



# Cross-Border Peer-on-Peer Abuse and Child Criminal Exploitation

## A Thematic Child Safeguarding Practice Review

For Keeping Bristol Safe Partnership, South  
Gloucestershire Children's Partnership and North  
Somerset Safeguarding Children Partnership

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## Acknowledgements

First and foremost, grateful thanks are due to the young people and parents who took part in this review and shared their views and experiences so generously in telling sometimes difficult and painful stories. Participants in the professionals' event brought a high level of engagement and reflection in thinking collectively about these issues and their contribution was central to understanding the challenges in responding effectively to serious youth violence and child criminal exploitation. Finally, thanks are due to the Review Group for their careful steer in facilitating this process.

## Section One: Introduction and background

### 1.1 Arrangements for the thematic review and terms of reference

This review was jointly commissioned by Keeping Bristol Safe Partnership, South Gloucestershire Children's Partnership and North Somerset Safeguarding Children Partnership. It follows a series of rapid reviews undertaken in line with statutory guidance, between 2018 and 2021, in respect of eight young people impacted by peer-on-peer abuse and knife crime, seven of whom were the victims of stabbings. The incidents occurred across the three local authority areas of Bristol, South Gloucestershire and North Somerset.

The Safeguarding Children Partnerships representing these areas commissioned a joint child safeguarding practice review (CSPR)<sup>1</sup> of peer-on-peer youth violence to consider the themes emerging from these reviews, including those which reflect the movement of young people across local authority boundaries and the implications for multi-agency partner responses. Also incorporated into the review was an audit of four young people charged with manslaughter/murder conducted in Bristol, in July 2019.

The terms of reference were drawn up by a Review Panel comprising representatives of the three local safeguarding partnerships. An independent reviewer from the Safer Young Lives Research Centre at the University of Bedfordshire led the review which was undertaken between January and June 2021.

The aims of the review were to examine the issues related to peer-on-peer abuse through knife crime in the context of child criminal exploitation (CCE), county lines and gang activity across the participating authorities. This was achieved by critically analysing the contributions from the involved agencies in the rapid reviews, engagement with young people and families and consultation with agency representatives and the review group.

This review has considered sensitive personal information about young people and their families. Other thematic reviews addressing similar subject matter have noted the importance of protecting the identity of the individuals concerned.<sup>2</sup> Given that several serious incidents considered in this review were retaliatory in nature, it is all the more important to protect the anonymity of the young people and families involved. For this reason, we have focussed throughout the report on themes rather than individual narratives and taken care in the way information about young people and families is presented.

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<sup>1</sup> [Working Together to Safeguard Children 2018](#) (Section 4)

<sup>2</sup> For example, see [Hounslow Systemic Learning Review on Serious Youth Violence November 2020](#).

## 1.2 Scope of the review

The thematic review was commissioned to consider five rapid reviews in respect of six young people involved in peer-on-peer violence. During the course of the review, two more young people were seriously harmed in further violent incidents and rapid reviews were undertaken and submitted to the National Panel. These were subsequently included within the review. The findings of a thematic audit (Bristol, July 2019) concerning four young people charged with manslaughter/murder were integrated into the analysis.

### Review Questions

1. What do young people and their families tell us about what is working well and what is needed to reduce risk? How effectively did we take this into account?
2. What does a multi-agency response to the peer groups in these cases tell us about what is currently effective and what opportunities there are to strengthen our safeguarding response (from identification to intervention) to peer groups where there are concerns about gang affiliation, knife crime and criminal exploitation?
3. What supports, and what is a barrier to information sharing and pooling of resources across neighbouring authorities? What opportunities do we have in the region to develop our co-working?
4. The subjects of the rapid reviews had common factors e.g. early childhood trauma, knife carrying, reported missing, low level early drug dealing and attendance at alternative learning provision. How can we/did we take these factors into account when designing our preventative and protective interventions?
5. What is the role of alternative learning provision and supported housing in how peer networks form, and risk and protective factors in them?
6. How effectively did the multi-agency group understand and intervene in the context in which these peer groups are operating i.e. identifying and responding to the role of organised criminal groups and locations of concern, including cross border co-operation?
7. What can our response to these peer groups tell us about the effectiveness of peer group and 1:1 intervention in reducing risk such as mentoring, specialist services etc.? What are areas of good practice across the three authorities that we can learn from? How effectively did we identify and support connected groups such as friends, siblings and children's boyfriends/girlfriends to reduce the risk to them?
8. All of the young people identified as part of this review have younger siblings. How can we ensure that the learning from this review is used to inform our practice and impact upon the outcomes for this potential 'up and coming' cohort?

The analysis and report aim to pull out the common themes emerging through the rapid reviews, the lived experience of parents contributing to the review alongside a consultation with young people engaged in local services, and the practice wisdom of participants in the professionals' event. The learning for individual agencies has already been identified through the rapid review reports and is not replicated here. Rather the discussion and recommendations are focussed on these broader themes and systemic issues with implications for multi-agency safeguarding partners.

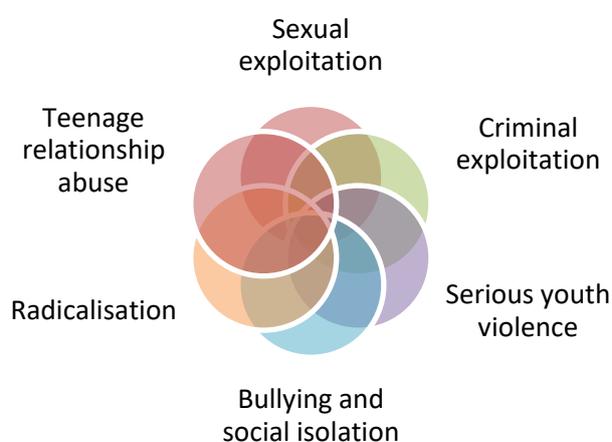
## 1.3 Terms and definitions

1. In reflecting its remit to explore particular issues around risk and vulnerability experienced in adolescence, this review refers to ‘young people’ throughout. Notwithstanding, the young people in this review were all legally defined as children under the Children Act 1989.
2. There is no single definition of Serious Youth Violence (SYV) instead various reviews refer to “community/public space violence committed by young people under the age of 25”<sup>3</sup>. This is echoed by the definition provided in the Bristol Safer Options strategy which was used to guide this review:

*“Violence that occurs among young people aged 25 and under, outside of the home. It is between young people who are not related, and who may or may not know each other”<sup>4</sup>.*

Serious youth violence is a complex and multi-faceted issue. Research shows that many young people experiencing SYV will also be vulnerable to other forms of harm or abuse including child criminal exploitation (CCE), county lines, child sexual exploitation (CSE) and involvement in gangs. Very often these multiple forms of harm are overlapping (RIP, 2019) and this is recognised throughout the approach of this review.

Figure 1: Overlapping forms of extra-familial harm experienced by adolescents



3. In particular, gangs form a feature of this review as several of the incidents considered were retaliatory attacks, arising from the incendiary relationships between two local rival gangs in the Bristol area. The Centre for Social Justice’ report *Dying to Belong* (2009) informs the Government definition of a gang as:

*“A relatively durable, predominantly street-based group of young people who: 1) see themselves (and are seen by others) as a discernible group; 2) engage in criminal activity and*

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<sup>3</sup> [Early Intervention Fund \(2015\) Preventing Gang and Youth Violence: A review of risk and protective factors. Cordis Bright Consulting](#)

<sup>4</sup> [Bristol Safer Options Approach to Serious Youth Violence and Child Criminal Exploitation 2020-2030](#)

*violence; and may also 3) lay claim over territory (not necessarily geographical but can include illegal economy territory); 4) have some form of identifying structural feature; and/or 5) be in conflict with other, similar, gangs.”*

It is important to note that there is considerable debate about the use of the term ‘gang.’ Some commentators contend that this is a vague and racialised concept that can result in the labelling of black young people who, due to the over-policing of black and minority ethnic communities are over-represented in national statistics (Amnesty International, 2018). Others describe how the failure to properly conceptualise gangs has led to inertia in public policy and practices (Andell, 2019; Maxwell *et al*; 2019). What has emerged in recent years, is a picture where the boundaries between street gangs and peer networks, organised crime networks and drug retailers have become increasingly blurred (Andell and Pitts, 2017; Maxwell *et al.*, 2019). For these reasons, this report refers to peer groups or co-offending peer groups rather than gangs.

4. The criminal exploitation of children through county lines activities is also a feature of this review. The National Police Chiefs Council (NPCC) defines ‘County Line’ as a term used to describe gangs and organised criminal networks involved in exporting illegal drugs into one or more importing areas [within the UK], using dedicated mobile phone lines or other form of “deal line”. They are likely to exploit children and vulnerable adults to move [and store] the drugs and money and they will often use coercion, intimidation, violence (including sexual violence) and weapons.<sup>5</sup>
5. Home Office guidance on county lines states that:

*“Child Criminal Exploitation is common in county lines and occurs where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, control, manipulate or deceive a child or young person under the age of 18. The victim may have been criminally exploited even if the activity appears consensual. Child Criminal Exploitation does not always involve physical contact; it can also occur through the use of technology.”<sup>6</sup>*

## 1.4 Review approach and methods

Contextual safeguarding recognises that young people experience violence and abuse in a range of contexts outside of the family home, including within their peer groups, schools and local communities and online through social media. This approach was used to guide the process of information gathering, organisation of the data and analysis (Firmin, 2017a).

An ecological lens was used to understand the importance and relative influence of peer relationships during adolescence in defining young people’s experiences, choices and behaviours and how they determine young people’s social status amongst their peers (Firmin, 2017b). This

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<sup>5</sup> [Home Office 2018 Serious Crime Strategy](#)

<sup>6</sup> [Home Office \(2018\) Criminal Exploitation of children and vulnerable adults: County Lines guidance p. 2](#)

recognises that peer relationships are influenced by the settings in which they develop whilst also influencing those settings.

The *Pathways to Harm, Pathways to Protection* model (Sidebotham et al., 2016; Brandon et al., 2020) highlights the need for timely interventions in taking preventative action through the identification of pre-disposing risks. Thus, this review also understood the young person's history as an additional context in identifying background vulnerability factors. This is essential if *anticipation* is to play a greater role in counter-acting or interrupting the weight of influence of harmful contexts.

The analysis sought to understand the interplay between the contexts and spaces that young people inhabit. It considers the implications for the child protections system, wider safeguarding partnerships and how partner agencies might intervene more effectively in those contexts outside of the home where young people experience harm.

The methods adopted by the review included:

- A review of background materials including national documents and reports, and local safeguarding policies, procedures and guidance documents across the three local authorities
- A thematic analysis of the rapid reviews and audit report using the mapping tool (as above)
- Interviews with families impacted by serious youth violence and knife crime
- A professionals' event in April 2021 to explore safeguarding partner experiences and service responses to SYV. Services represented included Health, Education and Alternative Learning Providers, Children's Social Care, Police and the Violence Reduction Unit (VRU), Victim Care, Youth Offending Services, Safer Options, CAMHS, SEND, Citizens Advice Bureau and local accommodation providers.

A bespoke analysis tool was developed to map the review questions (above) against the 'four domains' of contextual safeguarding (Firmin, 2017b) and identify patterns in young people's histories, service engagement with and responses to young people, and in the interplay between contexts across the rapid review sample.

### Engagement with families and young people

The original review design incorporated a significant element of engagement and consultation with the young people who were subjects of the rapid reviews, along with their families. This was unfortunately curtailed by the factors outlined below. The review does not under-estimate the importance of hearing these perspectives and in centralising lived experience and therefore recognises this as a limitation in the findings. The challenges and considerations are outlined below in order to maximise our learning about how thematic reviews addressing issues of SYV, criminal exploitation and county lines might approach direct engagement in the future. The involvement of young people and families in this work is essential and must be afforded additional time and resources in order for the challenges outlined below to be responded to and for the process to be appropriately facilitated and supported.

- The Covid-19 pandemic meant that for the majority of the six months' period over which the review was conducted (Jan 21 – June 21) the lockdown restrictions prevented face to face

engagement. This left a very limited window of opportunity towards the end of the process given the fixed timescales of the review. The sensitivity of the issues covered meant that it was not safe or appropriate to undertake meetings with young people online.

- Given the nature of the experiences of the young people as victims of knife crime who had sustained serious injuries, great care was taken to ensure that these conversations could take place safely with the young person's welfare always as the priority. For this reason, a Risk and Needs Assessment was devised and undertaken with each young person's lead professional to support their participation. This took a therapeutic approach in order to assess and minimise any risks of triggering or re-traumatising the young person and to ensure wrap-around support arrangements before and in follow-up to any meeting. For at least two young people in the sample, very recent serious incidents had occurred that meant their participation in the review would have been misjudged and injurious to their welfare.
- Other risks were also taken into consideration. Some of the young people were in custody and awaiting trials, subject to ongoing criminal investigations or facing further charges and their involvement in the review might have compromised these processes. The Risk and Needs Assessment also revealed the level of anxiety these circumstances held for young people and this meant the timing for consultation was not right for them.
- For some young people, situations of serious peer-on-peer violence and those associated with criminal exploitation were ongoing. Not only did this mean that a young person could be living from day to day in a heightened state of anxiety but that there were real risks of retaliatory attacks. This also has implications for holding focus groups with young people where the management of information between young people may present challenges.
- Lastly, some young people exercised their right not to participate in the review for other reasons and it was important that this choice was respected.

In the event, four parents contributed to the review through direct interviews and their views have been represented in the report. Additional views were also incorporated from one parent whose son was badly injured in a more recent incident of peer-on-peer abuse.

The review also draws on findings from a consultation exercise with four young people in the wider peer networks of those young people subject to this review. This was conducted by Barnardo's with Bristol safeguarding leads and explored the young people's perceptions of youth violence, peer group dynamics and some of the push and pull factors that contribute to incidents of serious youth violence. Direct quotes from these discussions are used in this report.

The following table sets out the numbers of children and parents whose information or views are included in this review to provide clarity to the reader. The findings of the review are applicable across the three local authorities and have been triangulated with the contributions from a broad range of professionals.

Figure 2: Number of children and parents whose information or views are included in this review

	6	0	4	5 parents from 4 families. 4 young people from wider peer groups.
	0	4	0	
	2	0	0	

## 1.5 The broader context

This review has taken place at a time of increased national concern with regard to an escalation in violence between young people and the proliferation of county lines drugs trafficking and criminal exploitation of young people. The Covid-19 pandemic has raised additional challenges in responding to adaptations in county lines supply methods, intelligence sharing between key services and the reduced visibility coupled with the increased vulnerability of young people at risk.

The National Referral Mechanism (NRM) is the UK system for identifying victims of trafficking and is increasingly being used to identify young people exploited through county lines. In 2020, there were 4946 potential child victims – an increase of 10% from 2019 and 47% of all referrals were for individuals who claimed to have been exploited as children<sup>8</sup>.

In 2020, the National Safeguarding Panel undertook a review of Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE)<sup>9</sup> identifying the links between young people going missing, drugs and other criminality including knife crime. It explores the responses of 17 local areas to these issues and many of the themes in this report echo the findings of the national review.

Following national trends, Avon and Somerset Police has seen recent increases in crime related to serious youth violence (SYV). In 2018-19 there were 1092 incidents of Knife Crime, Actual Bodily

<sup>7</sup> Local authority details not provided to maintain anonymity

<sup>8</sup> Source: National Referral Mechanism and Duty to Notify Statistics, end of year summary (2020)

<sup>9</sup> [It was hard to escape: Safeguarding children at risk from criminal exploitation. The Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel](#)

Harm, Grievous Bodily Harm and Gun Crime in Bristol and the rate of Serious Youth Violence offences overall rose by 24% between 2016/17 and 2018/19 with serious knife crime offences increasing by 45% in the same time period.<sup>10</sup>

Local responses to the issue are framed and supported by the Avon and Somerset serious violence strategy and the work of the regional Violence Reduction Unit which operates a devolved model across the force. In addition, each local area has a bespoke response to the issue:

- In Bristol 'Safer Options' has been introduced as a whole systems approach designed to combat criminal exploitation of young people and serious youth violence framed by Bristol's 'Safeguarding Children in our Communities Strategy 2020-2023' and the 'Serious Youth Violence Plan 2020'.
- 'South Gloucestershire's (Response) Strategy for Tackling Serious Violence' was launched in March 2020 and the South Gloucestershire's Violence Reduction Unit leads the development and delivery of a multi-agency action plan to tackle the issues identified in the strategy and through the South Gloucestershire Serious Violence Problem Profile using a Public Health approach.
- In North Somerset the 'North Somerset Serious Violence Reduction Strategy 2021-22' provides a co-ordinated front-line multi agency model to provide sustainable solutions that prevent serious violence problems escalating. It is comprised of four key areas: a Risk Programme, an Intervention Programme, an Education Programme and a Communities Programme, following a Public Health model.

For an overview of regional developments see the [Avon and Somerset Violence Reduction Unit Annual Report 2020-2021](#).

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<sup>10</sup> [Bristol Safer Options Approach to Serious Youth Violence and Child Criminal Exploitation 2020-2030](#). pg. 5.

## Section Two: Findings

### 2.1 The incidents of serious youth violence covered in the rapid reviews

This thematic review has considered the rapid reviews relating to seven incidents of peer-on-peer violence where young people were the victims of stabbings and seriously injured. Sadly, there was one fatality in the group.

The incidents took place between 2018 and 2021. Five of them took place in Bristol, one in Bath and North East Somerset and one in North Somerset, although the young people involved were not necessarily residents in these areas but in some cases travelled across local authority borders. Several of the incidents were related and involved young people who were associated with two local rival peer groups. Other young people linked to these groups have been subject to charges of manslaughter and attempted murder in relation to other retaliatory activities between the two groups, and this situation is ongoing.

It is recognised that these reviews span the period between July 2018 and July 2021, during which time local knowledge has developed about the nature of extra-familial harm in relation to peer-on-peer violence and criminal exploitation. Strategic and operational responses have been introduced over this time that are resulting in swifter and more effective interventions, evidenced to some degree in the latter reviews and showing how learning has been assimilated and actioned. The thematic review highlights examples of good practice in order that this learning might be shared effectively as well as identifying the opportunities for further learning and development.

The following analysis follows the ecological model which underpins the contextual safeguarding approach in order to understand the significance and weight of the various contexts and spaces which young people inhabit and move between in their daily interactions with others. It draws on the range of sources outlined above (1.4) including: the rapid reviews, the SYV multi-agency audit (2019), interviews with parents and young people from peer groups and consultation with professionals, alongside the wider literature surrounding SYV and CCE.

It begins by looking at the features and characteristics of young people's home lives and personal domains in order to understand more clearly the relationship between background vulnerability factors and the extra familial harms these young people are experiencing.

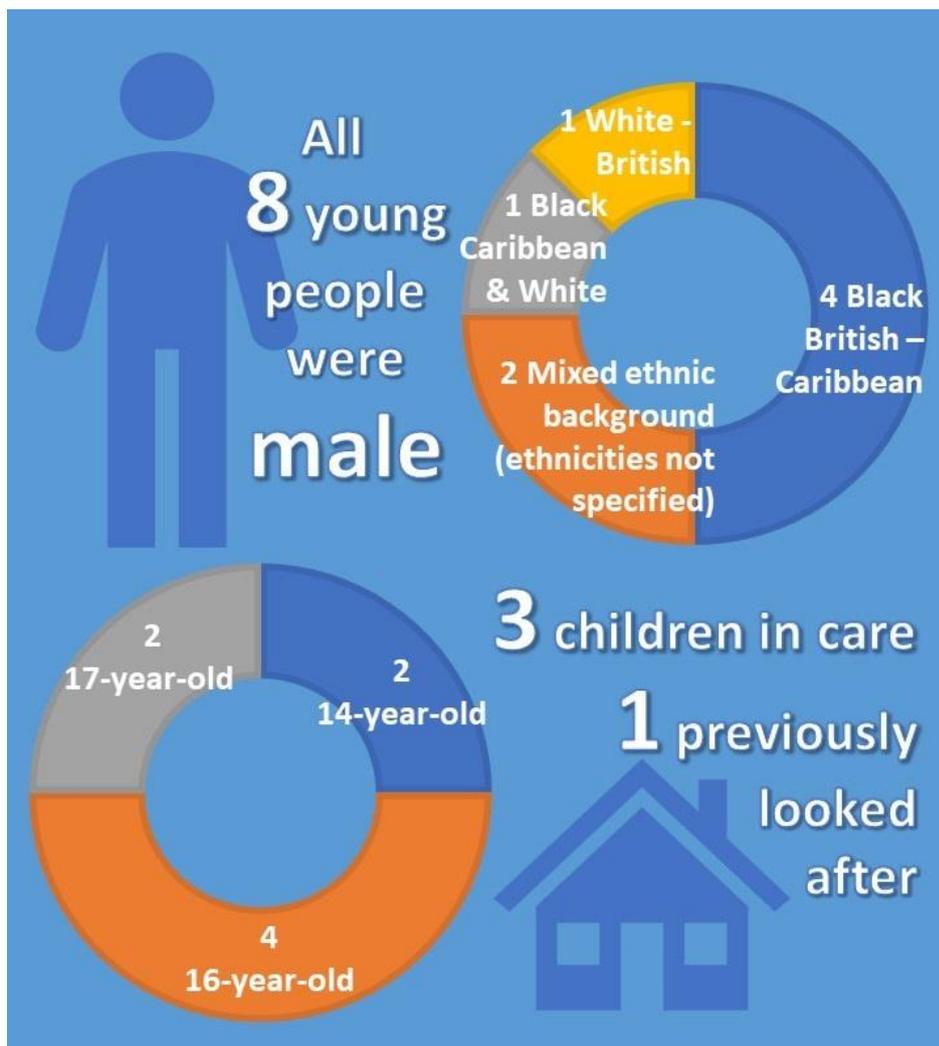
### 2.2 Characteristics of the young people

Seven rapid reviews were analysed in respect of eight named young people. Of those eight:

- All the young people were male
- Two were 14 years old, four were 16 and two were 17 years old at the time of the incident.
- Four were from Black British – Caribbean ethnic background, two were from a mixed ethnic background (ethnicities not specified), one was Black Caribbean & White and one was White British.

- Three of the young people were children in care and one had been previously looked after.
- Six young people were identified as having special educational needs, including moderate learning difficulties, ADHD and/or speech and language difficulties.
- Four were known to have experienced domestic abuse
- Five of the young people had been subject to physical abuse from their father or step-father
- Four of the young people had family members who were known to be involved in criminality, selling drugs and serious violence

Figure 3: Characteristics of the eight named young people



### Vulnerability and Risk

Much of the literature surrounding youth violence and overlapping forms of harm such as child criminal exploitation (CCE), county lines and child sexual exploitation (CSE) highlights the importance of understanding the historical and underlying factors in a young person’s background that may increase their vulnerability and contribute to the conditions in which peer-on-peer violence and extra familial harm occur. It can be helpful to think of these as historic conditional or static risk

factors that cannot be influenced through new circumstances or interventions (Department of Health, 2007; Barlow, 2020). Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) are categorised as background vulnerability factors.

It is of note that for most of these young people, home was not a protective environment. Violence was normalised and early adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) combined with troubled family backgrounds to represent significant push factors towards harmful peer contexts outside the family home.

Domestic abuse was identified in four of the eight cases; five of the young people had been subject to physical abuse from father or step-father. Neglect and emotional abuse were also cited in two of the cases. Half of the families were involved in criminality, selling drugs and serious violence and the Bristol multi-agency audit (2019) also identified this as a significant theme. One young person in the peer consultation described this as a key driver for young people becoming involved in criminality themselves:

*“Some adults are like, on drugs, and they teach their kids around drugs and alcohol. And some kids think it’s OK to sell because they see their parents sell or they have been sold stuff.” [Young person from wider peer group]*

Six of the eight young people were identified as having special educational needs, including moderate learning difficulties, ADHD and/or speech and language difficulties. These impacted their school careers but also their interactions and relationships with peers. For example, one parent described how her son had been unable to anticipate the consequences of his behaviour amongst his peer group:

*“He was getting into fights...because he is who he is, he can be quite demanding and I can see that on the street that would lead to fights...Another child would have known he was being set up but he just walked straight into the honey trap because he wasn’t able to make sense of the situation that was going on.”*  
[Parent]

For two young people, their full cognitive needs and functioning were not understood due to the accessibility of services to this cohort.

Four of the young people were in or had a history of being in care and were predominantly late entrants to care. Their experiences also included relationship breakdown and isolation from their families. Being in care was viewed as a protective factor for one of the young people. The others’ experiences of care were characterised by multiple placement moves, disruption and instability due to lack of safe and appropriate accommodation.

### Race, identity and intersecting needs

The disproportionality in national statistics with regard to race and ethnic background, serious youth violence and involvement in CCE is widely noted in the literature. The young people in this sample were, with one exception, from black and minority ethnic backgrounds and feedback from both professionals and young people indicated that common narratives around ‘gangs’ were linked to

race. One young person contributing to the consultation with peers, talked about active profiling of black young people by the police:

*“There is a lot of profiling from young black children and police. I feel they harass us more than they need to. One time my friends got arrested and for no reason. I’m just chilling with friends in a car park. And five minutes later there were five policeman coming at me. They arrested me for something about a phone call saying that people were waving knives. They could see we weren’t doing that. We were just linking up and catching up... I want to see equality from the police. Everyone has to understand that beneath your skin you are the same” [Young person from wider peer group]*

A representative of the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) participating in the professionals’ event, also highlighted how the concept of ‘gang’ had been racialised with behavioural issues amongst white young people characterised as ‘anti-social’ whilst for black young people they were ‘gang’ associated behaviours. An education representative also felt that systemic discrimination was evident in schools where children from different backgrounds were treated differently in the same circumstances, with black children disproportionately impacted by this.

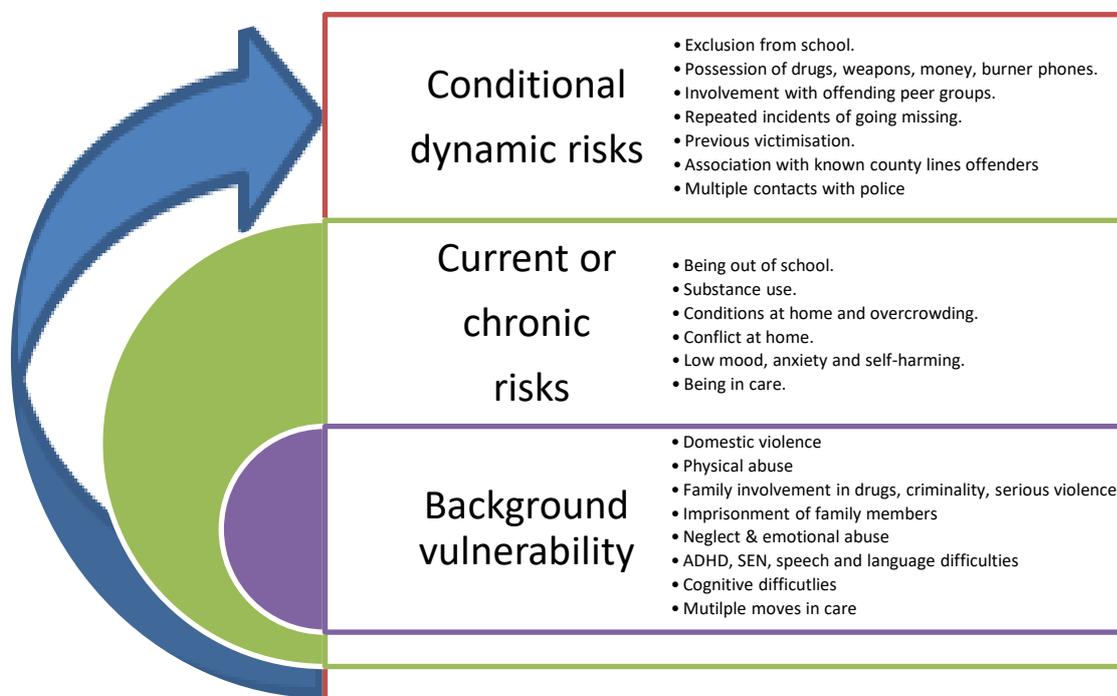
The intersecting needs of young people in the sample arising from racial identity, care status, special educational needs (SEN), attachment and behavioural disorders and ADHD, are compounded by perceptions of ‘gangs’ and peer groups. These are key themes for this review and returned to throughout the following analysis.

In addition, there were a range of *current risk factors* that recurred across the sample of reviews. These can be viewed as dynamic risks in that they are subject to change over time and so may be managed (Barlow, 2020) but they are also relatively stable or chronic. These acted as aggravators to historical factors, compounding risk and increasing young people’s vulnerability to harm in extra-familial contexts.

Also strongly evident in these cases were *conditional dynamic risk factors* arising in current situations that were liable to change and escalate rapidly and that required a fast response; including indicators that a young person was at immediate risk of peer violence through retaliation or exploitation.

The prevalence of ACEs experienced by the young people in this review demonstrates the impact of cumulative harm in their lives from an early age, and also shows how these can increase vulnerability to extra familial harm later on in adolescence. Most young people in the sample came to the attention of services relatively late in spite of these strong predicting factors and at a time when the outward indicators of risk such as going missing, weapons carrying, drug use and disruptive behaviour were already firmly established and resulting in negative outcomes such as school exclusion. This underlines the importance of partners recognising the signs and range of behaviours indicative of ACEs in order to deliver early help and increase the protective factors in children’s lives at an earlier stage.

Figure 4: Vulnerability and risk factors identified in common across the individual rapid reviews



A range of tools and resources are in use within and across partner and multi-agencies in order to assess the risk of SYV and CCE. It is important that such tools distinguish between and take account of background vulnerability, current or chronic risks and conditional dynamic risks and evaluate the interplay between them. For risk assessments to be effective they also need to move beyond the circumstances for the young person at individual and family level to assess the broader contexts in which the harm is occurring including school, peers, neighbourhoods and online. In so doing, they should determine the relative weight of influence of these community contexts in the life of the young person and how these contribute to the social conditions in which the harm is occurring. These issues are discussed further in section 3.2.

### 2.3 Health, mental health and wellbeing

A number of mental health and wellbeing issues were identified across the sample. As well as possession with intent to supply (PWIT), personal drug use was noted amongst all the young people, albeit at a low level, and aggressive behaviours at home also featured strongly in the reviews.

Participants from the health sector at the professionals' event noted a link between ADHD and cannabis use and a tendency for young people to self-medicate. This was the case for one young man in the sample who stopped taking his ADHD medication, possibly in response to negative peer influence, and this resulted in rapidly escalating risk and involvement in criminal behaviour. It was noted that it is an individual's right to decline treatment.

For three of the young people, low mood and anxiety was a key vulnerability, along with difficulties sleeping. Two of the young men had histories of self-harming and attempted suicide. For both these young men there was an association with parental, particularly mothers' mental health. One of the young people had received sustained counselling from CAMHS and another had received extensive family intervention support to help him and other family members with the impacts of domestic abuse, although the family noted concerns about the failure to access CAMHS for him. Several occasions were noted where no further action was taken after young people were perceived to disengage from counselling support services. One young man had an appointment with 'Thinking Allowed' a specialist counselling service for young people in care but he did not attend further sessions. In another example, a missed telephone assessment resulted in no further involvement from the service. A speech and language referral was made for one young person but the family needed more support to progress this. The need for persistence in engaging young people and families in services is a theme returned to in the later discussion (section 3.3).

Young people's access to general health care was a theme for health practitioners at the professionals' event in relation to chronic ill health issues that had been present since childhood, and this was especially noted for young people in care. This was an issue for one young man in the sample who needed support with a neurological condition but found it difficult to attend appointments. His access to health services was eventually improved with the support of a mentor.

Whilst all of the young people had been in receipt of acute and emergency health services subsequent to the attacks, there was little reference to follow up counselling support in hospitals at the time of the incidents and this was highlighted in one review. A participant in the professionals' event from the VCS, noted how an advocate attending at hospital following a stabbing, or supporting a young person at the police station following arrest, could play a key role in providing support, and communication with families and other professional's critical moments.

Other reviews noted missed opportunities for drugs treatment and counselling, post trauma counselling and psychological support and issues around information sharing between health, children's social care and police, also health services' involvement in multi-agency risk management processes. The learning for individual agencies has been addressed in rapid review recommendations and subsequent organisational action plans.

The traumatic impact of being a victim of such violence and young people's ongoing mental health is a key theme for this review. Some reports describe young people being in state of heightened anxiety or hyper-vigilance both in the forerun to and following the attacks, contributing to poor sleep patterns, decision making and negatively impacting other cognitive processes. A health practitioner at the professionals' event talked about young people using cannabis to blunt the impact of trauma and as a way to respond to the other difficulties in their lives, but its tendency to

reduce empathy was also considered. Professionals also discussed the longer term impact of trauma on cognition and how this could also act as barrier to engagement in services.

Psychological services were difficult to access. One parent contributing to the review described his frustration in getting psychological support for his 14-year-old son following the incident and also underlined the ongoing impact of that trauma on his mental health.

*“The support is non-existent. He could have died that night... It was horrible. Once something like that happens to a 14-year-old boy - how do you get over that? You can't. So where's the psychological help? How do you get to a point where a teenage boy nearly dies and he's not under CAMHS – I don't understand it.”*

[Parent]

These experiences were echoed by another parent who outlined the importance of support to parents in the wake of a violent attack but was mostly concerned about the mental health support for boys:

*“I feel that I'm having to ask for counselling and it's not there and I am not willing to let my son go through this and not have help. I was sat in the hospital asking and asking about counselling and the nurse gives me a leaflet about county lines but not any leaflets about counselling when my son's been stabbed and attacked.”* [Parent]

A young person from the wider peer group also made an observation about a friend they knew that had been the victim of a violent attack and the longer term impacts for them:

*“Someone I see on and off, he's been stabbed recently, and it's changed them. They become very scared and sad. And even if they are not sad they aren't even there, they aren't even in the room with you. It makes me sad because there's nothing you can do.”* [Young person from wider peer group]

In addition to the victims and their families, psychological trauma and the long term mental health impacts were also highly significant for the young people who had perpetrated the violence. The review heard very powerfully from two young people who had been friends with perpetrators of peer-on-peer violence:

*“He is so changed. When he was young he was so funny, laughing at everything. And now he's like no jokes, no smiles, didn't want to be touched, didn't want to be talked to.”* [Young person from wider peer group]

*“I know he shows remorse and I know it hurt him. I haven't spoken to him about his mental health. It's something you have to live with forever.”* [Young person from wider peer group]

There is a pathway to accessing counselling services through Youth Offending Services (YOS) although the review found that this route could be problematic once a young person's engagement

with YOS moved onto a voluntary basis. One practitioner described promising practice in the form of a pilot across the three areas using trauma-informed approaches to work with young people in the criminal justice system (Enhanced Case Management model). This involves a clinical psychology formulation with key agencies including health, police, school health nurses, social care and CAMHS in order to map and understand young people's communication and behavioural support needs. Young people's involvement is through statutory court order but this approach secures their involvement. Although still in its infancy, this is a helpful example of developing practice in learning how to target intervention to the young person's level of development and cognitive needs.

**Recommendation one: The Bristol, South Gloucestershire and North Somerset multi-agency children's safeguarding partnerships should give consideration to opportunities for investing in services as part of the public health response to serious youth violence and how gaps in therapeutic provision for young people might be addressed, including:**

- **Preventing serious violence and exploitation by strengthening the offer around speech and language therapy so that this is extended to primary school aged children, and access to services supported through health, children's social care and education pathways.**
- **Improving access to assessments and health and wellbeing support for children at risk of child criminal exploitation and knife crime, including those with complex needs (eg SEN, ADHD and cognition and processing needs);**
- **Enabling access to culturally appropriate trauma-recovery services following serious assaults**

## 2.4 Family life and living Situation

Five of the young people in the rapid reviews were living at home or with extended family and the impact of peer-on-peer violence and criminal exploitation on families was far reaching. Parents and families struggled to deal with a range of behaviours at home including drug use, aggression, self-harm, repeated missing incidents, exclusion from school, low mood and hyper-vigilance or anxiety.

Conditions in the family home and overcrowding were significant features for at least two of the young people and acted as a push factor towards harmful extra-familial contexts. For one young person this meant sleeping on the sofa on return home from hospital and recuperating from serious injuries.

For several young people in the sample there was frequent conflict in the home. Often this took the form of physical violence between the young person and father or step-father, and frequent physical assault, also representing a push factor towards harmful peer contexts. This is a significant and recurring theme across the young people in this review and raises questions about how fathers are supported to parent boys and how services respond to physical abuse from the earliest opportunities for intervention.

Some households experienced direct threats to the family. These could be retaliatory in nature, or reprisals linked to drug debts. This was the case for one family threatened by men in balaclavas

following the son's arrest and the police's confiscation of the drugs he was carrying. Another mother experienced threats and coercion linked to her son's criminal exploitation through county lines.

Where there was a significant level of threat, households were flagged by the police for a rapid response. One family was advised repeatedly to move as a safeguarding measure, however refused to do so because of a reluctance to move away from neighbours and existing social and support networks. Another family, having lost trust in statutory services' ability to keep themselves or their son safe, arranged for him to live with extended family in another part of the country and would not disclose his whereabouts to statutory services. One mother felt forced to move house with her four children in order to keep them safe. This had been highly disruptive to the other siblings and particularly so for a younger sibling with autism.

*"I don't know who these people are or what they are capable of... and it was just like I was telling the [social worker] my feelings for no reason because there was nothing he could do. I definitely didn't feel safe and I definitely didn't think my kids were safe... it was literally a case of 'I'm going to have to find whatever comes up straight away and just go and not tell anyone where we've gone and that's literally what we did...' [Parent]*

One family self-referred for Strengthening Families (Edge of Care) support to help address issues around conflict at home and their son's substance misuse. Parents contributing to the review spoke of their frustration and anger at services' inability to help their situation, describing interventions as too low level, short and ineffective. One mother described a series of social work visits over a six-week period in the wake of the incident but these mainly focussed on filling out paperwork: *"I've got loads of pieces of paperwork saying 'this is really difficult; I'm not coping very well'"* but she felt this process had not transpired into any real help or resolution of the situation. Another parent felt that all of the meetings they had attended between the agencies had not resulted in a joined up approach to home and school life:

*"We had no plan of what this worker was going to do with him, we had no targets as to how we were going to get [him] back into school, how we were going to join all this up between his school life and his home life. Surely we've got to have a plan that we can measure. I think the major problem here that each part of this has failed – the school failed, we failed as parents and social care has failed because we all failed to have a coherent plan to get him back on track. We were all doing everything individually and we tended to do the same things over and over again because that's all we had. It seemed to be more service led than being led [by his] needs." [Parent]*

This triangulates with professionals' views expressed at the consultation event about the challenges in moving assessment of risk through to action when there were few resources targeted towards disruption and intervention with peer groups and harmful places and spaces.

All four parents contributing to the review spoke of the personal toll and ongoing emotional impact of what had happened to their sons. One mother described how the family was called to the bedside

of her son in hospital and advised that he was unlikely to survive his injuries and she was subsequently diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder.

All of the young people in the rapid review sample had younger siblings and there were implications for them in terms of their own safety and the impacts on their emotional health and wellbeing. This underlines the need for a range of family interventions from preventative work and early help for siblings through to post trauma targeted support.

**Recommendation two: The Bristol, South Gloucestershire and North Somerset multi-agency children’s safeguarding partnerships should give consideration to opportunities for:**

- **Improving the multi-agency response to boys under 10 who have experienced physical abuse or witnessed physical violence by older males in their homes.**
- **Support with mental health and wellbeing for boys who have experienced domestic violence or physical abuse in the family home**
- **Health and wellbeing and trauma recovery services for young people and those around them impacted by peer-on-peer violence and CCE including peers, siblings and parents.**

### Young people in care

Three of the young people were in supported accommodation. For two of these young people being looked after was not a protective factor and appears to have increased their vulnerability and risk from harmful peer contexts. Both young people had experienced multiple placements through their care careers including foster homes, residential children’s homes, short break services, secure training centres and more latterly, supported lodgings or semi-independent accommodation. This was also the case for one young man who had previously been in care and looked after in multiple placements over a period of four years. One rapid review report highlighted the impact of multiple moves on a young person both in terms of their physical and emotional wellbeing and recommended that this should be considered an increased risk in terms of assessment and safety planning. Professionals at the consultation event described additional barriers for young people experiencing multiple moves in building and maintaining consistent relationships with adults and in accessing health care services.

Parents of children located out of area expressed concern at the distance young people were placed from the family home and young people often went missing from placements for extended periods of time, often to return home. Children in care are disproportionately represented in missing person reports and going missing is a known key indicator for CCE. For example, in 2020, one third of referrals to London’s Rescue and Response county lines project had looked after status.<sup>11</sup>

The number of young people in residential care in England has risen by 12% since 2015, and the percentage of those placed in residential care ‘out of area’ has also seen a dramatic increase from 47% to 61% between 2010 and 2020. The ‘market’ with regard to care placements and meeting the range of complex, multiple vulnerabilities has been described as ‘broken’ (Crest Advisory, 2021). Whilst the use of ‘out of area’ placements can be for safeguarding reasons, it is most often due to a

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<sup>11</sup> Rescue and Response County Lines Project (2020) Year 2 Strategic Assessment.

lack of suitable accommodation locally. There is no evidence that out of area placements are any safer for young people. Rather the converse is true, as host local authorities often don't have sufficient information about the young people placed in their area or the resources to support them. Research has identified the deliberate targeting of young people in children's homes and foster homes for exploitation (Maxwell, *et al.*, 2019) and the use of 'out of area' placements by exploiters to extend the reach of county lines. In two of the rapid reviews, being placed out of area significantly increased risk for the young people and there were clear indicators of county lines exploitation including a high level of missing incidence, possession of drugs, weapons and money and being found in cuckooed properties.

The accommodation crisis for vulnerable adolescents was highlighted in other examples, notably in the case of one young person who needed emergency accommodation after being mistakenly bailed to an unsafe address. After 24 hours in custody, a placement had still not been identified for the young person and he was eventually accommodated in a hotel with staff support.

The accommodation provided, even when accompanied by 24-hour support, could also present risks to the young person through association with peer groups and contexts characterised by harmful social rules and behaviours. One such example occurred for a young person in a supported placement when a known county lines runner was able to take up residence in his flat. Whilst this was disclosed to the police, they had insufficient powers to remove him. This young person was later victim to a serious attack in the same flat.

*"When you have a child and you take them from their family you have to make sure that child is well looked after, everything is very secure for that child."*

[Parent]

One review highlighted a positive example of a protective supported accommodation placement where the young person was provided with intensive support with basic care, and transition to independence and he was able to achieve some stability. The parents were involved in his risk management and care planning and relationships with his family improved. In particular, this young person benefitted from the structure that the placement provided, particularly valuing the support from black male carers who he looked up to and respected.

However, there were other aspects of his safety that decreased and this was in relation to missing incidents. When living at home the parent described how when her son went missing *"we would go missing with him – so we would go all round [the area] searching for him."* She would ring everybody she knew, galvanising a local network made up of his friends and their parents and neighbours. Both parents would be actively out on the street looking for him and their presence and visibility acted as protective factor:

*"The street people didn't like [my son] being around so much because (his father) would turn up, I would turn up, the police would be coming to their house. It was just too inconvenient for them to have him hanging around whereas all of a sudden when he went into accommodation, he ends up being much more free...he was just left to get on with things himself for some while. When he was going missing from [supported placement] they would phone the police. No one would*

*go looking and the police never ever found [him] so I don't know why they even bothered to phone them. I used to say to the police 'this is just an administrative task just in case something happened to him that evening.'* [Parent]

This example highlights the protective power of family and local community in increasing safety for young people and this is returned to in the concluding discussion.

**Recommendation three: The Bristol, South Gloucestershire and North Somerset multi-agency children's safeguarding partnerships should explore opportunities for innovation in developing market sufficiency in supported accommodation for young people at high risk of CCE. This should be with the aim that young people can remain in touch with their local area and their natural support networks as they transition to adulthood and independence.**

## 2.5 School and education

This review considered the degree to which schools and alternative learning provision proved protective or harmful contexts for young people. Although there was little evidence in the reviews of school environments increasing physical risks to young people, it was clear that schools adopted a range of strategies in order to manage young people's behaviour including internal isolation and fixed term exclusions. Representatives from the education sector participating in the professionals' event described a 'culture of exclusion' whereby pupils could be excluded as a first option for managing behaviour, rather than as a last resort. This is particularly significant given the background vulnerabilities of the young people in the review sample, and the fact that for them, home was not a safe place. In these circumstances, school should have been a significant protective factor in their lives.

Professionals from education described how black young people in particular were responded to differently in schools and this triangulated with the experience of one young person from the wider peer group consultation:

*"I went to a lot of schools... I used to get in trouble for stupid things and get put on report. I used to do silly stuff but it wasn't malicious. I would do stuff loud like a teenager. I'd bust jokes. I feel me and my friends were targeted. By Year 9, 15 of my friends had been kicked out and other people were doing way worse. Being black... There isn't the equality in school. Behind the skin we are the same human. There isn't the equality. The shade of my skin shouldn't determine how you deal with me."* [Young person from wider peer group]

All of the young people in this thematic review had disrupted educational careers, experiencing multiple school placements, being on roll and negotiated placements, and alternative education provision and these were identified as significant push factors towards harmful extra-familial contexts.

It is inevitable that young people will experience a sense of displacement and dislocation as a result of multiple school moves. Because of this, the act of excluding a child can make them more vulnerable to gang violence (Children’s Commissioner, 2019). The Timpson review identified a correlation between school exclusion and becoming involved in crime.<sup>12</sup> The National Safeguarding Review Panel report into safeguarding children at risk of CCE<sup>13</sup> identifies exclusion from mainstream school as a key trigger point for escalating the risks of serious harm. The report recommends that permanent exclusion should be accompanied by an immediate support package in order to mitigate this. In addition to the escalation of risk, the young people in this review experienced disruption to their learning, isolation from peer and positive adult relationships, disrupted routine and increased unstructured time.

*“To me it all stems from the fact of not going to school and it’s the main driver of all this that he ended up being at home too much and him just walking out of the house or going to meet friends... and getting more and more involved with people that he shouldn’t have been.” [Parent]*

Exclusions and negotiated transfers are often accompanied by a deficit approach including blaming language with an emphasis on failure. These processes can impact highly negatively on young people’s sense of identity, belonging and self-esteem at a crucial time in their adolescent development.

The rapid reviews identified examples where exclusion was used disproportionately in response to minor examples of anti-social behaviour that were not well evidenced or did not take place on school grounds. One review highlighted that more timely use of the new Bristol Weapons in Schools pathway might have reduced the use of fixed term exclusion and the need for more awareness raising of the protocol amongst alternative education providers and social workers. Another identified multiple challenges in finding education provision to take young people with an extensive history of weapon carrying and violent offences.

An example of good practice showed how effectively a school can support a young person to stay in mainstream provision. In this case, whilst some fixed term exclusions had been necessary, the school worked consistently hard to avoid permanent exclusion and this involved providing and funding a range of interventions including: 24 weekly mentoring sessions; additional mentoring for a younger sibling; referral for counselling; the provision of extra tutoring and a bespoke education package. The parent’s description of the school’s support demonstrates how impactful this wrap-around support can be:

*“Without the school I would be dead to be honest. They have pushed and pushed – the funding, the mentors they have put in, the counselling...In all honesty the deputy head was my social worker and that was not fair to put on the school, but that is all I had and she understood [him], she knew what he’d been through.” [Parent]*

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<sup>12</sup> HM Government (May 2019) CP92, Timpson Review of School Exclusion.

<sup>13</sup> [National Safeguarding Review Panel \(2020\)](#)

The National Safeguarding Review of CCE identified that alternative learning provision could present harmful contexts for young people in providing an arena for peer group rivalries. One of the serious incidents considered in this review took place in the playground of a pupil referral unit (PRU) and was perpetrated by another adolescent from outside of the school. There had been concerns from the outset of the placement about other young people in the PRU having grievance against him. The incident raises issues around the safety and security of physical environments but also underlines the importance of information sharing and the involvement of alternative provision providers in risk assessment, management and safety planning. These activities should be undertaken, not just in respect of individual young people, but also peer groups and contexts particularly where gang rivalries are evident (see section 2.6 below for the characteristics of peer contexts).

Six of the eight young people were identified as having special educational needs (SEN), including moderate learning difficulties, ADHD and/or speech and language difficulties. Education professionals described pupils with SEN could find it difficult to make friendships with their peers with whom there could be frequent conflicts. Three of the young people had Education Health Care Plans (EHCPs) in place but this did not necessarily secure active involvement from the SEN team and it was not clear how the EHCP was being implemented. The rapid reviews also highlighted the need for EHCPs to be shared with key agencies engaged with the young person including health and VCS organisations. Barriers were identified for two young people in accessing speech and language support and these underlined a need to engage young people with complex needs more effectively in assessments. Two of the reviews noted an element of drift in returning to some form of education for young people leaving custody or spending a considerable time in hospital, recommending that these pathways be reviewed and strengthened.

Examples of good practice were noted in the reviews with regard to strong advocacy provided by Early Help, also in exploring and addressing behavioural concerns and providing support with negotiated transfers. It was also noted that Serious Violence Education Inclusion Managers could be particularly effective in advocating for young people to remain in mainstream school. In one case this had been successful where there were concerns related to gang affiliated pupils in alternative education provision and a move would have been counter-productive in terms of safeguarding. In one case where a child's needs were identified and assessed early at primary school age, the mother described:

*“The school were fabulous with him... from 5 till 11 he was really well supported and people understood him. We knew what his diagnoses was.”* [Parent]

However, identification of a child's learning, behavioural or cognitive needs at primary school was no guarantee of a specialist school placement. For two children, a reluctance to meet the costs of expensive residential placements in these circumstances led to far costlier interventions in secondary school and very poor educational outcomes for the child.

A participant in the professionals' event gave a positive practice example of how a school identified, mitigated and managed risk on site in order to prevent the exclusions of two young people whose activities, associated with rival peer groups, were a risk both inside and outside of school. A meeting

was held with parents and the pupils in order to agree 'safe space' within the school grounds with the result that both pupils completed Year 11 successfully and without further incident.

The review was also provided with an example of good practice being developed by an ALP (Alternative Learning Provision) focussed on the outreach work that they do to engage and support children back into mainstream schools by offering flexible outreach at both primary and secondary age. At primary age, they work with small groups twice a week. The intervention is based on a trauma-sensitive and developmental approach to the emotional and social needs of young people. Previously at risk of exclusion, all of the students they have worked with to date have maintained their mainstream placements. Schools have also reported improvement in students managing their feelings and reduced incidents of distressing behaviour. Additionally, for individual students at the point of permanent exclusion, they have offered a fixed term placement at the ALP; the school have not proceeded with the permanent exclusion and the student has been able to return at the end of the placement. In secondary schools, the ALP has offered dual registered placements for Year 11 students at significant risk of exclusion. All students recently successfully completed Year 11 and have clear post 16 plans. Schools also reported that these placements reduced the risk of permanent exclusion of other young people in their setting.

**Recommendation four: It is recommended that Bristol, South Gloucestershire and North Somerset multi-agency children's safeguarding partnerships look for opportunities to develop the evidence base with regard to interventions to prevent exclusion of children at risk of serious violence and child criminal exploitation with the eventual aim of achieving a zero-exclusion policy. Such interventions might include:**

- **Strengthening early help from Years 5 to 8 to identify emotional and behavioural problems including violent behaviour amongst boys and to provide support at the earliest stage and through the transition to secondary school. This should dovetail with initiatives around early help with accessing speech and language therapy (as above).**
- **Systematic risk assessment and the provision of immediate wrap-around support when a young person is excluded from school to provide structure, reduce negative impacts, manage risks and increase safety, building on best practice from Weapons in Schools Pilot.**
- **This should reach down to primary school level with a focus on capacity building so that learning from the three areas is built on with regard to early identification and effective responses to exclusion.**

## 2.6 Peer group characteristics, neighbourhood and online contexts

This section draws extensively on the views of young people from the wider peer group and some parents in order to provide illustration and insight into some of the characteristics of peer groups and how harm can occur within and between them. In doing so, it outlines some of the impact of this harm, both for individuals but also for the wider peer cohort. Extended quotes are used in order to illustrate the context and the challenges for all involved in trying to respond to these issues including for young people, parents and communities, alongside professionals and partner agencies.

This section also highlights the resilience and protective factors in friendship groups and communities that were described by young people. Section 3.4 below, outlines their ideas, drawn from this consultation for intervening and increasing safety in these contexts.

### Peer group characteristics and dynamics

Several of the incidents of serious youth violence featured in this review were linked to two particular rival peer groups in the Bristol area and the attacks were often retaliatory in nature. Examples included reprisals for previous incidents of peer-on-peer violence, the online posting of videos linked to previous attacks or debt recovery associated with drugs trafficking. There was also considerable evidence of the young people's involvement in robbery, violence and intimidation in schools and community settings; activities which were also linked to peer groups.

These are large groups, comprising up to thirty young people at the core with extended peer networks reaching wider peer cohorts. They were described as having long histories and peer-on-peer violence was often retaliatory in nature and played out over significant periods of time. Incidents within the sample, as far back as 2018, were connected to each other in this way. One mother described how her son's attack had been linked to a seemingly random but violent incident that he had perpetrated against a friend two years earlier. She described how her son had one postcode and he had another and this had determined the peer group allegiances.

These altercations were not just confined to the immediate group but could reach out into wider networks of friends, also impacting their friendships and determining allegiance:

*"You're not even part of the gang... you're just friends with a person and they have a problem with this person and all of a sudden everyone's involved in the problem so now you've got to be taking sides and you can't be that person's friend anymore."* [Parent]

*"I've got a mate and his cousin has a gang but I say he's got to calm down before he gets hurt but he then blocks me, when I am trying to help him."* [Young person from wider peer group]

This meant that often young people did not understand the current state of play with regard to their own friendship groups or where they stood in relation to them:

*"Even if you are in the group you don't know. You don't even know who is hating you on you."* [Young person from wider peer group]

One young person described the volatility of peer dynamics and how situations could quickly change; sometimes as a result of a joke, or a misunderstanding, and then arguments would quickly escalate into fights. The arbitrary nature of violent incidents meant that young people felt they needed to carry a knife and this in turn, generated more unpredictability illustrating the challenges for professionals in attempting to forecast or intervene in fast-paced scenarios:

*"Anything can happen anywhere. If it's going to happen it's going to happen. You can't do anything. When young people carry a knife they don't always have the*

*intention to use it. But they don't have a plan. Just to feel safe."* [Young person from wider peer group]

*"Some people feel that they are unsafe when they step outside their house. They feel they have to carry a knife for their own protection...It's crazy, they shouldn't have to feel like that. You should feel comfortable to walk on the roadside free."* [Young person from wider peer group]

The review heard from young people in the wider peer group that the stakes could be very high for young people, leading to hyper-vigilance and echoing previous accounts from parents and professionals about young people experiencing heightened states of anxiety that affected their mental health and cognitive functioning. Young people described the subsequent impact for peer groups:

*"He used to tell me: 'I can't walk the streets because I've got people after me' and we didn't understand what he was talking about but this boy had been making rap songs... basically saying he was going to kill [him]."* [Parent]

*"It's really hard for people when they feel like they have a target on them. They can try to kill them to stop them from killing them."* [Young person from wider peer group]

*"You have to be on your alert. I lost a friend to stabbing. You have to be forever alert. You have to know who you class as a friend but you trust no one. It can happen anywhere... It's a dice game – unexpected. You have to make sure you are knowledgeable about what you are doing and who you are doing it around."* [Young person from wider peer group]

*"Everyone's always on edge."* [Young person from wider peer group]

## Neighbourhoods and online contexts

Young people from the wider peer group described how violent incidents often began through social media (on Instagram or Snapchat) as a verbal exchange or incitement, or through the distribution of videos and then transferred to the streets where they rapidly escalated into violence:

*"Verbal. Always verbal on there. And then people see them out and they are like you said that on snapchat. People used to laugh about getting rushed. But now we are worried. Multiple people beating you up at the same time. And they all run onto you. You see that all on insta."* [Young person from wider peer group]

*"There were so many videos of people on buses, in houses and on street and then someone's filming them and saying 'Are you in this gang? Have you got beef with this person? You said this...'. I see them go round. I've seen it happen to boys that out of nowhere they all go for them. And then one boy gets his head kicked in."* [Young person from wider peer group]

This parent described the significance of the role of social media and how this had been amplified by the lockdown conditions during the Covid-19 pandemic, raising significant challenges for professionals in engaging with online contexts and monitoring communications between young people that are hidden:

*“They are doing all this over phones. You don’t physically have to be on a street corner now to be part of a gang. What these people in social care think is a gang and the reality of what a gang is, is very [different]. It’s like they’re still looking back to when gangs were walking around with different colours on, on street corners whereas nowadays this is all done online. They don’t even have to be out their house for very long to be in a gang because they are being groomed online – on Facebook, on Instagram, on Snapchat and ... By the time you get them out on the street and the police see them getting involved or we find out as parents that they are getting involved it’s all too late because they could have had 6 months of their friends, or their friends of friends grooming them to be part of this, way before anything happens.” [Parent]*

One parent described some of the difficulties she had experienced with social media and the control of information through community networks and how this had undermined her trust in the police and their ability to provide protection:

*“I feel that sometimes it’s too risky to make statements to the police. I reported the assault in January but straight away it was all over social networking that [my son] had snitched. He hadn’t even made a statement and it was already a problem for us...he [my son] has basically done an online confession... Social media is a huge problem in conflict in [area]. How am I supposed to stop him using it when I am hooked to the social too? We need to work differently with young people about how they are using it but I don’t know how to solve it.” [Parent]*

In addition to online spaces, geographical places were also a feature of young people’s experiences of criminality and peer violence. One young person clearly identified several areas as hotspots for violence and described how his family had moved home to escape an area where there were ‘lots of stabbings and people getting killed’ and where the crime rate was ‘completely unbalanced.’

In the rapid reviews, one young person was lured to the middle of a park by someone on Instagram, where they were physically exposed and vulnerable to a ‘rush’ attack. One of the young people in the consultation talked about the need to increase safety through better lighting in public spaces, giving an example of a friend being attacked by several young men in balaclavas, whilst walking through a park on the way home. The incident had been made more frightening by the fact that it was dark and they couldn’t see what was happening.

One of the young people talked about the policing of local neighbourhoods, not just of his own, but of footage of police behaviour that was circulated on social media and Instagram. This showed young people of 13 to 15 years’ old being manhandled and improperly treated and he felt these kind of images in turn fuelled young people’s behaviour:

*“The police forget that we are younger kids, I would call myself a child, not a ‘child’ child, I’m not a little kid but I’m not a man. They forget we are teenagers.”*

[Young person from wider peer group]

Professionals representing police and the criminal justice system spoke about the need for community policing approaches that engaged young people, building relationships and trust.

### Resilience and protective factors

It was possible for young people to become ostracised from peer groups in response to incidents and arguments, however young people from the wider peer group also described the strengths and protective factors that characterised their friendship groups. These included how they looked out for each other but also supported each other in the wake of tragedies that had affected the whole community:

*“We relied on each other to get through it... Us being so strong as a friendship group helped because we managed to pick ourselves and each other up. You got to move forward. It gave us a reason to do better. To do it for his mum and his siblings.”* [Young person from wider peer group]

*“My friend has been through terrible stuff recently...Sometimes you have to be able to check on your friends and say ‘I know about this and that – are you alright?’”* [Young person from wider peer group]

One young person talked about the importance of young people’s mental health and how they needed time and space to talk in the wake of traumatic event like a stabbing, or the death of a friend:

*“There needs to be an increase in the seeking out of young people’s mental health. Professionals don’t understand or don’t pay attention to the fact that these things eat up your brain. If you don’t speak to the right people and get the right knowledge it eats you up from the inside. So it would be very good for there to be increase in the accessibility to go and talk to someone, because at the moment people feel that they have to hold in their feelings. I know that lots of people my age or older or younger would feel better if they could go and speak about their deepest problems.”*

He suggested that one way to achieve this might be to build on the community strengths so that young people were helping young people:

*“It would show [that] even though you are young, it doesn’t mean you aren’t entitled to feel a certain way and speak your feeling. If there were young people out there to help other young people, you know you can relate to what they are saying. I think other young people feel the same type of way.”* [Young person from wider peer group]

## 2.7 Voice and lived experience

A number of gaps emerged through the analysis of the rapid reviews with regard to professionals' knowledge in relation to peer-on-peer violence and exploitation. In particular, these were in respect of online contexts and the role that social media has in escalating situations where peer violence is likely to occur. This raises challenges in engaging with online spaces for professionals.

Given the sample of rapid reviews, this review concentrated on the experiences of young men, but two of the cases raised issues around the impact on young women of peer-on-peer violence. This is reflected in the wider literature where an over-reliance on crime and police data to provide a picture of serious youth violence where girls are not as disproportionately stopped by police or are involved in ways less likely to come to police attention, and this was also highlighted through the consultation with peers:

*"People carry knives not to use them but just if something does happen they can get it out. Schools don't discuss any of it. They don't talk about this stuff at school with girls. They think it's just boys... I know lots of guys who have gotten angry about something. But because their girlfriend is there trying to help them she is the one they get angry at. Because she doesn't understand. And she is closest to them she's the one they get angry at, because it's her fault for what's happened"*  
[Young person from wider peer network]

Parents contributing to this review expressed frustration that professionals were seemingly unable to respond to their concerns and anxieties around peer violence and examples were given where young people had clearly raised the alarm ahead of retaliatory or reprisal attacks. In several cases parents did not feel that professionals took their views seriously, feel listened to or included as equal partners with a common aim of trying to increase safety:

*"I offered a view and I know parents always think they have the magic answer and want people to take notice of what they are saying... but I was making suggestions about what I thought would be a good outcome for [my son] based on what I understood about him as a parent. Their focus was on trying to keep the family together, but that was not the problem. In meetings they start talking about [my son] but they have no clue who they are talking about...I would say 'I am the last person you are engaging with, you've had seven meetings without me. I don't know what you could be talking about in a 'professionals meeting' if you are talking about [my son] because I know him and its really frustrating."*  
[Parent]

*"[The CAMHS focus] seemed set on me as a parent and not about what was needed for him and where we were both at. I felt judged and like no one else could see what my son needed."* [Parent]

A positive case example showed that parents' fears were responded to promptly and multi-agencies worked together to reduce risks and increase safety for the young person. However, even when professionals did work together there were limited opportunities, interventions or solutions

available to safeguard young people and where identifying who poses the risk in extended networks is highly challenging for agencies.

Young people talked about these activities taking place against a backdrop of poverty and lack of opportunity and this correlates with the background vulnerabilities identified from the rapid reviews. When asked what draws young people into situations like these, one young person talked about the 'element of hunger:'

*"...A lot of stuff in life, there's always a reason. No one is going to turn to drug dealing because it is cool. There's always a back story because of [...] knowing its illegal, knowing the dangers... the element of hunger that you want more for yourself.... The opportunities we've got are very different to other people. It's very limited."* [Young person from wider peer group]

The desire for money was a repeated theme and acted as a strong push factor towards harmful contexts. In their turn, these provided strong pull factors because selling drugs was an easy way to make it when there were few legitimate job opportunities. Even for younger people, below working age, this was the case, and this increased their vulnerability to exploitation:

*"I'm not being funny but by 13 your mind-set is money. You want to go out. People that don't have parents with money, how are they going to get by? They want to do things...People are going out there, meeting these people and they are thinking 'I can get money, the quick money'...This is what gets them into bad situations."* [Young person from wider peer group]

Peers described how some young people felt bullied or pressured into activities that they wouldn't otherwise have been involved in. For others, their association with particular peers provided credibility and status. For example, one parent described how for her son, the group provided a sense of identity and belonging that was stronger than the family group:

*"He instantly found people... he gravitated towards popular, big people that he felt made him untouchable, probably because he didn't have great social skills... and he fell into the trap of being friends with a gang and they wanted [him] to get involved in muling drugs from one place to another."* [Parent]

## Section Three: Discussion and Recommendations

Successful contextual safeguarding approaches require a policy framework for serious youth violence and criminal exploitation that recognises a) the weight of influence of different contexts in young people’s lives and how those shape the behaviours of young people and b) the impact that extra-familial contexts can have on the ability of parents and carers to be protective and this is considered in the following discussion.

### 3.1 The weight of influence in young people’s lives

Harmful peer groups, places and online spaces proved powerful contexts holding the weight of influence in the young people’s lives, which more protective environments such as school were unable to counteract. The protective influence of school was negated through multiple exclusions and disruption to young people’s school careers that was evidenced throughout these rapid reviews.

Often, home and family life did not provide sufficient protective factors to counter-balance harmful peer influences and online contexts. Some parents felt powerless in the face of external threats to the young person, sometimes extended to themselves and their families.

In addition, some of the background vulnerabilities of the young people, particularly in relation to early traumatic experiences and the high level of speech, learning and cognitive processing needs identified in this sample, meant that many of the young people had difficulty in negotiating peer group dynamics, relationships and the ‘rules’ within a group. These background vulnerability factors also dramatically increased the risk of county lines and other forms of coercion and criminal exploitation.

The review has identified the following push and pull factors both to and from harmful peer contexts:

*Figure 5: Push and pull factors towards harmful contexts*

<b>Push factors</b>	<b>Pull factors</b>
Overcrowding	Coercion and grooming
Out of school	Availability of drugs
Poverty	Opportunities to make money
Physical violence at home	Belonging and identity
SEN, ADHD and low cognitive functioning	Friendships
Poor mental health	
Substance misuse	

## 3.2 Bringing extra familial contexts into safeguarding processes

Across the sample of cases this review identified recurring challenges around services' recognition of risks and a correspondingly low level of response. For example, one review highlighted that agencies consistently didn't recognise the thresholds of concern related to criminal exploitation despite significant harm being disclosed by the family and the emerging police intelligence picture. As a result, early help was offered rather than ongoing statutory social work involvement and opportunities for a multi-agency response to the risks associated with weapon use were missed, as were opportunities to safeguard other young people in the peer group.

In another example, a young person was the victim of a serious attack that should have triggered an immediate strategy meeting given the harm sustained and the strong likelihood of re-victimisation. This was in the context of a series of dynamic and escalating risk factors and multiple concerns about gangs and retaliatory attacks. Once a strategy meeting was called the young person was assessed at the highest level of risk. In some of the reviews, it was evident that professionals struggled to get a clear view of the situation for the young person. In one example, professionals had not realised that the young person was spending significant time out of the country. No agency had a clear picture of his life or responded when risks began to escalate for him because he was viewed through a lens of criminality rather than as a victim. Reviews also highlighted an urgent need to clarify lead professional responsibilities where children's social care was not involved so that there was sufficient case co-ordination and clarity where a contextual approach was required.

The rapid reviews described a lack of understanding of the risks affecting young people and of responsibilities in relation to working with SYV and CCE and gaps in workforce skills and confidence were identified. These were reinforced by the views of participants in the professionals' event and in the feedback from parents who felt that social workers were often at a loss to know how to support or identify solutions. Professionals identified that multi-agency risk assessment and planning can help in a multi-agency team around the child holding risk collectively rather than responsibility lying solely with a statutory social worker.

In an example of good practice, effective risk and safety planning was characterised by a consistent professional network around the young person, relationship based support and engagement from a community mentor which improved engagement in education and training, access to health and the young person's recognition of the negative influence of offending peer groups. There was good engagement with the family which supported extended family connections. Regular risk management meetings were accompanied by timely information sharing, and the interface between familial and extra-familial settings was understood and regularly reviewed through Signs of Safety multi-agency mapping meetings, leading to a clear understanding and monitoring of risks.

In areas where there were locally based strategy meetings to assess peer group activities and neighbourhoods, reviews highlighted the need to join up the emerging intelligence picture with individual practitioner intervention with young people and families on the ground. Increased information flow with regard to local police strategies and activities to disrupt CCE and SYV would improve workforce confidence in reporting and soft intelligence gathering whilst also supporting direct intervention with young people and families. Multi-agency risk management meetings can

support the implementation of explicit approaches such as peer and place mapping within individual interventions whilst also contributing to the local intelligence picture to inform interventions into harmful extra-familial contexts.

As understanding of serious youth violence and criminal exploitation is developing, new models are emerging that respond to the complexity and the need for multi-dimensional approaches to risk assessment and management. For example, the Systemic Investigation, Protection and Prosecution Strategies for Cases of Child Criminal Exploitation (SIPPS)<sup>14</sup> is a tool that aims to improve the range of responses to CCE by analysing it as pattern that emerges from the interactions between the young person, the perpetrators and the environments in which they both exist. This aims to support the professional with the process of assessment through to planning the intervention so that the conditions for abuse are challenged at individual and place-based levels.

**Recommendation five: It is recommended that the Bristol, South Gloucestershire and North Somerset multi-agency children’s safeguarding partnerships ensure that current risk assessment tools encourage professionals to consider a) which represent current conditional risks with the potential to escalate, b) support professionals to move from assessment to intervention planning (individual, peer, place and space) and c) employ consistent language and approach in order to support multi-agency communication about risks and information sharing.**

**Recommendation six: The Bristol, South Gloucestershire and North Somerset multi-agency children’s safeguarding partnerships should review their multi-agency case coordination arrangements for adolescents experiencing exploitation to ensure that:**

- **Longer term case management and co-ordination (i.e. involvement for 18months or more) is provided where this is an assessed need and commensurate with the national framework requirements;**
- **Fluctuations in risk can be responded to flexibly i.e. there is a clear pathway back to support where this has previously been reduced;**
- **There is a means of maintaining ongoing co-ordination when there is not a statutory level lead professional. Options might include a lead professional located in the police, education provision or voluntary sector services depending on the local structure and positioning of the VRU and other commissioned arrangements.**

### Victim vs offender responses

Young people talked about policing practice in neighbourhood contexts and made reference to the young people as being ‘gang’ involved or associated. This was consistent with the views of a professional attending the practitioner event who felt that the ‘gang’ label created a convenient diversion for the criminals who were exploiting young people, keeping the spotlight on peer group activities rather than those of the perpetrators.

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<sup>14</sup> The SIPPS for CCE. Dr Craig Barlow – Consultant Forensic Social Worker and Criminologist.

Of the young people subject to the rapid reviews, seven were identified as victims and one as a perpetrator of serious youth violence. Six young people in the sample had been served a variety of referral, detention and training orders. There were multiple arrests recorded in the rapid reviews for a range of offences including public order offences and affray, possession with intent to supply and weapons. However, these were accompanied by multiple indicators of CCE including possession of burner phones, being found in cuckooed properties, association with known county lines dealers, presenting with injuries and repeated missing episodes.

Despite sometimes overwhelming evidence of exploitation, the reviews identified that young people were mostly responded to as offenders rather than victims. A number of factors contributed to this. Two of the young men had received conclusive grounds decisions through the NRM identifying them as victims of human trafficking yet were still not identified as 'high risk' missing persons. In some cases, the incidence of missing reports is so high it can become normalised and, in one example, the police acknowledged the low level response to the young person's missing status. In another case, whilst the police recognised the young person as being exploited through county lines, his refusal to disclose information about his exploiters meant that they were unable to pursue a modern slavery investigation. The withholding of information for fear of reprisals can present a significant challenge for police in county lines cases. One young person was arrested and bailed for attempted murder at age 14 years but this did not automatically trigger a safeguarding referral.

This review also considered the multi-agency thematic audit of SYV undertaken in Bristol in 2019<sup>15</sup> as a snapshot of the current systemic response to children charged with offences of manslaughter or attempted murder. The National Safeguarding Review of criminal exploitation makes it clear that children and young people identified as offenders are also considered as the victims of peer-on-peer violence and criminal exploitation, having similar backgrounds, risk factors and characteristics in common. This is clearly evident for these young people, several of whom who were at different times both perpetrators and victims of violent attacks. The impact and trauma experienced by young people as perpetrators of serious youth violence is identified as a key theme for this review (as above).

Offender as opposed to victim-based responses are founded on assumptions that young people are acting as free agents and making their own choices. However, these responses fail to recognise the relative weight of harmful contexts for young people and constrained choice given the levels of violence and coercion that they were subject to. The signs of hyper-vigilance and anxiety were evident across the sample. This high level of background vulnerability in this group also suggests a need for training to enable police officers and others working in the criminal justice system to recognise SEN, ADHD or cognitive difficulties that might impact young people's level of engagement and ability to comprehend the consequences of their actions and behaviours.

**Recommendation seven: The Bristol, South Gloucestershire and North Somerset multi-agency children's safeguarding partnerships should assure themselves that sufficient responses to CCE are focussed on identifying and responding to adult perpetrators of organised crime / county lines networks. This includes:**

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<sup>15</sup> Bristol: Serious Youth Violence Multi-Agency Thematic Audit July 2019

- **Implementation and delivery of a '4 Ps' (Prepare, Prevent, Pursue, Protect) partnership and community plan to reduce the threat of county lines. To include a review of proactive partnership approaches to target county lines offenders and drugs supply into the region.**
- **Ensuring that policing approaches to disrupting and tackling CCE are fully integrated with a child protection/ adolescent safeguarding response i.e. child victim first, child offender second.**
- **Ascertain what information/ data is already collected across policing, Crown Prosecution Service, courts service, probation and custodial establishments to understand the local position in relation to racial disproportionality in the criminal justice response to young people associated with offending peer groups. Use the information/ data to identify actions to address.**
- **Review the training provided to all agencies on how background vulnerabilities including trauma, SEN, ADHD and low cognitive functioning might disproportionately affect behaviours in this group. Review what cross agency support is in place to avoid unnecessary contact with the Criminal Justice System.**

### 3.3 Working with adolescents at risk

Consistently identified in this review were the challenges families faced in accessing services and the barriers to meaningful engagement. For example, a failure to effectively engage young people and parents led to families not receiving help with speech and language therapy and some health services. For many of the young people the involvement of children's social care came relatively late when young people were already teenagers, or in some cases not until the violent incident triggered a response. This was in spite of the clear indicators of background vulnerability that were present from an early age and known to increase the risks of SYV and CCE. In two cases, youth offending services described difficulties engaging with young people on a voluntary basis, after their orders had finished. However, there were young people in the sample who responded very positively to community or school mentors, suggesting that they might have benefitted from the support of a consistent adult who understood their lives much earlier, thus counter-acting less positive influences and helping to mitigate the negative outcomes for them.

Specialist CCE resources and responses are being developed within the region and nationally, specialist interventions have proven effective in other areas of safeguarding such as CSE. Techniques such as assertive outreach and replacing harmful or abusive relationships with positive attention have been shown to be particularly effective and locate the responsibility for engagement with the service rather than with the young person (Scott and Skidmore, 2005; Harris *et al*, 2017). These also show how specialist interventions using relational and youth work skills can be effective in working with trauma.

In this review, support from community, school and family intervention mentors was an effective way of engaging some young people, however parents and professionals concurred that relationship based interventions should not be arbitrarily limited to twelve week interventions:

*"They knew his perspective of men, they knew what he'd been brought up with, they knew that he needed someone, they knew that someone was making a*

*difference. Don't then justify to me in any way that taking that person away is all right when you know that kid is not all right. Just because your timeline has run out doesn't mean you should be able to just walk away and that for me was a massive thing for [him]... Not every kid can be fixed in twelve weeks. And if he's not, what do we do – what's the plan?" [Parent]*

Where this type of work is most effective, interventions are long-term, usually lasting up to two years or beyond. Over this period, young people can be supported to recognise and recover from harmful experiences and to re-establish positive and protective relationships in their families, schools and communities. The evidence base (Scott and Skidmore, 2005; Harris *et al*, 2017), suggests reduced caseloads for specialist workers can ensure flexibility and more intensive working where required and out-of-hours working responds to the young person's need and lives more effectively. These approaches can also be highly effective in building relationships with families and supporting them to help increase protective factors and safety for the young person either through a consistent worker supporting the whole family or through dedicated parenting workers.

**Recommendation eight: That the Bristol, South Gloucestershire and North Somerset multi-agency children's safeguarding partnerships escalate to the Home Office and Department for Education the challenge of providing consistent services which reflect the need for longer-term support for this cohort of children in the context of short-term funding cycles. Bristol, South Gloucestershire and North Somerset multi-agency children's safeguarding partnerships to seek opportunities to stabilise funding streams so that commitment can be given towards a long-term offer. This offer should be developed based on learning about the elements of good services currently in place across the region including:**

- **The commissioning of long-term or open-ended interventions,**
- **Out of hours flexible working,**
- **The provision of advocacy at critical moments (for example, exclusion from school or arrest for violence related offences),**
- **The sustainable and long-term investment in relational models of support.**
- **Break down barriers and provide opportunities for this group of young people into employment and earning as alternatives to drug-dealing**

### 3.4 How can services help to make local communities safer for young people?

As well as providing intervention at the individual level with young people and families, the Contextual Safeguarding Framework directs intervention at the community level providing interventions into places, social spaces and contexts that are harmful to young people. In reality, this means extending the reach of traditional child protection and broader child welfare and safeguarding processes to incorporate extra familial settings in which young people are at risk. Effective multi-agency working and engagement with the range of safeguarding partners including those with responsibility for public spaces is key to this work.

Peer and place based work is currently being developed through the work of the VRU throughout the Avon and Somerset region, although local arrangements with regard to location and delivery

may differ and there is evidence of emerging practice. One review provided an example where a complex strategy forum was held every six weeks to explore, assess, analyse and respond to the risks associated with peer dynamics and conflicts between rival peer groups. This had resulted in a more sophisticated picture of how local groups operate and the associated risks and harms but the next step was to determine how this translated into casework on the ground. Strategies should be put into place to ensure that communication and information flow is two-way.

Other examples of interventions with peer groups or places were outlined in the rapid reviews and included:

- A co-ordinated contextual approach to identifying networks and opportunities to intervene in county lines or groups at risk in the city as [young person name] was discussed at Multi-Agency Gangs Strategic Mapping meetings which included intelligence and assurance by the Safer Options Serious Youth Violence Unit.
- A restorative meeting held in school in order to reduce tensions between pupils believed to be connected to gangs
- A Neighbourhood policing action plan re: escalating gang activity in [area name] was well co-ordinated and an effective Contextual Safeguarding approach to this location reduced concerns in this period.

Effective intervention into key contexts of concern demands a range of strategies ranging from the preventative to the reactive. The latter might include police disruption of harmful activities or situations, or the targeting of multi-agency safeguarding interventions to support peer groups in the wake of a serious incident.

Voluntary and community based organisations were well placed to provide accessible and timely services alongside strengths-based interventions that support the building of resilience and safety in communities. Rapid reviews described that a local CCE service that works with young people at risk had a good understanding of the risks associated with peer groups and places, alongside peer dynamics. This was accompanied by a range of interventions including family group conferencing to build family resilience, safety and diversion.

The review identified a range of contexts such as local hotspots, parks and schools where practical measures could be taken to increase safety for young people such as improving lighting, increasing a positive, community focussed police presence and assessing areas such as school playgrounds for safety. One parent provided examples of how local friends and neighbours could act as a resource to help protect vulnerable young people in escalating situations by actively looking for them, passing messages through neighbourhood networks and supporting the actions of the local police. Strategies should build on positive community action to develop local resilience, and these should be supported by proactively focussed policing strategies to build relationships with communities in these areas.

Strategies to increase safety over the longer term might include working with young people in schools and community contexts to develop pro-social peer networks and provide safe spaces for young people to gather. Suggestions that emerged from the consultation with the wider peer group included helping young people to help others affected by criminality and violence by providing time

and space to talk, perhaps through a peer mentoring scheme. This would represent a strengths based approach whereby people are supported to develop local solutions and build resilience in local communities. It would also provide opportunities and a personal development path for young people in providing positive models and demonstrating leadership. The [Youth Endowment Fund](#) is currently funding local voluntary and community organisations in themed rounds<sup>16</sup> to develop this kind of work in response to serious youth violence, and is building an evidence base of what works through evaluation. It also funds peer research and opportunities of this kind might provide a pathway to develop and pilot small scale, co-produced projects that could be scaled across the region.

One young person participating in the review talked about addressing some of the broader socio-economic context for young people in challenging areas and spoke of his friends who wanted to learn plastering, engineering or music. He described the need for a community resource for young people that would help build social cohesion, a sense of belonging and identity in local spaces whilst also providing young people with real opportunities in the form of training and apprenticeships:

*“We want somewhere in the community where we can go and seek advice. We want a building where offer out apprenticeships and advice about how you can do better. So you can seek out and seek your dreams. I want apprenticeships and jobs and opportunities. It helps young people like my friends, where options are limited. We want to seek out what we want to do with our lives and build a path towards it... In my head, in that building I wouldn’t have to knock on the door, not have to ask, just walk in. Belonging.”* [Young person from wider peer group]

The movement of young people between geographical regions and areas is an integral feature of the exploitation of young people through county lines and raises challenges for cross border information sharing and co-ordination. Learning on a national level has been highlighted by serious case reviews such as that of [Jaden Moodie](#).

Four of these rapid reviews featured cross border movement between local authority areas. As an example, one young person was placed in multiple locations over a four-month period in a mix of placements including fostering, residential and secure. In each location he developed networks with other peers selling drugs and county lines dealers and multiple indicators of exploitation including threats and coercion were evident.

In another case, the movement of young people across local borders was gang related and linked to retaliatory actions and incendiary relations between gangs and peer groups.

These cases raise questions about how information can be effectively shared between statutory, private and voluntary sector organisations in building an accurate picture of activities, understanding the peer dynamics and relationships between groups and in providing some consistency in responses and resource allocation.

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<sup>16</sup> Themes currently include: diversion from the criminal justice system; helping families to overcome challenges; keeping young people engaged in education; safe neighbourhoods; social skills and mental health; trusted adult relationships; and a fair society.

**Recommendation nine: Bristol, South Gloucestershire and North Somerset multi-agency children’s safeguarding partnerships should consider a regional approach to increasing safety in peer groups. This could include building capacity within existing resources or the establishment of discreet, flexible funding to provide a strategic approach to tackling serious youth violence and support creative solutions. Such solutions might include a suite of evidence-based models of interventions with peer groups including:**

- **Mediation and conflict resolution interventions in schools and communities**
- **Long term detached or in-reach youth work with local peer groups**
- **Increasing safety in groups through a peer champions network**
- **Developing approaches to safeguarding children on social media/increasing professional presence online**
- **Bespoke commissioned interventions or budgets for a specific peer group**
- **Piloting a peer mentoring scheme to support young people in talking about their problems and experiences and providing positive modelling and leadership in local communities.**

## Full list of Recommendations

**Recommendation one:** The Bristol, South Gloucestershire and North Somerset multi-agency children's safeguarding partnerships should give consideration to opportunities for investing in services as part of the public health response to serious youth violence and how gaps in therapeutic provision for young people might be addressed, including:

- Preventing serious violence and exploitation by strengthening the offer around speech and language therapy so that this is extended to primary school aged children, and access to services supported through health, children's social care and education pathways.
- Improving access to assessments and health and wellbeing support for children at risk of child criminal exploitation and knife crime, including those with complex needs (eg SEN, ADHD and cognition and processing needs);
- Enabling access to culturally appropriate trauma-recovery services following serious assaults

**Recommendation two:** The Bristol, South Gloucestershire and North Somerset multi-agency children's safeguarding partnerships should give consideration to opportunities for:

- Improving the multi-agency response to boys under 10 who have experienced physical abuse or witnessed physical violence by older males in their homes.
- Support with mental health and wellbeing for boys who have experienced domestic violence or physical abuse in the family home
- Health and wellbeing and trauma recovery services for young people and those around them impacted by peer-on-peer violence and CCE including peers, siblings and parents.

**Recommendation three:** The Bristol, South Gloucestershire and North Somerset multi-agency children's safeguarding partnerships should explore opportunities for innovation in developing market sufficiency in supported accommodation for young people at high risk of CCE. This should be with the aim that young people can remain in touch with their local area and their natural support networks as they transition to adulthood and independence.

**Recommendation four:** It is recommended that Bristol, South Gloucestershire and North Somerset multi-agency children's safeguarding partnerships look for opportunities to develop the evidence base with regard to interventions to prevent exclusion of children at risk of serious violence and child criminal exploitation with the eventual aim of achieving a zero-exclusion policy. Such interventions might include:

- Strengthening early help from Years 5 to 8 to identify emotional and behavioural problems including violent behaviour amongst boys and to provide support at the earliest stage and through the transition to secondary school. This should dovetail with initiatives around early help with accessing speech and language therapy (as above).

- Systematic risk assessment and the provision of immediate wrap-around support when a young person is excluded from school to provide structure, reduce negative impacts, manage risks and increase safety, building on best practice from Weapons in Schools Pilot.
- This should reach down to primary school level with a focus on capacity building so that learning from the three areas is built on with regard to early identification and effective responses to exclusion.

**Recommendation five:** It is recommended that the Bristol, South Gloucestershire and North Somerset multi-agency children’s safeguarding partnerships ensure that current risk assessment tools encourage professionals to consider a) which represent current conditional risks with the potential to escalate, b) support professionals to move from assessment to intervention planning (individual, peer, place and space) and c) employ consistent language and approach in order to support multi-agency communication about risks and information sharing.

**Recommendation six:** The Bristol, South Gloucestershire and North Somerset multi-agency children’s safeguarding partnerships should review their multi-agency case coordination arrangements for adolescents experiencing exploitation to ensure that:

- Longer term case management and co-ordination (i.e. involvement for 18months or more) is provided where this is an assessed need and commensurate with the national framework requirements;
- Fluctuations in risk can be responded to flexibly i.e. there is a clear pathway back to support where this has previously been reduced;
- There is a means of maintaining ongoing co-ordination when there is not a statutory level lead professional. Options might include a lead professional located in the police, education provision or voluntary sector services depending on the local structure and positioning of the VRU and other commissioned arrangements.

**Recommendation seven:** The Bristol, South Gloucestershire and North Somerset multi-agency children’s safeguarding partnerships should assure themselves that sufficient responses to CCE are focussed on identifying and responding to adult perpetrators of organised crime / county lines networks. This includes:

- Implementation and delivery of a ‘4 Ps’ (Prepare, Prevent, Pursue, Protect) partnership and community plan to reduce the threat of county lines. To include a review of proactive partnership approaches to target county lines offenders and drugs supply into the region.
- Ensuring that policing approaches to disrupting and tackling CCE are fully integrated with a child protection/ adolescent safeguarding response i.e. child victim first, child offender second.
- Ascertain what information/ data is already collected across policing, Crown Prosecution Service, courts service, probation and custodial establishments to understand the local position in relation to racial disproportionality in the criminal justice response to young people associated with offending peer groups. Use the information/ data to identify actions to address.

- Review the training provided to all agencies on how background vulnerabilities including trauma, SEN, ADHD and low cognitive functioning might disproportionately affect behaviours in this group. Review what cross agency support is in place to avoid unnecessary contact with the Criminal Justice System.

**Recommendation eight:** That the Bristol, South Gloucestershire and North Somerset multi-agency children’s safeguarding partnerships escalate to the Home Office and Department for Education the challenge of providing consistent services which reflect the need for longer-term support for this cohort of children in the context of short-term funding cycles. Bristol, South Gloucestershire and North Somerset multi-agency children’s safeguarding partnerships to seek opportunities to stabilise funding streams so that commitment can be given towards a long-term offer. This offer should be developed based on learning about the elements of good services currently in place across the region including:

- The commissioning of long-term or open-ended interventions,
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- Mediation and conflict resolution interventions in schools and communities
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- Bespoke commissioned interventions or budgets for a specific peer group
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