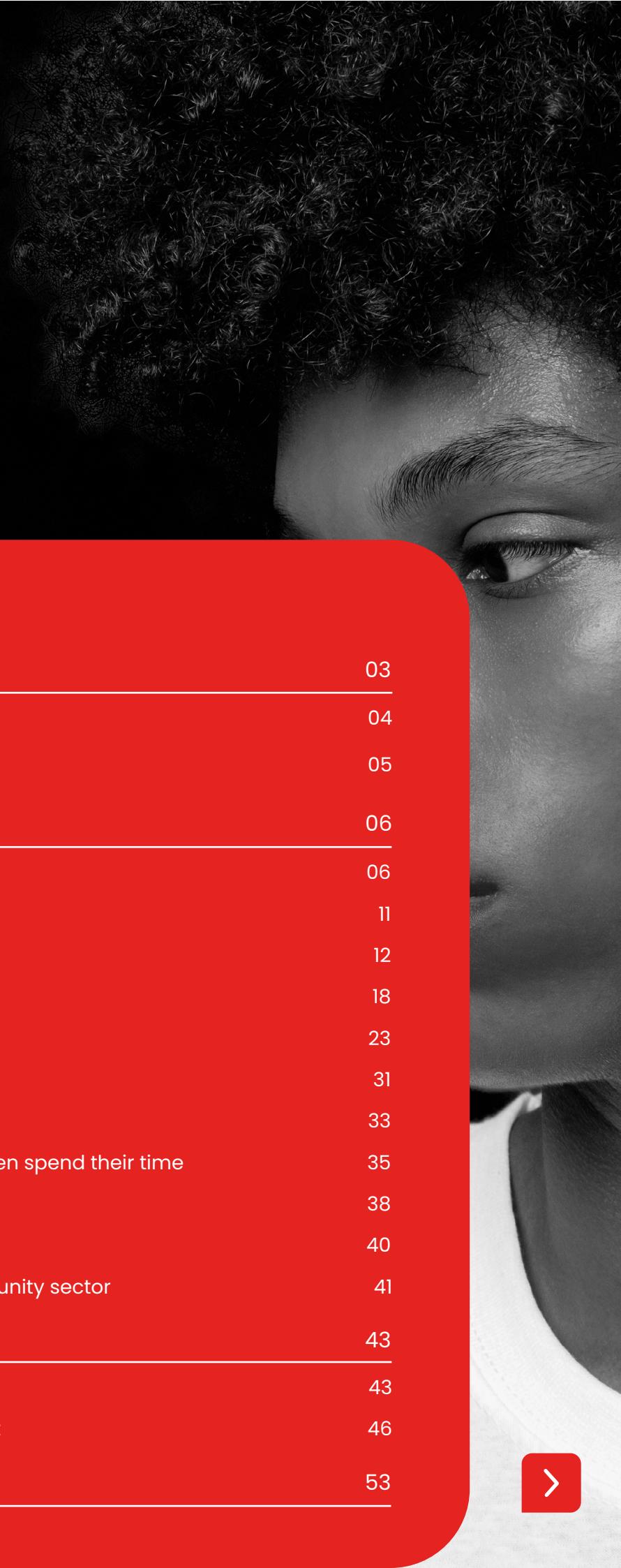


Who Cares?

Hearing from children and families about their experiences of multi-agency support when impacted by serious youth violence.

A report for the Inspectorates as part of the Joint Targeted Area Inspections (JTAI) on serious youth violence.





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INTRODUCTION

Who Cares? amplifies the voices of children and parents impacted by serious youth violence, shedding light on their experiences with multi-agency support and services.

Through their reflections, this report explores the reality of accessing support systems – showing where they've been let down and where, sometimes, they have found support that has met their complex and multifaceted needs.

By asking open questions, we encouraged an honest conversation about what has been helpful and where improvements are needed. This feedback is essential for the services tasked with safeguarding children, as it provides insight into what those directly impacted genuinely need.

The findings in Who Cares? have been used by the Inspectorates to inform the Joint Targeted Area Inspections (JTAI) on serious youth violence, offering direct input from children and parents.

For those who took part, Who Cares? was an opportunity to have their voices heard, hoping that by sharing their experiences, future interactions with safeguarding and support services will be improved for others in need.

The report has been reviewed by the children and parents who participated in conversations with Safer London, to check that it sensitively and accurately reflects their experiences and reflections.

We are grateful for their openness and courage in sharing their stories to help inspire positive change.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Ofsted, alongside the Care Quality Commission (CQC), HM Inspectorate of Probation (HMIP), HM Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) have undertaken inspections of Children's Social Care, the police, education, youth offending services and relevant health services, and other key safeguarding partners, to understand the multi-agency response to children affected by serious youth violence in six local authority areas in England.

As part of this process, they worked with Safer London to engage with children and families, aiming to gain a deeper understanding of their experiences with support services when they have been impacted by serious youth violence.



Who Cares? is an independent report that was commissioned by Ofsted, on behalf of the Inspectorates. The Inspectorates recognise the importance of listening to children and families and this consultation provides an important insight into the experiences of children and families.

The children and families who took part in this consultation were different from the children and families involved in the Joint Targeted Area Inspection (JTAI) on serious youth violence, and the majority lived in different areas from those inspected. Safer London independently recruited the children and parents who participated, inviting them to share their honest experiences and perspectives on the services and support they received in the context of serious youth violence.

Therefore, the inspections and this consultation work are quite separate but do focus on the same issues of multi-agency work to address serious youth violence.

LANGUAGE, TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

When referring to serious youth violence the Inspectorates are looking at specific types of crime affecting children outside of the home. This includes homicide and weapon-enabled violence, and may also include County Lines and drug-dealing activity. This may be children who have been harmed, are responsible for harm or both, because of these types of crimes.

At Safer London we often observe that the binary labelling of children and young people as victims or perpetrators is unhelpful as it often contributes to the criminalisation of children who are experiencing harm and impacts on the support they may receive. Therefore we choose not to use this language in the report.

We are working from the perspective that all children impacted by serious youth violence should receive a child welfare led response which recognises the need for safeguarding and support for those affected.

Throughout this report we have consciously chosen to use the term **children** to describe the children and young people we spoke to, as they were all under the age of 18 years old when they experienced harm. Whilst we recognise that their preference is often to be referred to as young people, in this context we feel that it is important to recognise the gravity of these experiences and the significant impact that these issues have for the children and families dealing with them.

It is used as a reminder of the need for their protection and support and to ensure that we do not make children responsible for the harm they experience or adultify them by framing them in any way which may encourage this. It is in no way used as a method to infantilise or to lose sight of the unique needs and rights of adolescents.

Throughout this report we will refer to all parents and carers as **parents**. However, we recognise that families come in many diverse forms and in some circumstances the child's main carers may not be their parent, but a carer from their wider family or community or a carer provided to them as a Looked After Child. All these roles are valid and valuable to the children they care for.



RESEARCH & FINDINGS

Prepared by Carly Adams Elias and Hannah Millar

OUR APPROACH

Safer London worked with a group of children and young people, aged 16-19 years old and with experiences of youth violence, to shape this approach. This group of children and young people felt we should have multiple ways for children and parents to share their experiences.

Based on their ideas and input we co-created and offered opportunities for children and parents to share their experiences in three ways:

- Having an easily accessible digital method, such as a short questionnaire which can be accessed digitally and completed with support from a trusted adult.
- Group conversations facilitated by trusted adults.
- Individual conversations for those who want to share more and/or are not able to access a group conversation.

Once created, the methods were tested with a group of children and young people who undertook the activities and sense checked the language and approach. Their feedback was used to shape the process further before sharing it more widely.

Regardless of the method of participation, all those who took part were thanked with a £30 Love2shop voucher for their time and reflections.

13

children and young people shaped the approach

33

children and young people shared their experiences and views

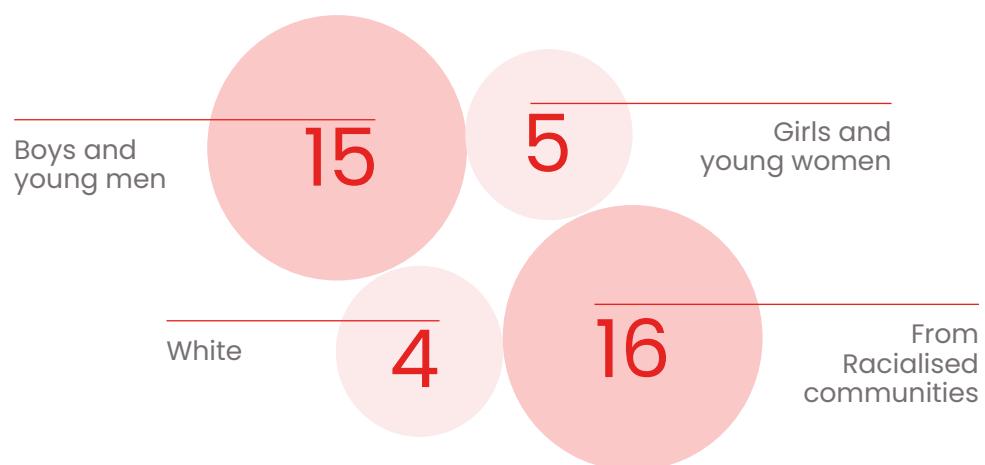
10

parents shared their experiences and views

WHO TOOK PART

During the creation of this report 33 children and young people were involved in shaping the work and contributing their views and experiences. 13 children and young people were involved in shaping the approach and a further 20 children shared their experiences either using the digital method, taking part in a one to one conversation, or a combination of both.

Of the children who shared their experiences, 5 were girls and young women and 15 were boys and young men. All respondents were from London and live in a range of boroughs across North, South and East London. 16 of the children represent racialised communities and 4 are White.



The children identified their experiences of serious youth violence as taking place between the ages of 8 and 17 years old, with ages 14-16 years old being the most common age range when they were impacted.

Whilst group conversations were offered, no children chose to engage with this method. This perhaps reflects children's reluctance to engage in these conversations within a group setting, particularly when there isn't already an established group with a shared identity and safety created within those group dynamics. It may also reflect the capacity of the organisations invited to hold these spaces and provide the necessary arrangements needed to support conversations which may be challenging and raise difficult or traumatic experiences and reflections.

In addition, 10 parents were involved in a combination of one to one and group conversations. 6 of these were from London and 4 lived outside of London. 2 are from racialised communities and 4 are White, 4 are unknown. The families represented a range of socio-economic backgrounds, family sizes and ages. Many of the children discussed by the parents, also had siblings who were impacted by the child's experience of youth violence.

The opportunity to participate was shared with over 40 organisations working alongside children and families who may be impacted by serious youth violence across England.

For those who were able to support children or families to engage in sharing their experiences, vouchers were also shared as an acknowledgment of the time and resources it takes to facilitate such spaces.

Many organisations were unable to support engagement due to their own time and capacity constraints. Many are supporting children who are being impacted currently by serious youth violence and are not necessarily in a safe and stable place in their lives to be able to talk about their experiences.

Whilst this report can offer some valuable insights, it should also be recognised that to effectively hear from children and families about their experiences more time and resources are needed to break down the barriers to engaging. Especially when there have been experiences of being let down and not trusting services who should have been supportive, as well as safety in knowing that they will be supported if the process surfaces unresolved trauma and needs.

WHAT THEY TOLD US

Children and families told us that having access to support from multi-agency networks is important to them. But just having the agencies involved isn't enough for them to feel safe and cared for and for that support to feel effective.

This report covers themes and issues which have emerged from the responses of those who participated and is organised by the agencies that may form the network of multi-agency support for children and families impacted by serious youth violence. We will explore what surfaced with each agency and share the positives, the concerns, and the recommendations for improving responses.

We have chosen to anonymise the children and parents who spoke to us. Any names or locations have been changed to pseudonyms to protect the identity and safety of all those who participated. It is important to hold in mind that this report is not just a series of themes emerging, but a representation of the lives and experiences of those who felt safe enough and brave enough to share their experiences.

We have written the quotes verbatim, as they were told or recorded. We do this to provide an honest representation of those we spoke to and as an attempt to humanise their experiences and reflections. We may make minor additions in brackets in some cases to clarify the quote or make sense in the context within which it is written.

Whilst there are some positives to be drawn out in these conversations with children and parents, there is a sense that agencies behave in a way that make children and families feel like they simply don't care, leaving them feeling uncared for and unsupported.

CONTEXTUALISING CHILDREN'S EXPERIENCE OF YOUTH VIOLENCE

For the children and families that we spoke to, the experiences of violence spanned a wide range; with some being harmed, some harming others and some experiencing both. We spoke to some children who were exposed to harm through their friends or other peers being harmed, such as witnessing their friend being stabbed or being threatened because of their friendships with others.

We heard from children and parents where children had been threatened or harmed by guns, knives or other weapons including corrosive chemicals, as well as children who had chosen to carry knives or who had harmed others with weapons. We spoke to children who had been robbed and others who have robbed, and some who had experienced both. We heard about experiences where children had the harm that they experienced filmed and shared within their wider communities.

We spoke to some children who described no other experiences of harm, whilst for many their experience of youth violence also intersected with experiences of exploitation and trafficking, other forms of peer instigated harm, such as bullying and sexual violence, harm or loss within their families, and harm that occurred as result of structural inequalities and discrimination such as poverty, racism, sexism, ableism, homophobia and transphobia.

All the children we spoke to describe some impact of the harm they experienced. Some suffered serious and life changing physical injuries, some had harmed themselves because of the emotional impact of their experiences and others described various manifestations of emotional or psychological distress. Many spoke about experiences of isolation, exclusion and feeling let down by those who hold responsibilities to safeguard and protect them.

We spoke to children who had been impacted by one off experiences and others whose lives were being impacted daily and continue to be.

“

Nobody acknowledged what was going on with my son

PARENT

Alongside the children, we also spoke to parents and carers who told us about the wider impact these harms had had on them and their family, particularly the emotional impact and distress of knowing their child is not safe but feeling little power to help achieve safety for them outside of their home.

Many spoke about the advocacy they have done on behalf of their children to influence decision-making and achieve access to the resources they need, as well as the sacrifices that they've had to make to help keep their children safe. They spoke about the time and energy it takes to liaise with multi-agency partnerships, and how this can feel; some with positive experiences that made them feel seen and supported, but sadly, many who were left feeling blamed, frustrated and disappointed.

One parent shared that “*nobody acknowledged what was going on with my son. He was stabbed, he had chemicals thrown at him. He was severely exploited, and he did suffer a lot of violence. Absolutely nothing, in my opinion, happened that should have happened*”.

Discover the agency online data capture ratings



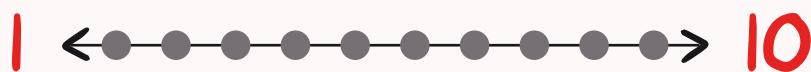
EXPLORE AGENCY FINDINGS

- Children's Social Care
- The Police
- Schools and education settings
- Housing
- Health services
- Spaces and places where children spend their time
- Friends and peer relationships
- Youth Justice services
- The youth, voluntary and community sector

AGENCY RATINGS

ONLINE DATA COLLECTION

As part of the online method, children were asked to share which services they had been involved with them and their family and to rate them on a scale of 1-10



One represented the most negative experience and ten represented the most positive experience.

16

children provided responses to the online data collection survey



Due to the small sample size, the findings are not generalisable to all children who experience youth violence in England.

The "average scores" reflect the responses from the 16 children and should not be read as general effectiveness scores of these agencies.

However, we can see that children who responded gave a lower rating to the agencies with which they had the most frequent involvement, and a higher rating to the youth and voluntary sector workers that appear to be least available to them.

SOCIAL CARE

5

Average score

The 9 children who responded to say they had involvement from Children's Social Care, rated them between 1 and 10, with an average score of 5

POLICE

3

Average score

13 children rated their experiences with the police from 1 to 9. Out of these, 10 children rated their experiences at 1. The average rating for all the children's experiences was 3.

EDUCATION SETTINGS

3

Average score

9 children reflected on the role of professionals in education settings, and rated their experiences between 1 and 6, averaging at 3.

YOUTH JUSTICE SERVICE

No children shared that they had involvement with the Youth Justice Service.

HEALTH SERVICES

3

Average score

Only 3 children had involvement with health services, and rated this between 1 and 5, with an average of 3

VOLUNTARY AND COMMUNITY SERVICE

7

Average score

3 children responded to say they received support from a voluntary and community Service, rating them between 6 and 9, with an average of 7

YOUTH WORKERS

8

Average score

3 children responded to say they had youth workers involved, rating this at 5, 10 and 10, bringing the average to 8

CHILDREN'S SOCIAL CARE

Many families experienced frequent changes in social workers. Some families spoke positively about their social worker's support, with the most memorable ones being those who provided practical support and took action that genuinely felt helpful.

One parent, who had Children's Social Care involvement and numerous different social workers in that period, described a new social worker coming in and resolving a long-standing school placement issue immediately following a quick phone call. This tangible help left them feeling that "*she's done more in that half an hour than all of our previous sort of interactions with social services have achieved in the previous three years... but if we'd had this lady three years ago, I think we would have been in a very different situation*".

While there was minimal reference to the positive experiences children and parents have had, parents recognised the need and wish for Children's Social Care to be involved "*from the get-go*". Parents described feeling unsure what to do and one shared that "*you don't know who should be involved at that time, and that is the issue. Even just having this list, obviously you know your friends and your family, but you don't really know what's available, and that's I think what the issue is*".

They reflected that the social worker should act as a central point of contact and provide information on what help was available to them, as most families wouldn't know. They understood that it's the social worker's role to coordinate all the multi-agency communication and working, but one reflected that "*they failed miserably*" at that because "*no one takes ownership of anything*". Another shared that "*we've had a social worker floating around in the background. Keep promising us all these things are going to happen. Nothing happens*".

“

she's done more in that half an hour than all of our previous sort of interactions

PARENT

ABILITY TO UNDERSTAND AND RESPOND TO NEEDS

Children's Social Care are recognised by both children and parents to be important partners in providing a response to those impacted by youth violence.

However, what we heard were many examples of the challenges children and parents faced in trying to get support from this agency. Part of this may be due to what some parents recognised as the ongoing difficulty Children's Social Care has in responding to harm outside the home, with one noting "*because there was no concerns of there being any danger in the house, they just weren't interested at all*".

This was echoed by another parent who shared that "*they come and assessed us as a family and basically concluded that he was in a nice safe family home, and he wasn't at risk at home. Nobody ever discussed with me that he was in severe danger out of my home*". This does not align with the guidance in [Working Together to Safeguard Children 2023](#), which states that harm outside the home should be considered.

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they just weren't interested at all

PARENT

Contextual Safeguarding approaches seeks to address this by promoting changes within the safeguarding system to think about and respond to different contexts where children may experience harm, like public spaces where incidents of youth violence may have occurred. Yet, it seems in many of the experiences shared, the focus has remained on the families and any risks that may exist within the home, which subsequently excludes them from receiving appropriate support.

For some of the children and parents we spoke with, there had been involvement with social workers in their lives for a long period of time. However, this was not solely in relation to the impact of youth violence. For others, it felt like a battle to get Children's Social Care involved when children and families had been impacted by youth violence and they needed it.

One parent told us that the social worker "*wasn't helpful, because when she then came back and said, oh, she doesn't feel that my son is in that need for them to really be part of what's going on*". Another parent described her situation as feeling desperate when trying to access support: "*Like we were begging social services to follow up on our child's missing episodes, and they didn't really do that. And we were begging for them to come and give us advice about how to, kind of like, best try and sort of, yeah, look after our child and help*".

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I believe if there was a social worker, a permanent one involved, I'm sure by now things would have moved forward

PARENT

There is a sense that parents felt helpless and did not get the support they were asking for or get it at the right time. One parent struggled with Children's Social Care who eventually allocated a social worker for her son, but only several months after he had been stabbed. She reflected that "*they haven't done nothing at all, apart from now when they want to give me a social worker, which we should have had from the beginning... I believe if there was a social worker, a permanent one involved, I'm sure by now things would have moved forward*".

One parent seeking support shared that on their first contact with Children's Social Care that the social worker "*asked me what, what did I want them to do? What did I actually want them to do about any of this*". Families reported what they felt was a deflective approach and how this can lead them to question how they can have trust in Children's Social Care when they appear to not know how to respond.

Aligned with this lack of response, many families also spoke about how quickly cases were closed, often with little support in place or communication about why or what they should expect.

COMMUNICATION

Communication was a significant issue that both children and parents found challenging when it came to engaging with Children's Social Care.

Children commented on the fact they felt that they were often asked the same questions, which the social workers already knew the answers to. Another felt social workers "*didn't really look into why things happened*".

One parent explained that the police and Children's Social Care's lack of response to the youth violence meant that her son does not trust them as he was left to deal with things on his own. The social worker "*did try and talk to him, but he's still not having it. He doesn't want anything to do with her*". Another parent told us that the social worker "*still doesn't contact me unless I contact her*". In another case, a parent reported that they were told to stop contacting agencies when they were reaching out for answers and responses: "*What the police and social services did was, they sent us this really official letter saying that our level of communication, the amount of times we were communicating, was intimidating staff and that we should only write one email a week on a Tuesday and it would be replied to on a Friday*".

Through our work at Safer London we often hear from professionals in these agencies that children and parents 'will not engage', but our conversations have revealed that families have found social workers to often be inaccessible, unavailable, failing to engage or provide support at critical times.

Linked to challenges around communication, some children talked about how trust was broken when they were told things would be done but were not, or not when needed. "*I would say, like, when it comes to social services, they for me, I don't feel like as if things were done at the right time and then I feel like they give you false hope as well*". This was echoed by another child who shared that "*I've experienced the lies, the lies... the fake opportunities that they try to bring. Like they will say that they're going to do something, and it will never, it will never come round, and they will never do*".

We also had several examples of families feeling that social workers were not always clear about the concerns they held. One parent shared that "*nobody ever once sat me down and said your son's been exploited*". This left parents feeling pushed out of the network and unable to know how to appropriately respond.

MISREPRESENTING THE FAMILY

Another theme related to communication was how families felt their child's needs or the facts of the situation were misrepresented.

One parent shared their experience of their child being taken into care, feeling that the social worker misrepresented the reasons for this decision. They shared that the social worker "*failed to tell the homeless hostel anything about the exploitation. Anything about the neurodiversity and his registered disability, but instead told them that the reason why he put himself into care was all our fault, because we'd been, we'd basically been too strict with him, and it was all our fault and that's why he was in care*". The impact of this and the feeling of powerlessness caused this parent to experience a breakdown.

Another parent told us about how their social worker had told them that they were satisfied that the concerns were reduced, and they'd be working towards closing the case. However the parent said they were then presented with a 20 page Child Protection report the night before the Child Protection Conference which suggested that the child was at high risk of exploitation, modern slavery and gang involvement. The report, although based in some truths, felt to the parent exaggerated and overstated and not reflective of the child and family's true experience. He shared "*I'd probably say 30% of the page was highlighted after I'd finished reading through it because it was just either inaccurate or it was misrepresented, or it was things that we'd established previously weren't true*".

The same parent felt that Children's Social Care overplayed concerns and labelled their child, sharing that the "*Head of Social Services has literally come and said, oh, she's the worst child on our books. And it's like this makes no sense at all*".

The disparity between what is discussed, written down and acted upon contributes to creating barriers to feeling supported and engaged, and parents told us this often results in families left feeling blamed and unable to trust Children's Social Care.

The same parent shared that having multiple different social workers over a long period created more issues than it resolved. He shared that "*none of them really have communicated with each other. And they're all now working off a report, written by people who are working off reports written by other people, and it's sort of...every time I say to them, well, actually, you know this, we established that this wasn't accurate or that that wasn't a thing. It's like, oh, no, no. It's in the reports now*".

This sense of misrepresentation and feeling blamed is a theme that both children and parents felt, not just with Children's Social Care but with different agencies and is repeated through this report.

Parents reported to us that the lack of recognition and a tendency towards blame has the lasting effect; leaving a concerned, loving parent feeling isolated and judged by the very services that are meant to be there to support them and leaving children feeling responsible for the harm they experience.

“

**when it comes to social services, they for me,
I don't feel like as if things were done at the
right time and then I feel like they give you
false hope as well**

CHILD

In our conversations with children and families, we have heard that Children's Social Care is still unequipped to support children and families affected by harm outside of their home. The lack of response to these risks erodes trust and leaves children and their parents at a loss about where to turn.

In the cases where Children's Social Care are involved, we heard about how children and families felt they were not represented accurately, did not feel heard and even placed in situations of further harm.

THE POLICE

When talking about experiences of support from the police, we heard about how they often did not provide a response that was supportive, and in some cases were even harmful. There was a general feeling from both children and parents that they were “*not taken seriously*” and the police “*did not care*”.

TRUST

It is important to recognise the significance of some children’s previous negative encounters with police and how these have impacted how they feel about the police: “*I’ve never really liked or trusted the police at all. Like, they say they’re there to protect and help, but if anything, they’re more threatening than they are helpful.*” Another expressed “*I just think that police do stuff, just to target people*”.

One child shared how, when he had been shot one month before being harmed in a knife attack, he was initially accused of lying by the police, until they viewed CCTV. The lack of trust in the police from Black and working-class communities is documented and, as we have found in this consultation, continues to be evidenced in the experiences some children and families have in their encounters with the police.

For a child who has been harmed in a violent incident, children and families broadly reported that the police would respond to those who have caused the harm, but this didn’t always lead to outcomes that made children and families feel safe. One child told us that the police “*arrested the person who stabbed me and let him out the next day. And two weeks later, he stabbed someone else, and he’s still free. He’s not arrested. Nothing*” . Another shared that “*when things had happened and obviously, they (the police) was called, they’d left the situation as if it was nothing*”.

In cases where it felt like some action had been taken, parents still found that the response from the criminal justice system left them feeling unsafe. They explained those who had committed violent acts were “*just put on tag*” and are “*out there roaming the streets*”.

At Safer London we recognise that children who have committed violent acts also need support, but what that looks like has a role in ensuring that those who have been harmed feel safer.

BLAMING CHILDREN FOR THE HARM THEY EXPERIENCE

One of the issues that surfaced when parents and children reflected on engagements with police were feelings of being judged and blamed.

Some of the children explained that they felt this was due to their appearance or the area they are from and that this affects how police respond to them. One explained that they "*feel like it's people from the less privileged areas, as in Location X, like other places, obviously, but from my experience in Location X, I feel like I feel like the police don't care*". The same child was told, while in an ambulance following a traumatic knife attack to his face by the police; "*well, it's your fault, because you put yourself in that situation*". This resonates with another child who shared that, even though they had been threatened and attacked, the police suspected them of being part of something. The child explained they were in fact on the way to a party, which should be a normal, safe activity for teenagers to do.

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They definitely weren't treating him as a child

PARENT

Parents also reflected on the fact they found their children and themselves being blamed for the harm that they have experienced. One parent shared that "*from the off, they've treated (my child) as a criminal. You know that there's never been any sort of understanding or empathy that, you know, that he is a victim.*" Another recognised that "*they definitely weren't treating him as a child.*" Another told us that "*they'd come and visit the house, but again, it's almost like I'm under investigation*".

When children are blamed for the harm that they are experiencing, parents report that this often translates into the approach taken, one parent reflected on the use of language by a police officer and shared that "*the language that's been used, things like, 'well, if we find him, we're going to back him into a corner', you know, like he's an animal*". This doesn't create a sense of safety, respect, empathy or support from those officers and leaves families feeling powerless and that services don't care about them or their children.

AVAILABILITY

Similar to their experiences with Children's Social Care, parents expressed struggles in getting responses from the police.

They told us that "*the police were not helpful, because we hardly saw them*". Another commented on the difficulty of not having a single point of contact and communication; "*they weren't helpful as well, because they kept changing police officers....and then when they finally gave me a police officer, even if he called him, we couldn't get him*".

Although youth violence is often understood as violent conflict between children, the whole family's safety is often impacted, especially when this occurs in the context of exploitation.

As one parent shared "*I also received threats as well from the gangs. Our house was threatened to be bombed... I've received letters, phone calls. So, I've reported that all to the police and we got no help*". This left some families questioning where to turn to for support when their lives are in potential danger if they do not get the necessary help from Police and Children's Social Care.

Another parent told us about their willingness to engage with the police, who they say would often not act despite requests for help; they said, "*we were trying to give loads and loads of evidence to the police and they kept saying this isn't evidence*", but provided no advice on what the parents should provide.

For another parent, who was in a similar situation when their child was being exploited and involved in youth violence, they reflected that "*what we needed was a Child Exploitation officer, which we then eventually got when it was too late and he even questioned why we hadn't been connected well before that point.....things just get left for so long, when you're just in the dark constantly....That's when a lot of people just give up hope and that's when it goes really wrong*".

Communication has surfaced as a frequent issue. One parent shared how information was withheld from them by the police; "*there was just so much they knew that they didn't share with me, and they didn't support my son. And it was literally 'everything was his fault, his choice, his decisions'... so yeah, I'm very angry towards the police*".

There was a sense that having specialist officers would be a positive offer. However, the availability and timeliness of allocating them when available appears to limit the role and their potential to support.



VAL'S STORY

One girl's account of her experiences with the police across multiple contexts was particularly concerning.

She had contact with the police following a traumatic experience of sexual violence involving several boys. She told us "*Yeah, nothing happens. I'm still waiting. They put the boys on bail saying that they can't be around the house or anything*" and there is still no outcome. There has been no court date. For her it feels like nothing will happen.

Her mental health had deteriorated because of experiencing multiple forms of harm from peers, including a boy she was in a relationship with, who was threatening her and her parents.

During a time when she had left her area, distressed, and carrying a knife, her parent reported her missing and was in constant communication with the police due to concerns that she may harm herself. The police had been made aware of the context of her experiences of harm and emotional wellbeing.

When she was located by the police, they found she had taken a drink from a supermarket without paying. She was physically handled by officers to which she responded with resistance, resulting in charges of assaulting an officer.

When in the back of a police car, she was asked why she was behaving like way. When she explained that she had been raped and didn't like being touched by people she didn't know, a male police office responded with 'don't play that card'.



For a child who was missing, visibly distressed, and vulnerable, being treated this way by the police failed to uphold safeguarding responsibilities. Instead of receiving a caring, protective response, she was treated in a way that led to her criminalisation.

Sadly, most of this section shares negative reflections but there were a few comments that perhaps shed some light on the more positive experiences for some. A parent told us that they found "*the older officers actually were obviously more experienced and more helpful and more sympathetic*". Another parent told us that their introduction to a parents group that can offer support to those whose children have been exploited came from a police officer, which they expressed their gratitude for.

Parents and children did share some positives when it came to police responses, but overwhelmingly the feedback we heard from this small group of children and families captures a range of experiences that highlight real concerns about police attitudes and practices when there was a response. Disappointingly, in many cases there was no meaningful response at all, which we would have expected to see when a child has been harmed, whether through youth violence, sexual violence or any other type of harm.

Parents reported experiencing challenges in communication and a strong sense that not much is done for those who have been impacted by youth violence and other intersecting forms of harm. We heard numerous examples of parents desperate to feel heard and for something to be done but instead were left feeling judged and like their children didn't matter.

SCHOOLS AND EDUCATION SETTINGS

The children we spoke to shared mixed experiences and reflections on the support they received from their education providers. This is another lengthy section, and this partly reflects how much was shared by those we spoke to and the different themes that emerged.

Children spend, or should spend, a substantial proportion of their time in their education provision and it represents a significant context for them. In addition to their educational development, their education provider plays a key role in so many vital aspects of their life including their experience of safety, contributing to how their identity and worldview is shaped, developing their experience of professionals or adults outside their personal networks, and influencing how they feel valued and cared for. Education settings have the potential to be an instrumental source of support.

Some children spoke positively about the support they received and regarded it as appropriate and responsive to what they needed. Some felt that school played a key role and felt grateful for support until they felt safe again. One child shared that their *“school were aware of what happened. They knew about it, and they booked us in every Thursdays for therapy, just to talk about it until we got better”*.

Some parents described the practical support that education settings were able to offer, with one describing how their child's college was supportive when there were risks in the community which meant that they were not safe to be travelling alone. To enable the child to continue to attend and for the parent to maintain some routine with their employment they arranged a taxi for two days a week, whilst the parent did the drop off and pick up on other days.

It wasn't just practical support that they valued. Another child felt that, in one of the schools they attended, *“they don't just label me as something, they help, they generally try looking into it and help understand why the person has been like that and why things have happened”*. These thoughtful and considered approaches made children and families feel cared for and supported.

Sadly, for most of the children and parents we spoke to their experience didn't feel as helpful or supportive as it should do and parents and children reported that the approaches or actions taken felt labelling, blaming, excluding or punishing.

Children and parents reported that children's needs were not understood, they felt they were moved with little regard to their intersectional needs and experiences. Children and parents felt safeguarding processes were not followed and when schools themselves were the context of harm, there seemed to be minimal action taken to address the social conditions within that school that was enabling harm to take place.

LABELLING OF CHILDREN AND JUDGEMENTAL APPROACH

Many examples were provided of children feeling that they were labelled and that this played into the responses or support they received; with one child saying "*I was very much labelled as a feral child, so they'll just give up, not give me that support. Never offer the support*". This was a view also held by parents who could see that their child's needs were misunderstood and felt that "*it's almost like they labelled her a bad child*" or that "*school made out that she was a problem child*".

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It's almost like they labelled her a bad child

PARENT

When reflecting on the role of their school in the multi-agency response one child reflected "*if they understood more and didn't jump to conclusions...just sprint to exclude someone for their behaviours or simply just go straight to the punishment. I feel like, if the schools was more understanding, yeah, then me and others wouldn't feel the need to go off the rails*".

Children and families who feel a sense of shame or blame because of the labels, whether perceived or real, will have their ability to trust eroded and this creates barriers to being able to work together collaboratively. It also risks impacting on how decisions are made and what actions are taken to safeguard and support the child.

Where children and families reported feeling a sense of shame or blame it was when schools focused solely on managing behaviour, without considering the underlying reasons behind it. This approach sometimes led to exclusions and missed opportunities to provide the safeguarding support that children impacted by serious violence urgently need.



YAS'S STORY

We heard from one parent whose child had experienced repeated episodes of violence from peers at her school, which took place within the school, in the community and in online spaces. There were several children responsible for this harm, but Yas was removed from the school.

The school were made aware of the violence Yas was experiencing, but Yas's parent reported that the school did not put in any measures to create safety in the school and in fact her trauma response and coping behaviours were labelled and responded to as behavioural issues.

To create safety for herself she stopped going into classes where she knew the other pupils would be and instead would find somewhere within the school to sit. She would be late to class so she could see who was there, she used to leave class if she was distressed, and she refused to engage in some activities that would mean she would be in close proximity to those who were harming her.

This was seen as defiance of the rules and rather than seeking to understand and address the conditions within the school that were contributing to her experience of harm, the school decided to find an alternative provision for her. She ended up moving through several different education provisions as her neurodiversity, which was still being assessed, hadn't been taken into consideration and the alternative provisions were unable to understand and meet her needs.

She was briefly placed in a provision that felt safe and able to meet her needs, however the funding for this was time limited and she was moved again, despite this not being what she or her parents wanted.

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There was no help there for her whatsoever

YAS' PARENT

After several moves, she is finishing her final year of education in a Pupil Referral Unit which her parents and Yas feel is inappropriate for her needs and vulnerability, and which is exposing her to further incidents of harm; *“she’s suffered really badly with anxiety and everything else, and it’s not the right setting for her, but I can’t do nothing because the authorities are saying that’s her last option and she’s got to go there”*.



The family have advocated for Yas, trying to challenge the decisions made for her and raised a complaint with the school and the Governors but have felt further let down by the lack of response: *“There was no help there for her whatsoever. Not a thing. I even messaged the board of governors. Not one of them replied to me.”*

EXCLUSIONS AND SCHOOL MOVES

We heard from children and families where the child experienced exclusions or was moved multiple times from their education provision. Sometimes this was presented as a decision made to keep the child safe; but which the family felt contributed to further harm and feelings of blame.

Yas's experience was not the only one we heard that left the child feeling excluded and marginalised from school. Many of the children we spoke to experienced multiple moves, long periods with no education provided at all and some who dropped out of education completely, which did not reflect their needs or wishes.

Many children spoke about feeling under surveillance by teachers who would report issues to Children's Social Care and parents without engaging them or involving them in the process. Whilst it may not always be safe or appropriate to share details when a referral is being made, one child we spoke to shared how it made her feel when a referral was made without including her or her parents: *"when I was 11, I went into school and I posted a video of me dancing to like, TikTok songs.... and I was dancing to it, like the dance wasn't explicit, but the song was real. And my school decided to take this. They saw this and they reported it to social services without even talking to me, without talking to my parents, just straight to social services, saying that they think I'm a victim of sexual exploitation. Why?"*

Some children spoke about being put in isolation instead of being offered support, with the impact leading the child to thinking it was all their fault. Others spoke about repeatedly getting suspended. Another shared how they felt unsupported and punished by their school for having to leave London for two weeks for their safety. The child shared that Children's Social Care did not advocate for or support them to remain in education. They have not returned since. Another child shared that they gave up on education due to their involvement in youth violence, feeling that no one made an effort to keep them engaged. This was echoed by one parent who reflected that *"I really just felt that nobody cared if he was in education or not."*

Although most of those we spoke to saw school moves and exclusion as a negative decision; one child spoke about the contrast with their experience in a different school when they were moved because of violence. They shared that *"in a different school I get a lot more closure and support"*.

Parents and children recognised that school moves can sometimes be a positive opportunity for creating safety and supporting a child's emotional wellbeing. However, parents feel this kind of decision needs to be made in collaboration with the child and parent, with sensitivity to the child's needs, rather than focusing on blame or behaviour, and without addressing the underlying issues.

POOR SAFEGUARDING DECISIONS AND RESPONSES

Beyond feeling let down and unsupported many of those we spoke to describe their education setting as being the context where harm occurred, and the school were perceived to do very little to address the presenting safeguarding issues or address the social conditions present within the school.

There were multiple examples of the school being aware of issues within the school but not responding appropriately to this. One parent shared that "*clearly there was a massive issue within the school that just wasn't being addressed. I think they just wanted it, you know, to just go under the radar, get these kids out the door, the other end and you know, that the issue will go away. Well, that wasn't the case. So no, they didn't play a very helpful role at all*".

Another parent spoke about a lack of action having a knock-on effect. They shared that when the "*school tried to contain it – we missed out on opening up to support from a network. I think really that should have been opened up to almost a multi-service kind of network and support and, and it never was, so....*"

Another parent learnt that their child's school had concerns about youth violence and exploitation issues, but they never shared this with parents or potential partners until much later; "*even though they had suspicions, in their words, 'that he was affiliated with gangs' for quite some time, they had never raised it as a safeguarding issue, ever*". The child was later expelled from the school.

We heard about the experiences of a child who, at 13 years old, had shared with his school that he was being bullied, felt unsafe and had been given drugs. Parents reported that the school did nothing at this time in terms of sharing the concerns and missed opportunities to intervene and prevent escalation.

Another parent could relate and told us "*I totally blame the education authorities for what happened with my son. They, they didn't, you know, support him at all. They expelled him from school. They didn't inform us what was going on. Once he was expelled, the council Education Officer, I mean, was just absolutely horrendous*".

Linked to what parents described as poor decision making and responses to children is the poor communication and involvement of parents in this process. One parent spoke about how, after they made a request to access their child's records, they became aware that a Child Exploitation Officer has spoken to their son three times in school before things had escalated, but the parent was never informed.

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He was arrested at school, handcuffed ... and he was strip searched... I didn't find that information out until he was nearly 18

PARENT

Another parent shared a similar experience of later finding out about police involvement that had taken place at the school which was never shared with them; *“I only found out that at the age of 13 he was arrested at school, handcuffed, took away in front of everyone at school and he was strip searched. So, I didn't know that that had happened. That happened, you know, on about 3 or 4 occasions. I didn't find that information out until he was nearly 18”*.

We have included this example in the school section as parents felt there was poor collaboration between different agencies. In this case the parent felt that the school deferred to the police and did not step in to protect or advocate for the child or communicate what was happening to the child's parents. They felt that the school should have shared this information with the parents and taken clear and decisive action to safeguard and support the children in their care.

This family has taken action to complain to the Government Ombudsman about the repeated failures of their multi-agency network.

NOT UNDERSTANDING AND RESPONDING TO NEEDS

There were many examples of schools not understanding or responding to children's needs.

One example shared with us involved an older girl who had punched and threatened a child. This girl was at the Pupil Referral Unit that the child was subsequently going to be moved to. Their parents shared this information, but nothing was done to address this concern and the child was sent there anyway.

We also heard several accounts of schools being aware that children are believed to be neurodivergent and undergoing lengthy and long delayed assessment processes but receiving little or no support; *"School didn't do anything. So, she was waiting for diagnosis, but there was, there was nothing"*.

The same also applied in situations where the child presented with needs related to their emotional wellbeing *"I feel really, really angry at my son's school because right at the very beginning, after he ran away the first time, the school blocked him getting any, like, emotional, kind of like psychological assessment"*.

Schools and education settings have the potential to create safety and provide support, but we heard evidence that they are not providing this from some of the children and families we spoke to. We heard about experiences which lacked empathy and care and tended towards labelling children and giving them the message that they are the problem with the actions they chose to take. Actions included isolation, exclusions and school moves.

We heard evidence of schools making poor decisions around safeguarding or not addressing safeguarding issues within the school when this presented as the source or context of harm. We heard some upsetting examples from parents and children who reported that schools supported poor practices by the police, which caused further harm to the children. There were also failures to inform and involve parents, highlighting a lack of honesty, transparency and collaboration.

What we heard has also highlighted a lack of understanding or care about children's needs and rights and this resulting in no action being taken, or when it is, this being inappropriate or way too late to feel useful or prevent escalation.

Overall, we heard too many examples of missed opportunities by education providers to provide support and to appropriately safeguarding of children in their care.

HOUSING

Very few of the children we spoke to referenced housing, but many of the parents did.

Parents told us about how the violence their children experienced was often near their home or that the people responsible for the harm, such as harming their child with a knife or shooting at their home, knew where they lived. This resulted in them feeling very unsafe in their home or the surrounding areas and sometimes they received advice from the police that they should move/be moved out of the area for their own safety. However, all of the parents who spoke about this issue shared that they felt very disappointed with the support offered; *"Nothing was really happening, (it) felt like things were said, but not being done".*

There was acknowledgement that there is a housing crisis and that there will be limited options available for those who may need housing but that the reality was that even when the police or Children's Social Care advised a move for the family's safety, that very little was done to action this.

Some spoke about a need to move out of their home borough, but were only offered options within the same borough, were told to approach the councils directly, or advised to give up their secure tenancy to access private renting: *"Housing will not... they're not helpful, even up till now. They're not helpful. They're saying that they can move me within the borough".*

The reality of youth violence is that this often take places within the community. If a family is moved within their borough their freedom and ability to move about remains limited, the risk of their home being located again is high and therefore they continue to live with fear and the anxiety that comes with that.

One child shared how housing support was often promised but didn't materialise. He shared that their Housing Officer *"made a lot of promises. She was telling my mom this, that, about how she was trying to get us on the on the list and all that. But like she would leave my mom in the dark for like weeks".*

When children spoke about housing, they often did so in the context of isolating themselves to their home address, severely limiting when they would leave. With some only leaving once or twice a week and being so fearful that they would run between the home and the car with their hood up and mask on to minimise the chance of being spotted.

One child shared that they "*made the decision to stop going out and I feel like a lot of time by myself made me quite paranoid, cause I had a lot of time to think, and I found that after that I found it quite difficult to leave the house*". The knock-on impact of this is isolation, exclusion from education, loneliness, depression and anxiety. It also leads to parents feeling blamed if their children are not accessing education, but they have very little support to meaningful help their children to access education safely.

Some children spoke about housing in relation to being moved out of their area or London for safety but that this disrupted their routine or the positive and protective things they had such as a training course, and feeling that they had little say in where they ended up. One child reflected on a range of options that they felt were not considered including that "*they also could have moved me somewhere closer to college*".

Despite the challenges presented, other children felt it was a positive to have been moved because they believed that if they had not left London then they would have stayed in the "*lifestyle*".

Housing presents as a significant concern for parents due to the gravity of impact this can have for the whole family. Those who shared their experience of issues with housing felt that decisions made about housing do not consider all of the family's needs. When homes are being targeted by those responsible for harm, parents and children report that it leaves families feeling under threat the whole time, unable to relax and feel safe in their own homes. It encroaches into wider family life and has knock-on effect on siblings, parents, work, finance, isolation and creates a sense of living in fear for the whole household.

Unfortunately, those we spoke to felt like they were offered very little support, and the prevailing expectation was that families would give up secure housing to be placed in poor quality and insecure temporary accommodation which often made families feel unsafe and that they are left with little choice.

HEALTH SERVICES

When discussing support from health services, children and families focused predominantly on what this looked like in relation to their mental health. Like their experiences with other services, they expressed challenges in getting a timely response and identified a need for more support in this area.

Children and families recognised the impact that their experiences with services had on their mental health. For some children, exclusions and school moves impacted their mental health and one parent shared how their child's anxiety was exacerbated by being placed in an alternative provision that did not meet their needs.

Other children, who were involved with Children's Social Care for issues arising from youth violence, shared that their mental health was not addressed. One told us at the time of an incident of youth violence; "*I was in, like, a really bad mental place at the time, and I had no support when I, like, needed support and stuff like that*".

Several children reflected that they felt more could have been done in relation to their mental health: "*I could have received more support with my mental health*." However the same child did share positives around the support they did receive: "*The support was good in taking me out of my home, being taken to the museum, taking me to activities to keep me out of trouble, going on trips etc.*" Another child also emphasised the importance in responding to their mental health: "*I would say though one thing, the only thing I would change is the mental health, because you have to make sure that kids health is in order anyway before anything else happens*".

Children spoke about The Children and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) being the main pathway to receive mental health support, but they often experienced waiting unhelpfully long periods before receiving support. One told us: "*I really needed help with my mental health and CAMHS took ages to get involved. I was waiting for CAMHS since I was 11 and I've only started receiving CAMHS support when I was 13*".

The same young person also reflected on the influence of older peers who exposed her to self-harm and how this influenced how they dealt with threats of violence from others. They told us that it took an extreme situation to activate a referral to CAMHS: "*She said that she was going to stab me up with a Rambo, so I tried to kill myself with Ibuprofen and it got me referred to CAMHS*".

Another child shared that “right from the start, like when I was like 11, I had social care involved in my life. On and off till now. And like, I’ve been a victim of CSA (child sexual abuse). And just like a whole bunch of stuff is happening, like I needed support with my mental health and like I didn’t get that until, like, recently”. Their CAMHs support came three years later, after many other experiences which had impacted her mental health.

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I feel like that mental health services need to be more accessible

CHILD

Children also highlighted concern about the impact of youth violence on their parents with one telling us: “I was more worried about my mum and her mental health more than I was myself”. Parents themselves told us about how their own mental health deteriorated because of what their children had gone through, but also the challenges in trying to get support from services. One suggested that professionals should “check like the mental health and things like that, cause for me it really affected me. And because when it all happened, I couldn’t sleep. I was like, literally watching my door 24/7”.

There was an overall message from children and families that more could be done to address mental health, as one child told us that “for someone in my situation, I feel like that mental health services need to be more accessible”.

One suggestion from a child included the introduction of an emergency health line which children with PTSD could call and then speak to someone who understands. The professional could then visit their home if needed, or do a call on the phone or online.

Another child raised concerns about the impact of wider societal issues on their mental health such as trying to get a job and get their life on track after the effects of what they called ‘the lifestyle’ that led to being directly impacted by youth violence.

Parents and children reported that, while some services are in place, they felt there was a need for both formal and informal support for families. They expressed a desire for spaces where they can talk openly, and for professionals across all services – not just in health – to acknowledge mental health needs and regularly check in with them.

SPACES AND PLACES WHERE CHILDREN SPEND THEIR TIME

For children who have experienced youth violence, this often occurs in public spaces, often within their local area, close to home.

Some children shared that the areas they live are unsafe. One child reflected that "*I used to get into fights when I was younger, but I've lived in a dangerous area, where there has been people that have used violence, and someone loses their life or goes to prison*". Some describe how they have developed their own ways to manage any situations that may arise. One told us how they rely on their family "*when it comes to, like certain stuff like that happens outside and was dangerous stuff, I always call my family members first*". For another child they shared how they would "*just run home, like sprint home, because I just...that's how scared I was*".

We heard that very little is being done within those spaces to create safety and children, instead, often chose to withdraw from being outside and spending more time inside. This impacts on their freedom to participate and move around, but also impacts on mental and emotional wellbeing.

When there was visible action to address concerns in public places this tended towards increased surveillance. One parent reflected on the mobilisation of people in the community following violence in their area; "*there's a bit more of the police presence again at the moment and a few community officers, I mean, I think where everyone's gone for Ring doorbells and things like that and people are just reporting things more, they're forcing the police to be about more, but no, not really nothing significant I think that's gonna make any difference*".

Increased police presence, however, doesn't necessarily make people feel safer, with one child sharing that "*they're more threatening than like, I feel, it shouldn't feel like this, but I feel safer around the people that commit the crimes than the people that are meant to stop it*". This demonstrates the significant lack of trust and fear that many people have in the police. When their presence feels more threatening than that of those who commit crime in the area, it suggests that increased police presence isn't the only answer to creating safer spaces.

This surveillance-led approach was also echoed by one child who reflected on the harm happening in their school and shared that "*where some of the violence did take place, the school's response to that was to install extra CCTV. So instead of actually having manpower on the ground, you know, monitoring what's happening, even though they're aware that there's an issue. It's like, let's install extra cameras. So, in some ways, by doing that, they're agreeing that there is an issue*". However the child felt that the act of installing the CCTV doesn't address the issue.



ZAK'S STORY

What children did seem to appreciate was a sense that there were people in their community that cared about them.

Zak shared an account of a local community member who came to his aid when an older young person attempted to attack him with a knife and steal his electric scooter in a public space.

The community member interrupted the assault, chased the assailant away and prevented him from taking the scooter. He also checked in with Zak and their friend, called the police and stayed with them until the police arrived.

He shared that "*if there hadn't been that one person, or like that person wasn't there in the right place and the right time, I feel like we would have just took our life*".

Knowing that there are people who will step in to protect them, made Zak feel safer. Unfortunately, Zak felt more supported by this stranger within the community than they did by the police, who closed the case within two weeks, with what appeared to the child and family to be minimal attempts to investigate or locate the assailant.

For Zak "*it just showed, like, they didn't care about it*".

Zak wasn't referred to Children's Social Care for any support despite this not being the first time he or his peers had been impacted by youth violence in their local community. He did however engage with sessions with his friends in school where they explored what was happening as a group and individually.

He said that the "*fact that I was able to talk about, like, my feelings and just be open to someone, like, who obviously does this as a job for, like, he takes it in and listen to you*".



When another child experienced being attacked in their area, they told us: "*It's not that I didn't feel safe. I felt perfectly safe after it happened. I wasn't worried it was gonna happen again, but it was, it was the fact that, like, I didn't want people to stress about me*".

This child moved temporarily out of London to live with a family member, but has since returned, now choosing to not be outside in his estate and keeping away from old associations.

Some children who are trying to move on from these harmful experiences, shared concerns for their younger siblings and whether they will also end up impacted through similar experiences of violence and police harassment simply because of where they live.

FRIENDS AND PEER RELATIONSHIPS

Children reflected on the role of their friends and peers, including their siblings, a lot and what they shared demonstrated the reality of the 'peers' paradox'.

For some children, their friendships and peer relationships were a source of safety and support, for others they represented harm and further risk; for many they were both. What they consistently agreed on though was there was little to no intervention with the peer group from multi-agency partners.

Some children spoke about the immediate physical support they needed or gave. One child described the medical support he received from friends when he was stabbed, whilst others described how friends stepped in when he was being attacked and stopped the person with the knife but also checked in to see how the child was doing after the attack.

Children spoke about feeling supported and cared for by their friends who checked in and one reflected that "*friends support and encourage me to calm down*" or another who shared that "*my friends at the time, they were majorly supportive, like especially when it actually happened*".

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friends are a bit of distraction from the other side of life

CHILD

Children also spoke about offering support by "*checking in on [their friend] who was targeted and supporting each other*". One shared that they're "*not really open to talk about my feelings with my friends, but most of the times they know how I feel*".

Some children said they focused on their responsibilities towards other and acted out of concern about safety for their friends or girlfriend/boyfriend, rather than primarily for their own safety. After incidents where harm had taken place, they described being focused on trying to take steps so both they and their friends felt safe.

One child also spoke about a time when some of his friends/peers were trying to confront the child who had harmed him, but he stopped that from happening, showing a sense of responsibility to stop harm being retaliated and further issues escalating.

Importantly one child shared that with friends "*you don't feel as if you're being judged about it. You can just go to them about 1-2 things, and you know, I guess, they're, like, for me, friends are a bit of distraction from the other side of life, I guess. Going out, doing activities and stuff like that*".

It's important for teenagers to feel a sense of belonging and having positive and supportive friendships can be important for their recovery from the harm they have experienced, and those relationships should be supported and nurtured when they are positive and protective.

Not all children found their friends and peer relationships to be positive though, and some described their friends and peers to be "*a bad influence at the time*" and many spoke about losing contact with friends. Some because of their choices to move away from harmful situations, others because they moved area and for some because they described rarely going out because they felt safer at home.

One child reflected on the benefit that some group work sessions could have provided to their friendships; "*We never got in, like, a room together and had a chat which I think would actually be really beneficial if we did do that, and I'd probably still be friends with them*". Another child shared that having support to talk to their friends about what was going on could have been helpful; "*I feel like even just starting a conversation and letting us go with it would have even been beneficial just because like we would like, let each other know how we feel...*".

Parents also spoke about the immense value of their own peer relationships and recognised the power that their informal networks held in making them feel heard and supported in a way that the professional networks didn't. Some parents extended this to praise the support offered by their faith communities.

When the conversation focused on friendships and peer relationships most of the children and parents, we spoke to felt supported, cared for and that they were not judged. This feels like a very clear contrast to the support provided by the multi-agency services and suggests that there may be a need to explore the role of peer relationships in providing support and protection.

YOUTH JUSTICE SERVICES

We heard from very few children and parents about involvement from the Youth Justice Service, but when we did, they were largely positive, despite this being an agency where to an extent there is a lack of choice about engagement.

One child described feeling that Youth Justice Service “*recognised*” him and wanted to support him “*to do something meaningful*”. They spoke about the worker taking time to get to build a relationship and taking a more informal approach that helped him to relax and feel comfortable to open up to them. Another joked about how their Youth Offending Service Worker had brought them a McDonalds and this was the difference between their social workers. When we explored why they said this, they explained it was because they think it “*sets a welcoming and positive environment to speak in*” and that it’s “*about building a relationship, and I think food is an important part of that*”.

They also spoke about how for many children they are often not getting much food, and this is a useful way to get them to come to meetings and feel a bit excited about it. For many children getting food or drinks can be a really simple way for workers to show that “*they care about you and that they’re here to meet lots of your needs*”. This child understood that this wouldn’t always be possible but wanted to emphasise the importance of building a relationship and showing care.

They reflected on how their Youth Offending Service Worker showed belief in them and encouraged them to build skills. They said that she told them “*you’re a good kid*” and that “*you just need to suit yourself*”. Their worker then helped them to engage in some programs like Jamie’s Farm and other initiatives aimed at building skills. The child spoke fondly of their worker and described her as “*amazing*” and said the way she engaged with him was as being “*like a big sister to me*”. He appreciated the sense of purpose and collaboration, as well as the time taken to build a relationship and a more informal approach.

Similarly, a parent spoke about the positives of having a youth justice worker involved reflecting that “*he was the only person I felt that was trying to help, but he wasn’t allocated enough time*”, often visiting the family out of office hours to try and help.

The Youth Justice Service take a trauma-responsive Child First approach, and this shows in how the workers centre the relationship and help children and families to feel seen and supported, taking time to build trust and show genuine care as well as helping with practical things to help build positive futures.

THE YOUTH, VOLUNTARY AND COMMUNITY SECTOR SERVICES

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my mentor has looked into me as a person

CHILD

We asked children and parents about their experiences with professionals from the voluntary and community sector which, for the purpose of this section, includes reflections on workers from specialist services, like Safer London, but also mentors and youth workers who may be in their schools, colleges, and community settings, because children don't seem to differentiate.

We heard from children that they felt that most professionals in these roles saw them as people and not defined or judged by their experiences. One child shared that "*my mentor has looked into me as a person and has been my person and has helped me in different stages of my life*". Another child reflected on the value of intervention from Safer London; "*when I got stabbed, I was gonna do something stupid until then Safer London helped me change my life around*".

A parent recognised the value in her son having a youth worker and the impact of that intervention at a critical time, when in hospital following a violent attack. She said, "*they can relate to them. They can, like, for example, my son was still in the hospital. The youth worker that was there, he was young. He brought down the PlayStation and they were both on the PlayStation, and he was talking to him, and he got a lot more out of him and when we came out of the hospital, he depended more on him*". She reflected on the time when their child left hospital and there was a joint handover and introduction from the youth worker in hospital to the Safer London worker which supported the start and development of this relationship. She said she was so grateful this had happened as they were the only people their child would speak to.

Having someone they felt they could talk to was important for most of the children we spoke to and seemed to be something appreciated about their workers. One child spoke about the approach being more two-way, rather than feeling like a tick box exercise of questions to be checked off and repeated every time they met. He reflected that "*I feel like asking questions is part of it, 100%, I just feel like it should be a conversation instead... yeah, like, well, I'm not an in interview, that I would just leave*".

Another child spoke about their youth worker and said that he likes that "*he just doesn't beat around the bush. And he actually sees me*". He described the things that made him feel seen as simple gestures such as "*he'll give me a card for my birthday or Christmas, and he will tell me how much he sees me growing as a person. And not as someone who just has to talk to you for work. I feel like it's a proper friendship*".

Another child described their worker as "*more caring and I feel like I can build a better relationship*" when compared to the approach of other agencies in their network. A child reflected that his worker "*helped me definitely grow as a person. I was, when I first met him, I was very angry. I was timid, I was anxious, and he helped me grow out that whole, like, behaviour and he's helped me grow as a person*".

The experiences of the children and parents that we heard from has revealed where they have felt let down by Children's Social Care and the police, they have found support in this sector. One parent told us that; "*I didn't get to know about Safer London until I went back to my doctor's. When I couldn't find the police and I couldn't find social services and it was my doctors that asked me to contact Safer London*". This perhaps suggests we need to create more accessible pathways into services and highlights the need for improved collaboration across multi-agency partners.

Another parent spoke about the support provided by a voluntary sector legal advice organisation, Just for Kids Law. The parent reflected on how helpful they had been and shared that "*without them, I just think it would have been completely different, he probably would be in prison. So, I think that that they just, yeah, gave us all the information we needed and that was our support really, it was the legal team*".

However, one parent identified some of the barriers to accessing support from voluntary and community organisations, which are often constrained by limited resources and criteria for referrals. As one parent explained, when her son was suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder because of the violence; "*we tried to reach out to charities but was again rejected because we didn't live in the right area or because they'd gone over the age of 18, which again I found incredibly frustrating*". In cases like this children and families can feel abandoned and isolated with a sense that no-one cares.

While the youth, voluntary and community sector plays a vital role in supporting children and families who are affected by youth violence, they cannot and should not, be filling the gaps and responsibilities of statutory agencies.

However, their value cannot be ignored as children and families identify the need for this kind of non-judgmental support which seeks to establish relationships of trusts with children, families and across the professional network, that feels purposeful, creates safety and supports growth.



CONCLUSION

CONCLUSION

This report is drawn on the experiences of 33 children and 10 parents and carers of children who have been impacted by youth violence. Whilst their experiences and demographics are varied, it is important to acknowledge that there are limits in how generalisable the findings would be to the wider population.

However, this report isn't intended to be presented as empirical research, but as an opportunity for children and families to share their experiences of multi-agency support, have their voices heard, and have the opportunity for their experiences to influence change.

For those who shared their experiences, there are powerful commonalities across accounts from all children and parents which adds strength to the conclusions and the recommendations made.

To help analyse the experiences and reflections shared by the children and families we spoke to, it was useful to draw on the expectation set out in the Working Together to Safeguard Children 2023 guidance which should be underpinning all multi-agency interventions to help, protect, and promote the welfare of children.

The principles described within Working Together to Safeguard Children 2023 aim to promote **positive and trusted relationships**, built on a foundation of **empathy, respect, compassion and creativity**.

It asks all agencies to avoid reinforcing shame, suffering and blaming.

It promotes using strength-based approaches and collaborative working with children and their families to effect positive change.

It urges sensitivity and trauma responsive approaches.

It requires agencies to be adaptive and accessible in their communication and responses to meet the diverse needs of children and parents.

It stipulates that verbal and non-verbal communication should be respectful, non-blaming, clear, inclusive and adapted to needs.

It suggests that practitioners empower children and families to participate in decision-making, creating a culture of “no surprises” and signposting families to sources of help and support available. They should be helping parents to understand what the issues are and how these impact on the child, what decisions could be made, what changes need to be made, why and how, timescales and possible outcomes.

It also suggests that practitioners involve families and local communities in designing processes that affect them, including those focused on safeguarding children.

The experiences shared within this report suggest we have a long way to go to feel confident that the basic principles are being upheld.

We have heard from parents and children that they experience or feel a distinct lack of empathy, with most agencies making children and families feel like "**they don't care**". We have heard many examples of blaming and judgement and assumptions made about children and families that has a significant impact on the safeguarding and support they receive. We've heard how this leads to needs being misunderstood and left unmet or leading to more harm due to poor decision making.

We've heard reflections of responses from Children's Social Care, the police and schools. Families and children felt responses focused on building surveillance rather than building relationships of trust and compassion. We heard that parents and children felt that nothing changes in the context where harm occurs and little is done to create safety in the places and spaces where children are experiencing harm, including schools and education settings.

Overall, we have seen very limited evidence of multi-agency partners working together. Parents and children, based on their experiences, shared that each agency appears to be working to their own agenda. Parents and children felt there was no shared vision for welfare between agencies, and there was no joint responsibility or accountability for safeguarding children impacted by serious youth violence.

When we heard from parents and children about more positive experiences, it is when agencies take the time to build trusting relationships and make the child or family feel seen and supported. For those we spoke to this has mostly been practitioners within the youth and voluntary and community sector.

The most valuable approaches that parents and children told us about are when someone shows genuine care, does what they say they will do and creates space for the child or parents to talk. Parents and children spoke about the value of tangible and practical support and help to access the things they need. They spoke about the approach showing empathy and being non-judgemental and ensuring that the child has agency and choice.

The children and families we spoke to recognise that there is some value in all of the agencies. They can each offer something different, but what families and children feel is currently being offered needs to be refined.

On the rare occasions where children and parent felt the multi-agency partners were working together, this was seen as powerful: "*There was kind of like, creating a little team, to kind of help me...the fact that I talked to someone who was professional and helped me out and realise the bigger picture... it was amazing*".

WHAT PARENTS AND CHILDREN WANT

Throughout our conversations with children and parents, we have heard valuable insights into what can be done differently to better support families affected by youth violence.

They shared their thoughts on how services across all agencies could be improved and expressed what they would say to each agency based on their experiences.

Children and parents want all agencies to:

- Reconsider the use of the term 'serious youth violence' and broaden the definition of what it means to be impacted by it.
- Reframe the language that is used to engage with children and families and talk about these issues, to ensure it is not labelling or judgemental.
- Understand that this kind of harm impacts the whole family.
- Make sure there are people to talk to who can build trust.
- Offer support for longer.
- Work together more collaboratively.

EXPLORE WHAT PARENTS AND CHILDREN WOULD SAY TO EACH AGENCY:

- Children's Social Care
- The police
- Schools and education settings
- Housing
- Health services
- Spaces and places where children spend their time
- Friends and peer relationships
- The youth, voluntary and community sector

CHILDREN'S SOCIAL CARE

What parents and children want to say to Children's Social Care:

- Enhance responses to harm outside the home and better recognise social care's role when families are impacted by youth violence. Avoid closing cases prematurely by overlooking the risks of youth violence in the community, as much harm occurs outside the home.
- Improve communication so that it is non-judgemental, fair and accurately recorded in reports and case recording.
- Have honest conversations about the concerns – the dialogue with parents needs to match what is being said to wider multi-agency partnership and in reports.



- Have honest conversations about what will and won't be done – to not make promises that are not kept.
- Interventions are needed earlier – stop waiting until things have escalated to offer support.
- Listen to parents when they are asking for help.

THE POLICE

What parents and children want to say to the police:

- Approaches should stop being driven by judgement and discrimination, and instead focus on the children's safeguarding needs, avoiding discriminatory language and methods.
- Communicate what action is being taken or has been taken and explain why.
- Involve and inform parents of any action being taken.
- Understand their positionality and how they can reinforce and add to children's experience of trauma.
- Reconsider their approach to safeguarding and physically handling children - especially children who have been impacted by sexual violence and other forms of trauma.



- Invest in developing more specialist officers who possess the necessary skills and competencies, focusing on building trust and ensuring effective communication and collaboration with both children and parents.

SCHOOLS AND EDUCATION SETTINGS

What parents and children want to say to schools and education settings:

→ Recognise and take responsibility for their role in exclusions and school moves.

→ Adopt more trauma responsive practices, rather than be behaviour management led, making sure staff try to understand the underlying causes of behaviour.



→ Limit what action the police can take in schools and ensure that safeguarding and welfare responses are prioritised over criminal justice processes.

→ Parents would like to be informed if the police speak to their children in school.

→ Access and engage with specialist services who can offer support to identify and address safety concerns in the school, who can build trust and work towards creating safety in the whole school context.

HOUSING

What parents and children want to say to housing:

- Support should be more proactive and not place the burden on parents to resolve issues on their own.
- Consideration of the whole family.
- A more inclusive approach to engaging parents that does not assume parents have skills and resources to move without practical support.

HEALTH

What parents and children want to say to health services:

- Quicker access to mental health support - before things escalate.
- Better quality mental health services, including an emergency mental health helpline for children with PTSD. This service should provide support from someone who understands their needs and can visit their home if necessary, or offer support through phone or online calls.
- Formal and informal spaces for both children and families to talk and a desire for professionals across services, not just within health, to acknowledge mental health and check-in with them.

PLACES AND SPACES WHERE CHILDREN SPEND THEIR TIME

What parents and children want to say in relation to spaces and places:

→ Action needs to be taken to create safety in places.



→ Approaches built on relationships of trust – where children feel involved in creating the solutions and do not feel pushed out of those spaces.

→ More proactive, on the ground responses that do not rely solely on CCTV as the answer.

→ Create youth focused spaces for children to go like youth hubs and community centres.

FRIENDS AND PEERS

What parents and children want to say in relation to friends and peers:

- More acknowledgement of the strengths and value of their friendships.
- Group work which offers space to talk and reflect with their friends.



YOUTH AND VOLUNTARY AND COMMUNITY SECTOR AGENCIES

What parents and children want to say to the youth, voluntary and community sector:

- A wide criterion for inclusion that support across area borders and age ranges.
- Access to more specialist services and youth workers.
- Longer periods of support for the interventions – continuation of support over years if needed.



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- Carly Adams Elias, Director of Practice
- Hannah Millar, Co-Production Consultant

Who Cares? is an independent report which will be published alongside the Inspectorates thematic Joint Targeted Area Inspection (JTAI) on serious youth violence to ensure the views of children and parents are heard alongside inspection findings. The conversations in this report were held independently of the work carried out by the Inspectorates in the six local authorities which is included in the thematic JTAI report. Safer London independently recruited the children and parents who participated.

ABOUT SAFER LONDON

Safer London works with young Londoners and families affected by violence and exploitation.

Through specialist one-to-one intervention, we are supporting young Londoners to move onto the positive futures they deserve. We put young Londoners at the centre of their support, focusing on them and their needs. By building strong, trusting relationships we gain an insight into their world, begin to understand what they need and together we find the best ways to keep them safe.

Understanding young Londoners' lives are shaped by the world in which they live, we work not only with them and their families, but also their peer networks and directly within the communities and places where they live and spend their time.

With a footprint in every borough in London, we build trusting, professional partnerships to embed our approaches and work towards achieving our vision of a city that is safer for all young Londoners who live here.

Safer London is a registered charity in England and Wales No. 1109444; and a company limited by guarantee No. 5190766.
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GET IN TOUCH

To discuss potential partnerships or to commission our services, please email bd@saferlondon.org.uk

Information on our services, including criteria and how to make a referral, can be found on our website
www.saferlondon.org.uk

If you'd like us to speak at your event or conference please email communications@saferlondon.org.uk

For general enquiries please email info@saferlondon.org.uk

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WHO CARES?

Hearing from children and families about their experiences of multi-agency support when impacted by serious youth violence.

A report for the Inspectorates as part of the Joint Targeted Area Inspection (JTAI) on serious youth violence.

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