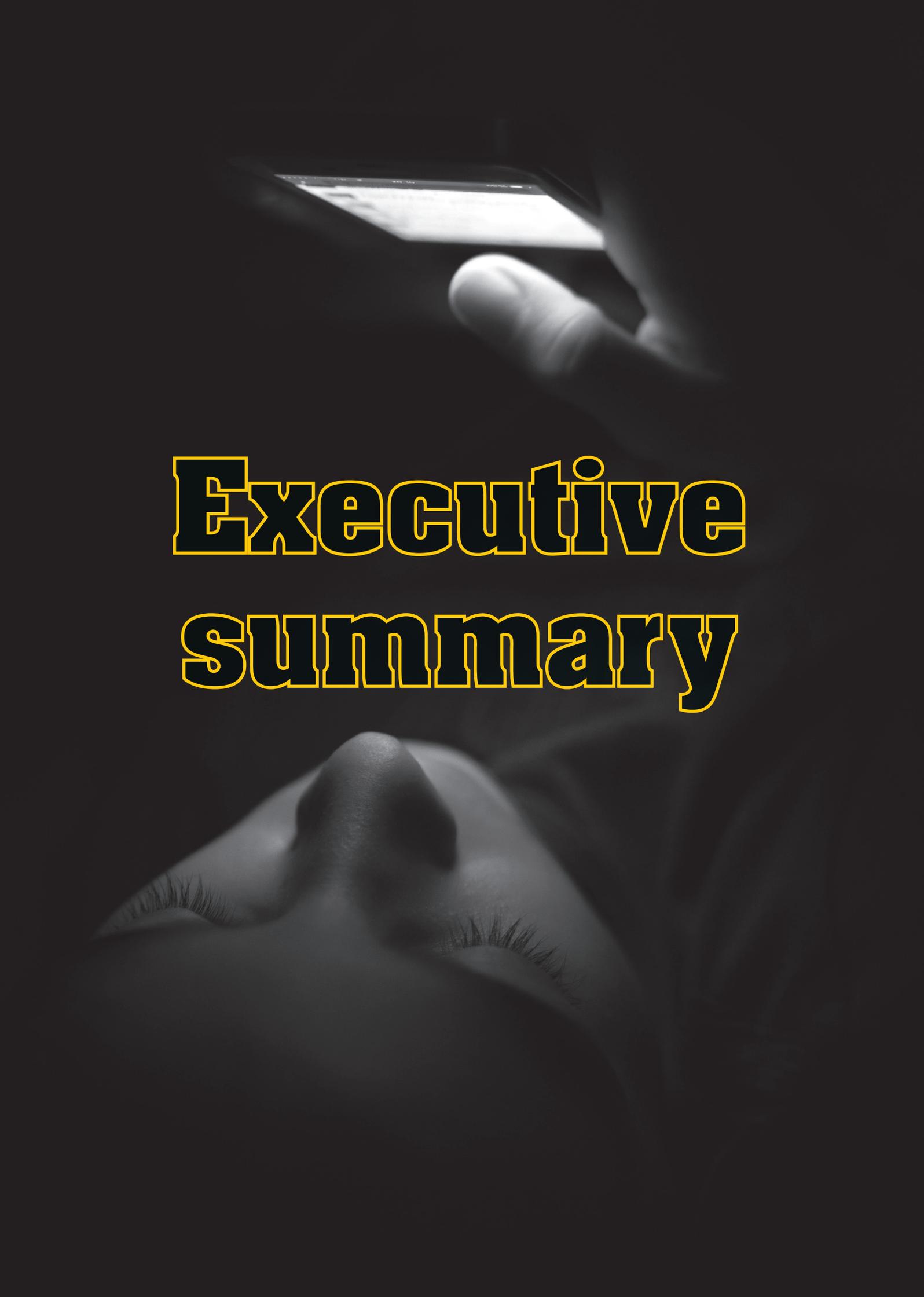
We don't claim to have the all the answers. These are emerging challenges and there are no precedents to which we can refer back. With this report, we are raising awareness and starting a conversation about how we can protect young people in this new world. The need is urgent and the risks are great. We cannot afford not to take action.

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1. Executive summary

Social media now plays a central role in the lives of young people in the UK, with the vast majority of teenagers using smartphones and tablets to access online platforms throughout their waking hours. The integration of social media into the daily lives of young people has left online–offline boundaries increasingly blurred. Whilst online activity offers huge potential to enhance the quantity and quality of communication between people across the world, it also raises some serious challenges. [1]

This report focuses on one of these challenges, namely, the links between young people's use of social media and youth violence. Whilst social media platforms are being used to glamorise, display and incite serious acts of violence, this content currently drifts under the radar of responsible adults and organisations which have the potential to respond to and challenge this behaviour.

The report makes for uncomfortable reading, particularly for those who work with young people and recognise the daily challenges that many face. The attitudes and behaviour of the young people discussed in this report must be viewed within the wider social and economic context of their lives. Many will have grown up in areas of socioeconomic deprivation, [2] may be struggling to cope with serious issues around trauma stemming from early childhood experiences [3] and are therefore exhibiting attitudes and behaviours that are tragically understandable when considered in this context. All of the findings presented in this report are intended to be read in light of the above.

By highlighting the ways in which social media is acting as a catalyst and trigger for serious incidents of violence between young people in real life, the report provides a springboard for action and collaborative exchanges between a full range of stakeholders as we move forward. It identifies a number of measures aimed at preventing young people harming, and being harmed by, other young

people as a result of activity on social media. Its recommendations, however, should not be taken as a fixed blueprint, but as a means of kick-starting the development of appropriate and effective policy and practice in this area.

1.1 Key findings

- **No holds barred online:** Because social media is commonly perceived to be hidden from adults, a virtual free-for-all space has emerged in which a small minority of young people share various forms of material that both display and incite serious incidents of violence in real life.

- **Impact of the smartphone:** Whilst some of the online activities discussed in this report have been occurring for several years, they now pose far greater challenges because of the recent developments in smartphone technology, which have radically altered both the nature and prevalence of young people's use of social media.

- **Growing audience:** By collapsing time and space, social media platforms are providing young people with unprecedented opportunities to disrespect one another. Before the advent of these platforms, incidents of violence, disrespect and provocation were typically confined to relatively small audiences, as well as a single location and point in time. Now, however, visceral displays of violence and disrespect are being captured via photographs and videos, and may be replayed at any time as the content spreads virally over multiple platforms. In addition, the enhanced audience size facilitated by social media makes violent retaliation more likely because of the unprecedented potential for disrespectful online activity to undermine young people's perceived status and reputation.

- **Threats and provocation in music videos:** Young people and professionals reported concerns around what they referred to as drill music videos, which threaten and provoke individuals and groups from rival areas. A clear distinction must be made between the vast majority of music videos that simply provide a raw reflection of the realities of young people's lives (content that does not provoke real-life violence), and a much smaller number of videos that go well beyond this, through displays of young people brandishing weapons, incendiary remarks about recent incidents of young people being seriously injured and killed, and explicit threats to stab or shoot specific individuals and members of rival groups.

- **Violent intent is the exception rather than the norm:** It is important to highlight that the vast majority of young people do not want to live the violent and risky lifestyles that are being glamorised in drill music videos. Many attempt to launch careers as music artists as a means of escaping life 'on road'. [4] In addition, these videos should not be seen as a root cause of youth violence. According to young people and professionals, however, they are acting as a catalyst and trigger for serious incidents of face-to-face violence between young people.

- **Daily exposure to online violence:** A small minority of young people are exposed daily to social media content that displays or incites serious violence in real life. This includes uploads of photos and videos of individuals and groups trespassing into areas associated with rival groups, and serious incidents of theft and violence perpetrated against young people. Some of the latter are being taken within prison settings [5] and broadcast live over social media by prisoners with access to smartphones. Some social media accounts are dedicated entirely to archiving and sharing material that displays young people being seriously harmed, disrespected and humiliated.

- **Social pressures:** When young people are disrespected by content uploaded to social media, this can generate significant social pressure to retaliate in real life to protect their perceived status and reputation. Moreover, when young people witness graphic displays of real-life violence involving their friends and family, this can leave them suffering from significant levels of anxiety and trauma. Those who initially upload the content disrespecting a particular individual or group become prone to retaliatory acts of serious violence and theft, which in turn are often recorded and broadcast over social media, creating a vicious cycle of retaliation.

- **Vulnerability of young women:** Professionals and young people reported cases of girls being violently attacked and sexually assaulted by members of rival groups after appearing in content uploaded online. In addition, professionals described cases in which young women who commented on content uploaded to social media were subsequently groomed and pressured into risky activities such as holding and storing weapons or drugs.

- **Negative implications for education and employment:** The social media accounts of some people who self-identify as being part of a street gang are being followed by tens of thousands of young people. [6] This continuous lens into a seemingly seductive and lucrative lifestyle that glamorises violence and the pursuit of money through illegal activities such as drug distribution further undermines the commitment of some young people to education and legitimate forms of employment.

1.1.1   Current responses

- **Limited response to online reports:** Social media platforms typically advise young people to report content that displays or incites serious incidents of violence directly to the platform provider or advise young people to contact the police directly. A range of professionals, however, questioned the extent to which social media platforms are acting on young people's reports, suggesting that material that supposedly violates a platform's community guidelines often remains online.

- **Lack of legal and organisational guidance:** Whilst professionals such as police officers and youth outreach workers in some countries actively use social media to pick up on signs of increased tensions to pre-empt violence, in our focus groups and interviews UK professionals reported being more cautious around engaging with social media content. A key reason for this is a general lack of guidance on how frontline professionals can and should be using social media from both an organisational and legal perspective.

- **Inadequate training:** Many professionals describe current e-safety training as either non-existent or narrowly focused on online chat rooms and internet forums. Such material is now outdated in an era of smartphone technology and social media applications.

- **Limited supervision:** Professionals and young people report that parents and carers typically provide very little oversight of, or engagement with, their children's use of social media.

1.2   Recommendations

Whilst young people now have access to unprecedented tools of communication, a range of professionals, as well as parents and carers, currently lack the knowledge and skills to address the risks and challenges that are accompanying these advancements in technology. Frank and honest conversations, as well as prolonged and collaborative efforts, will be required from a range of stakeholders to effectively tackle this issue.

A range of groups and organisations have roles to play in tackling the links between young people's use of social media and serious youth violence. To this end, it is useful to distinguish between three distinct albeit complementary strategies: prevention, intervention and suppression.

1.2.1   Prevention

- All professionals working with young people, for example teachers, social workers, foster carers, youth workers and the police, should be provided with sufficient, up-to-date training on social media; this should be mandatory for those working with children and young people who are most at risk. Training should cover all of the main issues raised in this report, including specific content that focuses on the exploitation (sexual and otherwise) of young women.

- Further research should be commissioned on the links between activity on social media and the exploitation of young women. This research should generate concrete recommendations for policy and practice, and inform the future training of professionals working with children and young people.

- Online resources explaining the basics of the main social media platforms, as well as the importance of parents and carers providing oversight of their children's activity on social media, should be developed by the Home Office, widely shared and updated on a regular basis to keep pace with the evolving social media landscape.

1.2.2 Intervention

- Where appropriate, professionals working with young people should actively use social media (particularly online content that is fully public) to better inform and support their frontline practice.

- In light of the rapid evolution of social media platforms and smartphone technology in recent years, existing legislative guidance regulating the powers of public bodies to monitor online content should be revisited, with careful consideration given to the appropriate balance between respecting people's rights to privacy and the imperative of safeguarding vulnerable children and young people.

- The Home Office should provide comprehensive guidance on what constitutes appropriate and acceptable use of social media to a full range of stakeholders, which includes the police, teachers and social workers.

- Voluntary, charitable and social enterprise organisations should provide similar guidance to their frontline practitioners.

1.2.3 Suppression

- All social media providers should provide a clear and simple process for users to report online content that violates the platform's own guidelines directly to the platform provider, highlighting that this process will be fully anonymous.

- Platform providers should ensure that they have efficient procedures in place to remove content that is deemed inappropriate in accordance with their own guidelines. When content is removed, a specific rationale should be provided to the relevant user or displayed on the webpage concerned..

1.3   About the research

This report is based on research comprising three main components. First, a six-month period of analysis of the following social media platforms: Twitter, YouTube, Snapchat, Instagram and Periscope. Second, discussions with key stakeholders, including young people's advocates, gangs and serious youth violence workers, young people themselves, the police and managers of local authority gangs teams. And third, an international review of relevant literature.

Introduction

2. Introduction

Social media is having a profound impact on the way young people think and behave. [7] Recent surveys indicate that around 96% of 13–18-year-olds use social media platforms and nearly a quarter of teenagers aged 13–17 are 'almost constantly' checking their social media accounts. [8] In addition, given the continuing acceleration of technological innovation and the expanding ownership of smartphones amongst young people, it seems unlikely that these trends towards greater use of social media will reverse in future years. Viewed in this context, it is unsurprising that online–offline boundaries are becoming increasingly blurred.

On the one hand, the positive potential of social media to further enhance levels of communication between people across the world and improve human wellbeing is unprecedented and exciting. [9] Whilst this report does not seek to challenge this positive potential, it does lay bare a more troubling side to the use of social media.

The report will undoubtedly make for uncomfortable reading, particularly for those who work with young people and recognise the challenges that many face on a daily basis. Many of the young people whose online and offline behaviour is discussed in this report will undoubtedly have grown up in areas of socioeconomic deprivation, [10] have serious issues around anxiety and trauma as a result of experiences in early childhood, [11] and will be exhibiting attitudes and behaviours that are tragically understandable when considered in this context. All of the findings presented in this report are intended to be read in light of the above.

To be clear, the report is not about blaming young people. It is, however, about understanding the links between what is happening on social media and serious incidents of violence in real life. Whilst the links between activity on social media and serious incidents of violence now date back several years, they are becoming increasingly significant and

prevalent due in large part to recent developments in smartphone technology that have radically changed both the nature and prevalence of young people's use of social media. It is vital, therefore, that efforts are made to understand what is going on in a world that many adults feel is increasingly hidden from sight, outside of their comfort zone and very often beyond their immediate understanding.

In short, a frank, in-depth and evidence-based exploration of this issue is long overdue. To this end, this report provides an insight into the links between young people's use of social media and youth violence for those who would benefit from a better understanding of this area and, crucially, aims to kick-start collaborative discussion and action to tackle the challenges being raised.

2.1 Being careful with the 'gang' label

The links between young people's use of social media and face-to-face violence are most pronounced for young people involved in gangs. Indeed, the initial stimulus for this project came from one of the authors' experiences of conducting research with a young person who had recently been stabbed and seriously injured after appearing in what was described as a gang music video that was uploaded onto YouTube. The video included taunts directed at members of a rival gang, who subsequently targeted the young person on his way to school the day after the video appeared online.

This report, however, will deliberately avoid overusing the term 'gang'. Citing research by the Centre for Criminal Justice Studies, MP Chuka Umunna highlighted in a Parliamentary debate on gangs and serious youth violence in March 2016 that labelling young people as gang members is often unhelpful and can lead to further stigmatisation of already disenfranchised

young people and communities. [12] Many of those contributing to the ongoing Youth Violence Commission have echoed these concerns. [13]

By adopting a title that does not explicitly refer to gangs, and by instead typically using the term 'group', the authors of this report do not mean to question the fundamental existence or significance of gangs in the UK. There are some relatively sophisticated and informed definitions of 'gangs', such as the well-established Eurogang definition, [14] which overlaps closely with young people's self-identification as gang members. [15] When the term 'gang' is used in this report, it refers to a group of three or more people who self-identify as a group and engage in illegal behaviours such as drug distribution, violence and theft.

Whilst group processes are integral to fully understanding much serious youth violence in the UK, and whilst gangs are a significant problem in several major cities (and indeed in a growing number of smaller towns and cities [16]), using the term 'gangs' often does more to obscure and overlook the complex reality of gang-related activities than to illuminate them. Therefore, whilst we think it would be unwise and unnecessary to discard the term altogether, we are calling for a more sparing and careful use of the term moving forwards.

2.2   Aims of the report

This report has two main aims: first, to highlight the ways in which activity on social media platforms is acting as a catalyst and trigger of serious violence between young people. Second, to kick-start a conversation around appropriate steps that can and should be taken to respond to the challenges being raised. Before addressing these aims, however, the report will provide a brief outline of the content and functions of the main social media applications being used by young people in 2016 (referred to from this point onwards as 'apps' [17]).

2.3   The main social media platforms: a concise guide

2.3.1 YouTube

YouTube is a video-sharing website that enables any member of the public to upload and share videos. People can visit YouTube either through their webpage (www.youtube.com) or through the YouTube app, which can be downloaded onto smartphones. People are able to browse through all of the videos available on YouTube by typing keywords into a search box. Although those uploading content have the option of restricting access if desired, the vast majority of videos are made fully available to anyone browsing the site.

2.3.2 Instagram

Instagram is an image- and video-sharing app that is primarily designed for use on smartphones. Users can set their privacy settings so that the content they upload is shared publicly (with anyone using Instagram) or privately (only with 'followers'). To follow someone's account, Instagram users simply search for a person's real name or username, which is assigned to each user when an account is created.

The distinction between public and private sharing of content on Instagram is questionable, given that many young people have thousands, if not tens of thousands, of people following their accounts. Moreover, young people often advertise their own Instagram usernames publicly on other social media sites such as YouTube and Twitter, and openly request that people follow them. At the very least, those accounts that share content with such high volumes of people would more accurately be described as semi-public, given the typically indiscriminate nature with which people are accepted as followers.

2.3.3 Snapchat

Similar to Instagram, Snapchat is an image- and video-sharing app designed primarily for use on smartphones. Users of Snapchat can create photos or short videos, which can then be shared with other people who follow their account. To follow someone's account, users simply need to type in a person's unique Snapchat username, which every user must choose when signing up for their account.

Unlike Instagram, where images and videos are permanently available until deleted by the person uploading them, images and videos shared on Snapchat appear on a viewer's screen for only a limited amount of time before disappearing. As with Instagram, it may be tempting to describe the video and imagine sharing on this app as 'private', in the sense that only people who follow a particular individual's account can see the content that they share. In reality, however, given the very high volume of followers many young people have on Snapchat, their accounts would again be more accurately described as semi-public.

2.3.4 Twitter

Twitter is a social networking service that allows users to exchange short, 140-character messages, referred to as 'tweets'. These messages may also be accompanied by photos and short videos. Although Twitter users may choose to make their accounts private and control who can see their tweets, the vast majority of Twitter users choose to have public accounts.[18] Twitter users may 'follow' the accounts of other Twitter users, enabling them to automatically receive messages posted from these accounts.

A person who wishes to share another person's tweet can 'retweet' the message, meaning that it is in turn shared with all of the people following the retweeter's account. This retweeting function enables certain tweets to 'go viral', as they can be shared and viewed by millions of people in a very short space of time.

2.3.5 Periscope

Periscope is the newest of the five social networking platforms described in this section. It is a live video-streaming app used primarily on smartphones. Users with a video-recording function on their phones can broadcast videos in real time to either a fully public audience or a restricted subgroup of Periscope users.

People viewing the live videos can 'like' the stream by clicking on an icon of a heart or comment on the videos in real time. Users also have the option to invite their own followers to join them in watching a particular video.

2.4 Methodology

To gain an in-depth insight into the links between young people's use of social media and face-to-face incidents of youth violence, the research utilised three components:

1. A six-month period of analysis of the social media platforms Twitter, YouTube, Snapchat, Instagram and Periscope (totalling over 500 hours of online platform analysis).[19]

2. Focus groups and interviews with a total of 20 professionals, including gangs and serious youth violence workers, managers of local authority gangs teams, young people's advocates and police officers from three different force areas. Focus groups and interviews with a total of 18 young people in two large UK cities.

3. An international review of relevant literature.[20]

This design enabled methodological triangulation, which allowed the authors to cross-check the data from each research component against one another, enhancing our confidence in the validity of the report's findings.

The sampling strategy for the online platform analysis constituted a blend of snowball and maximum variation sampling. Based on professionals' concerns, a sample of individuals was initially identified through music videos that had been uploaded onto YouTube and subsequently linked to face-to-face violence (discussed in section 4.1). Videos associated with four self-identified gangs from different areas of London were initially selected. Individuals and groups of young people used these videos to promote their personal Twitter accounts, which were subsequently included in the research. In turn, Twitter accounts included links to Snapchat, Instagram and Periscope accounts.

Overall, the project included 56 Twitter accounts, 31 Snapchat accounts, 79 Instagram accounts and 23 Periscope accounts. It is worth noting that all accounts belonged to males, as no female accounts linked to the videos which acted as the initial filter were found. Nevertheless, comments on the content uploaded to these accounts often came from females, providing at least some insight into young women's activity on social media. Data from this platform analysis were either (1) recorded systematically in a spreadsheet document and subsequently coded or (2) analysed on an ad hoc basis and used as case studies which explored potentially significant relationships between social media use and youth violence. A database of over 400 screenshots and 47 videos was compiled and drawn upon during the analysis and write-up phase of the project.

Based on existing contacts within Catch22, we approached a wide variety of professionals to participate in focus groups and interviews. The authors also utilised their professional contacts to approach suitable young people who either had direct experience of the issues discussed in this report or indirect knowledge of them through their friendship groups. The data from these focus groups and interviews were thematically coded and analysed using Nvivo, guided by Adaptive Theory principles. [21]

2.4.1 Ethical considerations

Because of the sensitive nature of the content collected and in the interests of anonymity, this report does not show any of the images from the database of screenshots and videos collected as part of the online platform analysis. In addition, account usernames, real names and other identifying features such as place names have all been excluded from descriptions of online content. It is also important to highlight that the social media accounts viewed as part of this study were openly advertised by users themselves on fully public online platforms.

The report was designed to raise awareness of the seriousness of certain forms of content being uploaded to social media platforms and, ultimately, to reduce the harm caused to young people by identifying ways in which a full range of stakeholders can attempt to tackle the challenges being raised. From the outset of the project, the researchers had frank conversations with members of the police, clarifying that the project would not be used as an information-gathering exercise for the purposes of enforcement in specific cases. Nevertheless, the researchers agreed that if the online platform analysis uncovered material that suggested a specific young person was at a significant risk of serious harm in the future, then they would follow their internal organisational safeguarding processes, which would involve sharing relevant information with the police. During the course of the project, an incident was brought to the attention of the police, but given that it had already spread virally over multiple social media platforms, they were already aware of it.

All young people and professionals participating in interviews and focus groups provided their consent after the purpose of the research and the potential uses of data had been fully explained.
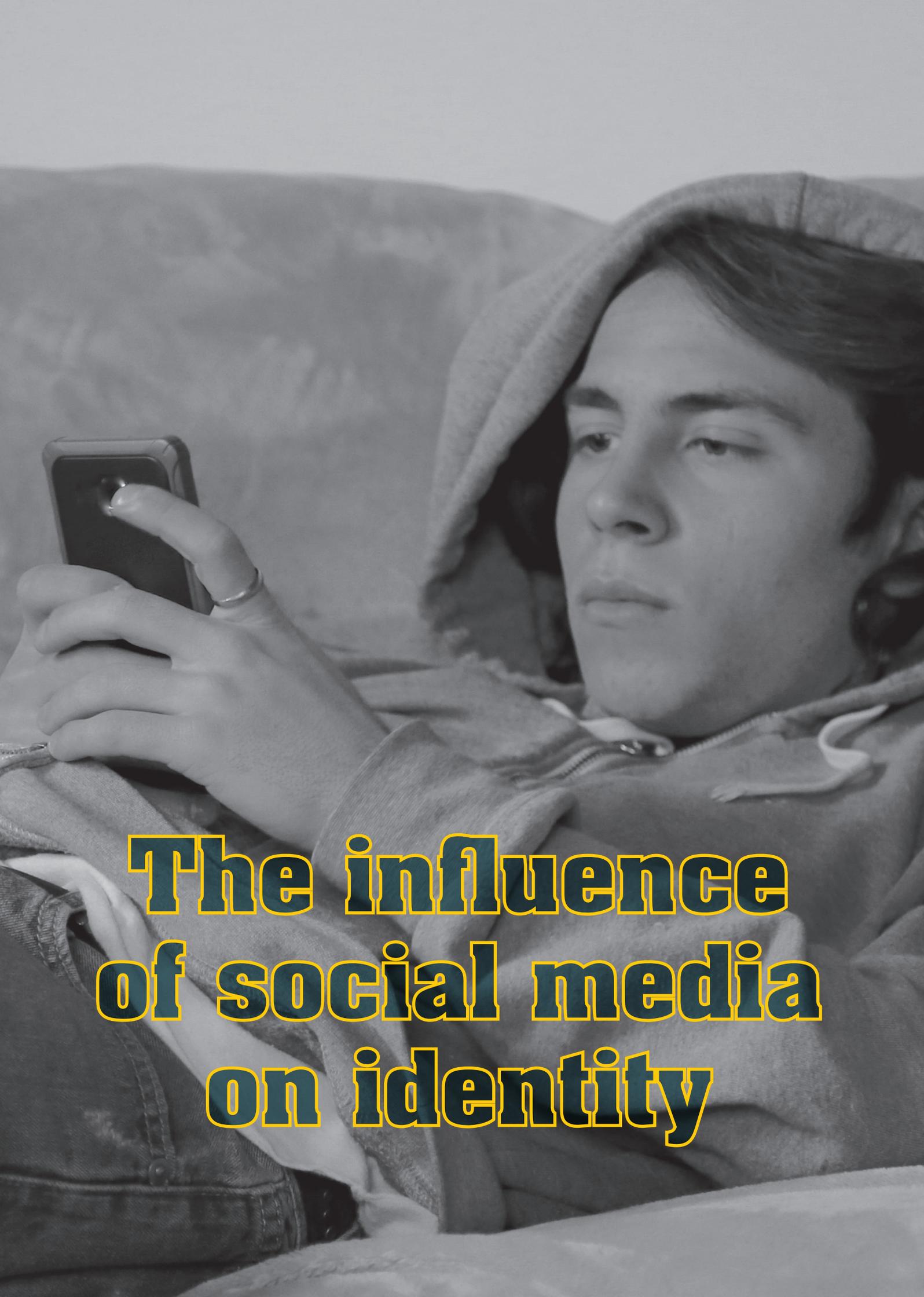
The influence of social media on identity

3. The influence of social media on identity

3.1 Idealised online identities

Social media platforms provide people with the opportunity to construct identities that are different to their offline personas. People may chop away and hide parts of their lives they do not wish to share with others, and select and highlight other parts which they do. Unsurprisingly, people's choices about what to share on social media are not random; they typically do not provide representative portraits of the lives they live offline. [22]

For many of the young men's accounts viewed as part of this study, this meant hiding any insecurities or lack of self-confidence with images that conveyed power and status. This was achieved through photos and videos portraying a lifestyle characterised by large quantities of money, designer clothes and expensive jewellery; a significant minority of photos and videos showed young people holding knives and guns as displays of power. [23]

According to our focus groups and interviews with professionals, these idealised identities were often being used as a cover for high levels of anxiety and insecurity, which may stem in large part from growing up in areas of socioeconomic deprivation as well as experiences of childhood trauma, which affect a disproportionate number of young people who later become involved in gangs. [24] Often, therefore, there is a significant gap between young people's idealised online identities and the realities of their offline lives.

3.2 Celebrity culture and the importance of audience approval

Increasing amounts of time spent viewing and uploading content to social media platforms – photographs uploaded to selected major social media platforms has risen by a staggering 1525% over the last five years [25] – is diluting many people's focus on the here and now in favour of a future-oriented focus that involves capturing photographic and video evidence of particular experiences to share with others. For many young people, their self-esteem is increasingly based not on what they think about themselves, but on what others think about them. [26]

Whilst external validation (approval by others) undoubtedly mattered a lot to young people long before the advent of social media platforms, this process is now continuous and unrelenting in an age of online technology. Indeed, recent research has evidenced the links between heightened narcissism and increasing use of social media. [27] On an hour-by-hour (and even minute-by-minute) basis, young people's posts to social media are uploaded and their popularity simplistically and objectively quantified for all to see through the number of views, likes and positive comments they receive.

For example, consider the use of the app Periscope. Phrases such as 'light it up' (a request that viewers repeatedly tap a heart icon that represents approval for the video content), 'swipe and invite' (a request that existing viewers invite additional people to watch the current stream) and 'follow me up' (an explicit request designed to hook viewers into future posts) are frequently employed by users of this social media platform.

The posts of individuals who are purportedly making large sums of money primarily through their involvement in drug distribution, and who have a reputation for serious violence, are often particularly popular amongst young people. Indeed, upwards of tens of thousands of young people are following the social media accounts of individuals who self-identify as prominent members of street gangs, involved in serious violence and drug distribution. [28] A range of professionals reported that this continuous lens into a seemingly seductive and lucrative lifestyle that glamorises violence and the pursuit of money through illegal activities such as drug distribution is further undermining the commitment of some young people to education and legitimate forms of employment. [29]

3.3 Anti-police

The generally negative views of young people towards the police in the UK have been well-documented in recent years. [30] This is concerning given the links between public perceptions of police legitimacy and the likelihood of people breaking the law. [31] In short, the less that someone believes the police to be a legitimate authority, the more likely they are to break the law. [32] With this in mind, the fact that many young people's accounts contained material that reflects negative views of the police is troubling. Photos and videos of police officers accompanied by expletives and derogatory text were common features of content on platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat and Periscope.

This type of content is troubling not only because of the negative interactions between young people and the police that it undoubtedly reflects, but also because it is likely that sharing this type of material will further embed and intensify this negativity. First, by enabling content to be viewed by large audiences, social media platforms make it possible for negative material about the police to reach far greater numbers than would have been the case before the advent of these platforms.

Second, the potential to comment on material uploaded onto social media provides young people with a virtual group space to collectively voice their anger and resentment of the police, consequently escalating negativity and further delegitimising the police as an institution. [33] Third, a single negative interaction between police officers and members of the public can often outweigh countless positive interactions, [34] particularly if negative interactions are recorded and shared widely over social media, whilst positive interactions remain confined to a single point in time and space.

Communication over social media platforms, therefore, seems to make the police's uphill struggle in overcoming their legitimacy deficits in the eyes of young people ever more challenging.

Online activity
spilling into
the real world

4. Online activity spilling into the real world

To what extent, and in what ways, can incidents occurring online have real-life face-to-face consequences? The current study uncovered numerous cases in which activity online had repercussions in the real world. Discussions with young people, police officers and other professionals working with young people all highlighted the serious real-world implications of certain content being uploaded to social media.

4.1 Music videos raising tension

One of the concerns raised by young people and professionals regarded music videos that contained taunts and threats to individuals from rival groups. These videos typically derived from the drill music genre, which originates in Chicago. It is essential to highlight that the vast majority of this music constitutes a raw reflection of the lives that the young people creating the music are living, and does not deliberately incite further serious incidents of violence. [35] Some laudable youth violence reduction initiatives in the UK actively support young people to develop their talents and create music in this and other related genres. [36]

The music videos discussed by participants, however, went beyond commenting on the violent environments in which many young people grow up. Instead, they included displays of young people holding weapons, remarks about recent incidents of violence, and explicit threats to stab or shoot specific individuals and members of rival groups. In short, participants argued that they acted as much as a call to violence, as they did a comment on it:

Interviewer: So what things happened after this music video was uploaded?

Mark: Shootings and stabbings.

Steven: It caused more stabbings for a time.

Chris: People from other ends have got to retaliate.

Mark: People from [Estate A] came to [Estate B] and there was some serious problems.

Focus group: young people

Sarah: Over the course of a week there were a number of different stabbings and shots fired as a result of a couple of videos they put up against each other as one video goes up and then a response video and so forth, it just raises the tension and makes things happen probably a lot quicker.

Group interview: police officer

It is worth highlighting that many young people do not want to live the violent and chaotic lifestyles that are being glamorised in these videos. Indeed, young people often attempt to launch careers as music artists as a means of escaping life 'on road'. Whilst the goal and intention is positive, the ends cannot be used to justify the means if young people are being seriously injured as a result of the content being uploaded as part of these videos.

The concerns of professionals and young people in the current study were echoed by a judge during a trial in May 2016 who, when sentencing four men for murder, concluded that ongoing threats communicated through videos uploaded onto YouTube had been 'at the heart' of a fatal stabbing. [37]

Of course, displays of disrespect that threaten a person's perceived reputation and self-esteem were 'at the heart' of many incidents of face-to-face violence long before the advent of social media.[38] Crucially, however, social media has the potential to greatly enhance the size of the audience witnessing these challenges to status and reputation. Therefore, if an individual or group fails to respond to these challenges, this can result in a significant perceived loss of status and reputation.

In addition, people who upload this type of content to social media come under pressure to live up to their words. If uploaded content is not backed up by real-life action, those uploading it are liable to being branded as 'internet gangsters'. Consequently, it is not surprising that young people, the police, and other professionals, reported an increase in violent face-to-face reprisals once this content appeared online.

If an individual fails to respond to these challenges, this can result in a significant perceived loss of status and reputation. In addition, the young people in the video who are doing the disrespecting also come under pressure to live up to their words. If statements in these videos are not backed up by real-life action, young people and the groups they represent are liable to be branded as 'internet gangsters'. Consequently, it is not surprising that young people, the police and other professionals all reported an increase in violent face-to-face reprisals once these videos appeared online.

In addition, young people indicated that the presence of violent material on social media, particularly involving displays of weapons, served to make them feel less safe and more likely to carry weapons for protection:

Liam: If you see the people you're living around holding knives in these videos, you know it's real, it isn't talk, so you're going to be scared and make sure you aren't the only one who can't defend yourself.

Focus group: young people

Much has already been written about the importance of helping young people to feel safe to reduce the prevalence of knife possession. [39] It was clear from our discussions with young people that these perceptions of safety depended not only on their experiences and awareness of real-life incidents of youth violence involving knives, but also on what they witnessed online.

4.2 Trespassing and taunting

The online platform analysis revealed numerous examples of young people videoing and photographing themselves trespassing into areas that supposedly belonged to rival groups. Young people reported that the primary intent of going into rival areas was to attack young people affiliated with rival groups. However, if members of rival groups could not be found, then videos and photographs were taken involving displays of disrespect such as making hand signs associated with their own group or urinating on prominent street signs. Comments such as 'Where they at?' were typically attached to these photos and videos. Young people reported that this type of content appeared daily on social media:

Danny: If you go on Twitter you can see these videos all the time. People are basically calling each other out, so obviously it's causing reactions.

Young people uploaded this content onto social media platforms to bolster their perceived status and reputation, as evidence of the fact that they were not afraid to enter areas which supposedly belonged to a rival group. In addition, this type of content was designed to denigrate and taunt young people affiliated with the area in question. This material, therefore, had the consequence of provoking the individuals or groups who were being disrespected, and young people and professionals reported during focus groups and interviews that it was not uncommon for these videos to trigger violent real-life reprisals. Indeed, the online platform analysis revealed numerous cases in which young people were attacked as a response to this material being uploaded. [40]

4.3 Stealing property and provocation

Young people also sought to bolster their perceived status and reputation by stealing the property of those associated with rival groups, and uploading photographic and video evidence onto social media platforms. One example which received a high level of attention over social media involved a group of young people seriously injuring an individual associated with a rival group and stealing his moped. A short time after the incident, one of the young people involved broadcast himself and other members of the group live on Periscope driving the moped around their own estate.

To further the humiliation and provoke a reaction from the young man who had been attacked, his name was posted in the title of the video, which was made publicly available to anyone with an account on the social media platform. Those in the video were so secure in the knowledge that adult generations do not engage with these platforms that during the broadcast they felt comfortable divulging the details of the attack as well as the theft of the young person's property.

Another example involved a group of young people attacking a member of rival group, stealing his coat and bag, and tying them to the top of a telegraph pole on their estate. A video was then broadcast on Periscope displaying the young person's property, challenging him to retrieve it. Although originally uploaded live using the Periscope app, the video was later uploaded onto YouTube, where it received tens of thousands of further views. This begs the question of who these viewers are. On some platforms such as Instagram and Periscope, it is possible to see a list of the people who have viewed or 'liked' the content. Although the current research did not systematically record the details of such large numbers of viewers, it was clear from scrolling through these lists that viewers were predominantly teenage boys and girls.

The added dimension of social media in cases such as these is troubling for at least two reasons. First, young people now have more to gain from engaging in behaviour that harms other young people. Prior to social media, the type of behaviour described above may well have earned a young person a certain degree of status and respect from their peers. Given the potential for these incidents to be viewed by unprecedented numbers of young people over social media platforms, however, the perceived reputational rewards are now much greater. A number of young people stated that the increasing prevalence of these incidents was due in large part to the significant amount of status and recognition that someone can get from uploading this type of content to social media. Social media also acts as an aggravating factor in another way, namely, by provoking retaliation from the young person or people who are the victims of these incidents.

4.4 Live broadcasting of violence

Numerous episodes of serious violence uploaded onto social media were encountered during the online platform analysis. Videos of violence between young people were sometimes broadcast live from prison by prisoners who had managed to gain access to smartphones. The problem of mobile phones being smuggled into prisons has not gone unnoticed in recent years, with the Ministry of Justice issuing a press release in August 2016 stating that the issue was being tackled through new measures introduced by the Serious Crime Act 2015. [41]

Videos not only evidenced episodes of young people being attacked in prison, but also included displays of large quantities of drugs in prisoners' cells, accompanied by young people boasting about their access to phones and drugs in prison.

Videos of young people attacking individuals associated with rival gangs in the community were also commonly uploaded onto social media platforms. Again, these videos not only bolstered the perceived status and reputation of the people uploading the videos, but also served to humiliate and provoke rival groups. As with the content that displayed acts of trespassing and theft, young people and professionals indicated that in many cases videos displaying young people being attacked led to violent reprisals in real life, as young people and their friends sought to get revenge for the humiliation of both the attacks themselves and the added insult of these acts being uploaded and shared over social media.

4.5 The prolonged and viral nature of online disrespect

The vast majority of young people's activity on social media of course does not relate to real-life episodes of violence. Even direct threats and provocation online more often than not fade away without real-world ramifications. Why then, does some activity on social media lead to serious violence between young people?

Although it is not particularly helpful, it is worth acknowledging that a young person's decision to react or not react to a particular instance of online disrespect is in large part down to chance. For example, factors such as how a young person is feeling in the particular moment that they view online instances of disrespect, whether they are with friends at the time who may encourage or discourage retaliation, and how proximate they are to the young person or people disrespecting them (and therefore how easy it would be to retaliate face-to-face) are all factors with the potential to sway the balance between overlooking episodes of disrespect and reacting to them.

Alongside these relatively random factors, however, one issue seems to matter more than most: the size of the audience that views the content in question. When material is uploaded onto a social media platform, it is difficult to predict precisely what size of audience it will get, although this can range significantly from no viewers at all to in excess of a million.

From the online platform analysis it became clear that instances of disrespect witnessed by small audiences are often dismissed or overlooked by the person being disrespected. Whilst this does not mean that incidents of disrespect confined to small audiences cannot trigger face-to-face violence, large audiences seem to make real-life retaliation more likely. It is this enhanced audience factor that seems to hold a central place in explaining the relationship between online provocation and face-to-face reaction.

The clearest illustration of this is the significant concern shown by young people and professionals around drill music videos, which taunt and provoke young people from rival groups. Some of these music videos are exceptionally popular, receiving in excess of one million views. The perceived reputational stakes are therefore particularly high in relation to this form of online communication. Videos showing young people trespassing into areas associated with rival groups (section 4.2), stealing the property of other young people (section 4.3) or engaging in violence (section 4.4) can also receive sizable audiences. Often this is the result of the fluidity with which online content can be transferred and disseminated over multiple social media platforms. What is initially broadcast live over Periscope, for example, can later be disseminated over Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat. To reiterate, when content goes viral in this way, this can exert significant social pressure on a young person or group to respond to instances of provocation.

In addition to this enhanced audience factor, social media facilitates the transformation of events which would otherwise be confined to a single point of time into those that can be replayed endlessly at any point in time. This makes it significantly harder for a young person to ignore or overlook instances of disrespect that are shared over social media. Whereas the memory of these events could fade with the passage of time prior to the advent of online platforms, content on social media now has a lingering nature and has the potential to resurface at any point in the future.

To summarise, therefore, before social media platforms emerged, instances of disrespect and provocation were typically confined to a single space and point in time, and to relatively small audiences. Although news about these incidents could spread by word of mouth to a larger number of people, there is a significant difference between this situation and the current one in which visceral displays of events are captured by photographic and video evidence and shared online for all to see. It is the combination of this enhanced audience dimension alongside the lingering nature of online content that seems to play a central role in understanding why online disrespect is so effectual in terms of provoking face-to-face violence.

What about young women?

5. What about young women?

Girls are often overlooked in research on gangs and serious youth violence. [42] Because of the current study's sampling strategy (discussed in section 2.4) the majority of the data related to boys. However, young people and professionals had much to say about the ways in which girls were implicated in issues concerning social media and youth violence.

In relation to the music videos discussed in section 4.1, there was a clear distinction between the perceptions of young men and young women. When discussing why girls might feature in what they described as gang videos uploaded on social media platforms, young women were keen to portray young men as the driving factor:

Claire: The girls make the guys look good, so other people think these guys have got the girls.

Jade: The boys are just using the girls to look good.

Sarah: I would say the same, the boys want to make it look like they can get girls.

Focus group: young people

In contrast, young men insisted that it was girls who played an active role in associating with young men in prominent groups

Josh: They (girls) just love gangs.

Daniel: Girls hang around with gangs because they want to say to other girls that, 'Ah, I'm part of the gang'. They want the status as well ... girls think it makes them look good; that's why they do it.

Focus group: young people

Discussions with professionals working with young people suggested that each case was unique, and that both of these perspectives were likely to have some, albeit varying, degrees of validity depending on the individual case.

Whatever the reason underpinning a particular girl's involvement with a group of young men, police officers described a number of incidents where girls

had featured in content uploaded to social media and subsequently been targeted by members of rival groups in serious violent reprisals and sexual assaults. In addition, professionals described cases in which young women who commented on content uploaded to social media were subsequently groomed and pressured into risky activities such as holding and storing weapons or drugs.

Another significant issue raised by professionals working with young people concerned so-called 'sket lists'. These are essentially lists of girls considered to be 'sluts' and legitimate targets for sexual violence. [43] The girls on these lists are sometimes the sisters or girlfriends of young men from rival groups who are specifically targeted for the purposes of revenge or provocation. Although sket lists are by no means new, [44] it appears that social media is increasingly being used to disseminate and share these lists, which often includes tags to the girls' own social media accounts, causing a high degree of distress and enhancing the risk of victimisation in real life.

Other concerns raised by professionals specifically concerning young women included groups of boys using girls for PR (public relations) purposes, for example to promote content associated with particular gangs over social media or to record and broadcast attacks on rival gang members. Concerns around the continued use of 'honey-trapping' (a phenomenon whereby a girl persuades a young man to travel to an area where he is then attacked by members of rival group) were raised by a number of professionals, who highlighted the use of social media for recording and disseminating these attacks.

Although some research has shed light on the subject of social media and sexual exploitation in recent years, [45] due to the pace of technological change there is an inherent limitation in that the findings quickly become outdated. Given the concerns of young people, the police and other professionals around girls, social media and violence, this is clearly an area that requires further attention.

Conclusion

6. Conclusion

This report has explored the links between young people's use of social media and serious youth violence. Data from the online platform analysis, discussions with young people and professionals, and findings from the international literature review are all broadly consistent and provide a good insight into what is happening online, and how and why online activity is acting as a catalyst and trigger for violence between young people.

The content of online material that is provoking face-to-face violence comes in a variety of forms: music videos that taunt and provoke young people and groups, photos and videos of young people trespassing into areas associated with rival groups, photos and videos displaying acts of theft from young people, and photos and videos displaying real-life acts of violence.

At a fundamental level, the links between online activity and face-to-face violence are similar in nature to the age-old process of instances of disrespect threatening to undermine a person's status and reputation, which in turn provokes a violent reaction to counter the threat. [46] Crucially, however, social media is both amplifying the number of opportunities for young people to disrespect one another and intensifying the provocative power of such disrespect.

Because of the sheer amount of time that young people spend on social media, as well as the enhanced audiences brought about by online platforms, online identities matter a great deal to many young people. The young men's accounts viewed as part of this study portrayed idealised online identities, characterised by hyper-masculinity and displays of large quantities of money, designer clothes, jewellery, drugs and weapons. However, there often seems to be a significant gap between these online displays and the realities of young people's offline lives. This leaves online identities fragile and particularly prone to challenge, which increases a young person's sensitivity to online instances of disrespect whilst also enhancing the likelihood of retaliation in real life.

On top of this, by collapsing time and space, social media provides young people with unprecedented opportunities to disrespect one another. Before the advent of social media, disrespect could be communicated either face-to-face or vicariously. Now, however, it can be communicated instantaneously at any time or place, in forms that are far more provocative. These potentially large audiences serve as an incentive for young people to engage in behaviour that that will increase their respect amongst peers, as well as subjecting others to significant social pressures to respond to incidents of online disrespect that threaten to undermine their perceived status and reputation.

6.1 Limitations

Although this report has provided an insight into the issue of young people's use of social media and serious violence between young people in real life, a number of limitations should be noted.

First and foremost, the findings apply in relation to the sample followed during the six-month online platform analysis, and the experiences and views of the professionals and young people who participated in interviews and focus groups. We cannot be sure of the extent to which these findings apply more generally to a wider population. It is likely that the issues discussed in this report will reflect more closely the experiences of a significant minority of young people living in large urban areas than those in more rural locations. In large part, this is because the presence of groups of young people who have serious rivalries with other groups, that is, rivalries that can result in young people being seriously injured on a regular basis, is a situation that predominantly exists in large cities. It is these rivalries that underpin much of the online activity and subsequent violence that is discussed in this report.

Second, the study has focused on issues which appeared to be most important in light of the data collected across the three research components. Whilst we can be confident in the findings presented in this report because the data from the three separate research components is largely consistent, we cannot be sure that the study has uncovered all of the potential links between young people's use of social media and youth violence.

Third, young people's use of social media is rapidly evolving. The process of designing research projects, collecting and analysing data, writing up and publishing within a sufficiently short timeframe that the findings remain relevant is challenging. Nevertheless, whilst the social media platforms used by young people will continue to evolve, we see no apparent reason why the general patterns and trends highlighted in this report will alter significantly in the coming years.

Recommendations

7. Recommendations

Responding to the challenges raised by young people's use of social media and its links to serious youth violence is a daunting task. As stated at the outset of this report, one of the main rationales for conducting the project was to raise awareness of what social media apps are currently being used by young people, how they are being used, and how and why online activity is triggering violent behaviour in the real world. We hope that this report has at least gone some way towards redressing this knowledge gap.

The crucial question, however, is where do we go from here? In answering this question, it is useful to distinguish between three fundamentally different strategies: prevention, intervention and suppression. Particular groups and organisations will have varying levels of interest and commitment to each of these strategies. It is important, however, that stakeholders do not regard them as competing against one another. Indeed, none of these strategies is likely to be effective in isolation. Instead, they ought to be cconsidered as complementary strands of activity that all share the common goal of tackling the links between young people's behaviour online and serious incidents of violence offline.

7.1   Prevention

Young people are inhabiting a virtual space which many perceive to be hidden from adults and belonging almost entirely to younger generations. Inevitably, this has created risky environments which young people are using to communicate with one another. In this report we have seen how this has led to some young people uploading evidence of criminal behaviour, including serious incidents of violence and property theft, to social media platforms in order to enhance their perceived status and reputation.

It is imperative, therefore, that adults engage to a greater extent with young people around the appropriate use of social media and, where possible, cohabit these spaces so that they contain a degree of adult oversight. Parents, carers and professionals often report a very limited knowledge and understanding of the social media apps that young people currently use, let alone what these apps involve or how young people's use of them is linking to attitudes and behaviours in real life. Viewed in this context, it is not surprising that many professionals working with young people are declining to engage with this issue.

A degree of cultural distance between generations – the so-called generation gap – is inevitable. Yet the unprecedented nature of technological innovation in recent years seems to have widened this gap further than ever before. We are not suggesting that adults need to be fully competent, regular users of social media, far from it. For parents, carers and professionals working with young people, even a basic understanding of the predominant means by which young people are now communicating would help to foster closer relationships between adults and young people.

Adults can start to bridge this important gap by engaging more closely with young people around their use of social media, not being afraid to ask young people what social media apps they use and what functions these apps perform. In addition, given the fundamental significance of online activity to young people's lives and the intimate link between an adequate understanding of social media and effective safeguarding, we recommend that all professionals working with young people be provided with sufficient training on social media.

7.1.1 Resources and training on social media

We acknowledge that many professionals working with young people will already be in receipt of some form of training around online activity. However, many of the professionals who participated in the current research indicated that they had either not received any training around social media whatsoever or that this training was severely limited.

One potential issue around training on social media is that the online landscape inhabited by young people typically evolves at a rapid pace. Some participants highlighted the outdated nature of recent internet training workshops which focused narrowly on online chat rooms and internet forums – such material is now limited in an era of smartphone technology and social media applications.

For adults with no knowledge or experience of social media apps, the task of getting to grips with young people's online behaviour must appear daunting. Yet providing professionals with a basic understanding of what social media apps are and what they do is not a particularly difficult task. These apps are expressly designed for ease of use: with a limited amount of instruction they can be downloaded with only a few clicks of a button and the basic functions are relatively simple to navigate. Training workshops that provide a basic yet comprehensive overview of the main social media applications should take no longer than half a day to deliver. The content, however, will require updating on a regular basis to keep pace with the development of online platforms.

In addition to training for professionals, the Home Office should develop online resources for parents and carers which explain the basics of the main social media platforms and highlight the importance of oversight of young people's and children's activity on social media. These resources should be well-advertised and updated on a regular basis to keep pace with the evolving social media landscape.

7.2 Intervention

Based on the current research, there seems to be a significant gap around the use of social media by parents, carers and professionals to engage with young people and pre-empt violent conflict. Policy and practice in the UK around social media intervention strategies appear to be lagging behind countries such as the USA. Recent research in Chicago, for example, provides evidence of how the effective use of social media by outreach youth workers is pre-empting and preventing serious incidents of face-to-face violence between young people. [47] In short, youth workers in Chicago are using social media platforms as a way of picking up on early warning signs of increased tension between high-risk individuals and groups. Youth workers then act on this information by attempting to reduce the heat between young people and groups whenever real-life violence appears imminent.

The frontline professionals participating in this research, however, reported being highly reluctant to use social media content to inform their frontline practice because they lack clear guidance on what is and what is not acceptable from an organisational and legal perspective. Currently, the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000 (RIPA) regulates the powers of public bodies to carry out surveillance and investigations of communication between members of the public. Given the rapid evolution of social media platforms in recent years, however, it seems appropriate for the guidance in this legislation to be revisited in light of the findings presented in the current report.

Indeed, following the Ending Gang Violence and Exploitation Forum in July 2016, the Home Office acknowledged the general request from those in attendance for further government guidance on the appropriate role and responsibilities of a full range of agencies with regard to the monitoring and use of content uploaded to social media. Again, whilst careful consideration must be given to finding an appropriate balance between respecting people's rights to privacy and the imperative of safeguarding vulnerable children and young people, it seems apparent that there is a great deal of potential for various stakeholders to do more to pre-empt and prevent violence between young people by engaging more closely with activity on social media.

7.3 Suppression

The authors of this report would like to see all reasonable measures taken to avoid young people being drawn into the criminal justice system. However, we are failing young people – both as perpetrators and victims – if we allow social media to act as an incentive to engage in serious acts of violence and theft.

7.3.1 Police monitoring and enforcement

The appropriate monitoring and enforcement role of the police based on content uploaded to social media platforms should be considered in light of the findings presented in this report. This is a sensitive issue, not least because of its potential to infringe on people's fundamental rights to privacy. In this regard, it is worth highlighting that much of the content shared over social media is either fully public or semi-public (see section 2.3).

At one end of the extreme, blanket surveillance of activity on social media platforms would be both undesirable and unnecessary. At the other end, a complete lack of oversight by the police or any other responsible adults will continue to contribute to young people's willingness to upload the type of content detailed in this report. There must surely be some compromise between these two extremes that would enable the police to pick up on the most serious incidents of criminal behaviour being broadcast and shared over social media platforms.

As noted above, RIPA currently regulates the powers of the police to carry out surveillance and investigations of communication between members of the public. Yet it remains unclear how the provisions of this statute may govern monitoring and enforcement based on content uploaded to social media. Recent social media applications are unprecedented in terms of how they facilitate content sharing and the extent to which such sharing ought to be considered public, private or somewhere between the two. Because of these uncertainties, as well as concerns at a senior level around the extent to which social media content may support frontline policing, the current level of police resources directed at monitoring social media is relatively low. If it is decided that the police ought to be playing a more active monitoring and enforcement role based on content broadcast and shared over social media platforms, then important decisions will need to be made around the appropriate (re)allocation of police resources to effectively operate in this space.

7.3.2 Removing online content

It is right that social media providers should remove content that violates their own community guidelines, for example, content that is violent or contains threats. [48] However, it is equally important that young people do not feel that they are being unfairly targeted by those in positions of power and authority, for example, social media providers and the police. This is particularly important given the pressing need to protect and enhance the legitimacy of the police in the eyes of young people. If professionals can proactively engage with young people to prevent them from uploading inappropriate content (as defined by the community guidelines provided by each social media platform), then this should be seen as preferable to simply responding reactively by removing such content.

Some decisions concerning whether or not to remove the type of content described in this report may be relatively straightforward. Others, however, may fall into a grey area. To enhance the legitimacy of a platform's decision to remove or allow certain content, platforms may benefit from some form of consultation with young people themselves to establish relevant criteria for making such judgements. As and when certain content is removed by social media platforms, the relevant user should be provided with a clear and specific rationale as to why the content breached the relevant guidelines.

Parents, carers and a wide range of professionals should encourage young people themselves to report online content that displays or incites serious violence. The major social media platforms already have processes in place for users to report inappropriate material. However, in the case of some platforms, the guidance given to young people is to contact the police to report any concerns about illegal activity or violent threats. Inevitably, many young people will be reluctant to contact the police about activity that they view online, both because of the time and effort required to do so and because of concerns around their own anonymity and fear of any potential repercussions around being labelled a 'snitch' by their peers. With this in mind, young people ought to be able to report this type of content anonymously and directly to the social media provider, who should then be under a duty to engage with the police when appropriate.

Some professionals reported that social media providers were failing to act on reports raised by young people concerning content that seemed to breach a platform's community guidelines. Given that social media providers are enabling violent and threatening material to be shared online between young people, the burden of responsibility should fall largely on the providers of these online platforms to ensure that they are being used safely.

7.4 Final reflections

The purpose of this report has been twofold: first, to raise knowledge and awareness of the links between young people's use of social media and serious youth violence, and, second, to kick-start a conversation about the possible ways in which we can respond to the challenges raised by these links. Regarding the former, the evidence is relatively clear and uncontroversial: social media is acting as a catalyst and trigger for incidents of serious youth violence through videos, photos and comments which raise the tension between individuals and rival groups, and provoke real-life retaliation.

The vast majority of this activity on social media is going unnoticed by parents, carers and professionals. Clearly, much more can and should be done to safeguard and protect vulnerable children and young people. We suggest that a range of groups and organisations can take positive steps in the three distinct, albeit complementary, areas of prevention, intervention and suppression.

It is important to highlight that the potential ways forward discussed in the final section of this report are not intended as a fixed blueprint as to what ought to be done in the immediate future. Instead, they are intended as starting points for various stakeholders to consider when developing their own strategies designed to respond to the challenges raised by social media.

Online technology is providing young people with unprecedented tools of communication. Whilst this is raising exciting opportunities, it is also creating serious risks and challenges that we are failing to tackle. Frank and honest conversations, as well as prolonged and collaborative efforts, will be required from a full range of groups and organisations to effectively address these issues. We hope that this report provides the stimulus to kick-start these efforts.

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[4] The term 'on road' generally refers to money-making street activity, for example drug distribution, theft and robbery.

[5] It is often difficult to tell whether online content has been taken and broadcast from an adult prison or a young offender institution. Therefore, the term 'prison' in this report is used as a catch-all term which includes both adult prisons and young offender institutions.

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