Children and young people's (aged 10-24 years) accounts of their involvement in serious youth violence in the UK: systematic review and meta-ethnography

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

There were no financial conflicts of interest. RB is a named author in one of the study reports.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

ADHD	Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
CASP	Critical Appraisal Skills Programme
CYP	Children and Young People
EGM	Evidence Gap Map
ENTREQ	Enhancing transparency in reporting the synthesis of qualitative research
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
LSHTM	London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine
PRISMA	Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses
SEND	Special Educational Needs
SYV	Serious Youth Violence
YAB	Youth Advisory Board
YEF	Youth Endowment Fund

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Executive summary

Background

Involvement in serious youth violence (SYV) is rare, but nonetheless causes significant economic, social and individual harms. In the UK, young males and some minority ethnic groups are disproportionately affected. Although the majority of children involved in violence are White, representation in relation to SYV in the criminal justice system is not proportionate relative to population distribution. Some minority ethnic groups – Black Caribbean children in particular – are over-represented, while other groups – e.g., those from Asian backgrounds – are under-represented (Youth Endowment Fund, 2025). Many 'at-risk' Children and Young People (CYP) are disconnected from formal social and educational systems and excluded from policy-making arenas. While existing research identifies risk factors for involvement in SYV, it often lacks the voices of young people. A qualitative, child-centred approach is needed to better understand the pathways through which CYP come to engage in or desist from violence, ensuring interventions are rooted in their lived experiences and social contexts.

To complement the existing evidence base, we conducted the first systematic review of UK qualitative research with CYP involved in or considered at risk of involvement in SYV.

The review focuses on three key research questions:

1. What is the range of existing UK qualitative research conducted with CYP at risk of or involved in serious violence, how representative is this (e.g., in terms of geographical, social context, types of CYP and forms of violence, use of social media) and what are the gaps in the existing evidence?
2. What do CYP perceive to be the pathways to and influences on their involvement in or desistance from serious violence?
3. What are CYP's experiences of being involved in serious violence and how do these vary across different groups of CYP, social contexts, geography and demographics?

Search Methods

We searched 17 bibliographic databases and 41 grey literature sources, covering a broad range of voluntary and statutory organisations linked to health, social care, criminal justice and youth services. The search strategy reflected the following key concepts: serious violence; children and young people; UK; qualitative research. The initial search was conducted between September and October 2024 and updated in January 2025.

Selection Criteria

Exclusion and inclusion criteria were agreed with the broad project team (YEF and LSHTM) and refined following input from the YEF's Youth Advisory Board (YAB) as part of the public engagement activity. Inclusion criteria covered primary qualitative studies conducted in the UK since 2000 and first-hand accounts of CYP involved in, or at risk of SYV. Additionally, to support the meta-ethnographic synthesis, the included studies needed to contain sufficiently rich accounts of young people's experience of involvement or risk of involvement to address our research questions.

Data extraction and synthesis

We conducted a qualitative evidence synthesis informed by meta-ethnography, a systematic, interpretive approach that explores contexts and meanings within original studies to develop new insights and interpretations from a body of research. Methodological quality of the primary studies was appraised using an adapted version of the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) tool to include a criterion assessing the extent to which the voice of CYP reflected in the study was likely to be one reflecting their own values and beliefs without external pressures or expectations. Concept maps were drawn for each of the papers included in the review, to visually represent relationships between concepts and themes. The team used open and axial coding in NVivo to organise data into themes and held iterative discussions to refine these. Both data and existing theories informed the analysis. Using thematic codes and concept maps, studies were compared and contrasted to explore interrelationships and grouped according to system-level factors, guided by an ecological framework. We compared and combined

participants' original views (first-order concepts) with study authors' interpretations (second-order), leading to new overarching insights (third-order constructs). These were used to develop three overarching lines of argument to describe CYPs involvement/risk of involvement in SYV.

Key findings

We screened 9,134 papers on title and abstract, resulting in 482 full text reviews. Of these, 42 met the final inclusion criteria.

Included studies were conducted among participants in schools, custodial settings, prisons, community centres, children's homes and youth clubs. The qualitative synthesis generated five theorised lines of argument, presented here as overarching narratives which characterise the experience of CYP who were either at risk of or involved in SYV. These are:

i. **DIFFICULT LIVES —** Adverse childhood experiences, including trauma, poverty, family history, environmental restrictions and social exclusion create low social connection and aspiration. Violence is expressive and reactive; a response to a mixture of anger, apathy, protection and desire for social justice.

ii. **HYPERMASCULINITY —** Marginalised young men turn to hypermasculinity to build status, identity, excitement, myth-making, membership of a peer group, which are often shaped by traditional and rigid gender norms, rejecting ideas and behaviours that may be perceived as feminine. While violence in this narrative is primarily performed by men, women too are drawn into and impacted by it. Violence here is consequential – in other words it is embedded within the way relationships are expressed.

iii. **FINANCIAL REWARD —** Money and financial reward as a route to status and livelihood. In the face of poor academic and other achievements, some CYP adopt paths to acquire 'easy' money to achieve status, independence, financial security and self-respect. These often involve criminal acts and violence used purposefully to extort goods and exert power through both real and symbolic acts. Violence here is used to achieve something tangible, be it a robbery of cash, a mobile phone or as a strategic part of an organised drug sale.

iv. **DEFINITIONS OF AT RISK —** In this review, "at risk" refers to young people who might become involved in SYV, even if they are not yet involved. The line between being "at risk" and actually taking part in violence is often unclear, and young people can move between these states.

This shift can depend on factors, such as those mentioned in the three themes described above. It can also be influenced by moving between different environments — for example, from school to the street. Young people are generally more likely to get involved in violence when they are with peers in unsupervised places than when they are in structured settings like school. Their behaviour is shaped by where they are and what's happening around them at the time, in other words it is both locally situated and contextualised.

v. **TOWARDS DESISTANCE —** Desistance from SYV is a complex, relational process shaped by young people's social environments, evolving identities, and increasing maturity and responsibilities. Young people valued strategies with a prevention focus that builds on assets, reinforces prosocial bonds, and create safe, supportive spaces, while also allow room for personal reflection and growth. Sustained desistance is most likely when individual change—driven by maturity and insight—is supported by broader structural change in the communities and environments around them.

Gaps in the literature

We found notable gaps in studies involving voices of certain subgroups of CYP and further research focused on these groups is recommended. For example, young women and girls' experiences and perspectives were largely absent. Although a number of included studies included both genders, in practice, nearly all were dominated by male CYP. Study authors noted reluctance in some cases from gatekeepers to recruit female participants in the study. Additionally, more research is needed with racially minoritised young people to understand the complexity and diversity of their experiences. Moreover, there is little targeted research, exploring an in-depth cultural perspective on the role of hypermasculinity and the social value attributed to gang affiliation and in shaping secure male identities. Although many studies did include a range of minoritised young people, findings are rarely broken down by specific ethnic groups. It may be the case that

there are no substantive differences, but future research that can evidence these would be welcome. There is a need to develop more innovative methodologies to recruit and engage more effectively with these groups, as their experiences, and trajectories into SYV are likely to differ significantly to those represented in this review. In addition, while two studies described migration status in their core population (one on immigrants and one on refugees), the wider experiences of CYP with diverse migrant status and their risks for or involvement in SYV are less known. This may be important particularly given the UK's hostile environment for migrants in recent years.

Finally, further inquiry is needed into the definitional boundaries between those actively involved in SYV and those considered 'at risk,' to better inform prevention and intervention strategies. Although we understand these pathways to be somewhat fluid, practice and policy strategies are likely to differ depending on where CYP are at on the pathway.

A map of the key findings has been developed and is provided as a link to this report to help navigate how the themes discussed in this report are represented in the included papers identified.

Conclusions

The complex and often contradictory CYP experiences of involvement in violence presented in this report depicts a wide range of emotional experiences, from excitement, assertion of status, fear, anxiety, vulnerability, enactment of honour, protection to boredom. Family and the wider environment played an important role in CYP's initial and subsequent continued involvement in violence. Conducting research on SYV, particularly with girls, is challenging and subject to a number of ethical and procedural obstacles. We found some primary studies did not report sufficient methodological details, making it challenging to determine the quality in relation to setting, population and recruitment. Despite these limitations, both in representation and validity, the accounts synthesised in this review provide valuable insight into the voices and experiences of young people whose perspectives are often overlooked. Clearer insight, provided by the overarching narratives in this review can inform future research and practice-based prevention, response and desistence interventions and programming.

1 Background

1 Background

Involvement in serious violence is rare, but nonetheless causes significant economic, social and individual harms. In the year ending March 2023, data show there were just under 3,400 knife or offensive weapon offences committed by children (aged 10-17 years) in England and Wales, resulting in a caution or sentence, which is 4% fewer than the previous year but 23% greater than ten years ago (Youth Justice Board, 2024). The majority of both perpetrators and victims are young males, and young people from some minority ethnic backgrounds are disproportionately affected, either as victims or perpetrators or both (Allen et al., 2023; Winchester, 2023; Youth Endowment Fund, 2025). Although the majority of children involved in violence are White, representation in the criminal justice system is not proportionate relative to population distribution. Some minority ethnic groups – such as Black Caribbean CYP – are over-represented, particularly in urban centres such as London and Birmingham, while other groups – e.g., those from Asian backgrounds – are under-represented (Youth Endowment Fund, 2025). The over-representation of some minority ethnic groups cannot be separated from broader structural inequalities which disproportionately affect certain ethnic communities (Billingham & Irwin-Rogers, 2022; GLA, 2020; Irwin-Rogers et al., 2020).

Areas with high rates of serious youth violence (SYV) overlap with those experiencing high levels of socioeconomic disadvantage. As such, the intersection of structural inequalities compounded by the institutional racial bias of the criminal justice system, plays a critical role in shaping both the risk of involvement in violence and the likelihood of being drawn into criminal justice processes (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2024).

A 2023 survey conducted by the Youth Endowment Fund (YEF) found that among 13–17 year olds, one in six reported they had been a victim of violence in the last 12 months, and a similar proportion said they had perpetrated violence (Youth Endowment Fund, 2023). The main type of violence reported was physical assault (12%) with smaller numbers reporting sexual assault (6%), weapons offences (6%) and robbery (6%). Key variables, such as socioeconomic status, gender, ethnicity, use of social media, mental health, school exclusion and regionality/geo-location may, to varying extents, intersect with pathways to and from involvement in violence. Further, data indicate that the offending rate for violence peaks in adolescence/early adulthood. The age–crime curve indicates that offending peaks between ages 15 and 20, after which most young people tend to naturally desist from criminal behaviour (Kilkelly, 2023; Loeber et al., 2012). Those seen to be at risk of engaging in SYV tend to be children and young people (CYP) who have removed themselves (or have been removed) from formal structures including the education system, social services and other formal and community-based services. They are not only physically absent from formal civil society, but often lack engagement with research conducted to inform policy and practice relevant to their wellbeing (Spray & Hunleth, 2020).

Other groups highlighted as being at particular risk of involvement in SYV are young people with special educational needs (SEND), children not in full-time education and some looked after children (Action for Children, 2024). Data from YEF (2024) show that children with SEND are three times more likely than other children to report being perpetrators of violence. A report from His Majesty's Inspectorate (2024) noted a high proportion of children with neurodivergence (including autism or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)) were impacted by SYV – though disabilities were not always consistently noted across different sectors and settings, and some were awaiting full diagnosis and support.

Despite decades of public and political interest in SYV in the UK (Williams and Squires, 2021), The Children's Commissioner recently concluded that local authorities still lack sufficient understanding of what drives CYP into violence or have cogent strategies to address these risks (Children's Commissioner, 2021). There is also a lack of insight into reasons why young people facing significant levels of risk desist from serious violence. The Child-First philosophy (Haines & Drakeford, 1998) proposes that CYP involvement in crime and violence is a reaction to unmet or unidentified needs. Accordingly, it is the duty of the child's social and professional networks (school, parents, health and social services) to appropriately identify and respond to these needs. If this goal is to be accomplished, Ullman (2024, p. 15) highlights the urgent need to work with children to co-produce a picture of their strengths and needs so that they may be supported to find alternative pathways away from violence.

2
Rationale for the review

2 Rationale for the review

Over the past decade, a series of systematic reviews have offered valuable insights into the drivers of SYV and the effectiveness of interventions to address it (Farrington et al., 2017; Haylock et al., 2020; Melendez-Torres et al., 2016; Ullman et al., 2024). This largely quantitative evidence identifies a range of individual, social and environmental factors associated with violent behaviours in CYP and emphasises the importance of systems-based approaches which incorporate both structural and individual factors. Systems thinking, rather than focusing on one element in isolation, considers the issue as part of a bigger network of connected parts, incorporating individual, family and community factors along with structural factors (poverty, education, criminal justice system) and analysing their overlapping impacts over time.

However, previous reviews do not adequately describe the complex mechanisms that underlie CYP involvement in violence and pathways that might support desistance. The voices and perspectives of CYP who are directly involved in perpetrating violent behaviours are often missing from these syntheses. Understanding the meanings CYP attach to violence, how and why they become involved and how they might be supported away from violence is better captured through a pragmatic, pluralist approach combing insights from both quantitative and qualitative research. Any meaningful intervention, policy or strategy aimed at reducing youth violence will be more effective if informed by the perspectives and experiences of CYP, particularly through data which remains grounded in their social locations and perspectives. Synthesising the available qualitative evidence can provide important pointers for policy and practice.

2.1 The phenomenon of interest

The focus of this review is to explore how young people (aged 10-24 years) narrate their experiences of both becoming involved in SYV and choosing pathways enabling them to leave violence behind (desistance).

Definition of serious youth violence & desistence

The term SYV used in this review covers interpersonal violent offences or severe acts of aggression. This definition has been guided by discussions with YEF and consultations with members of YEF's Youth Advisory Board as well as professionals working in the area (see Public Engagement below).

Specifically, SYV includes:

- Severe interpersonal violent offences or acts of aggression such as murder; assault with a weapon; grievous bodily harm; kidnapping and abduction; sexual violence; race/ethnic or gender-based violence
- Violent acts committed as individuals or as part of groups involved in drug markets (including those involved in county lines, Child Criminal Exploitation, street gangs, post-code gangs, organised crime groups)

We define **desistance** from violence as leaving street gangs or desisting from offending. In this review, we use the term gang or street gang as something distinct from non-violent peer groups or grooming gangs.

Street gang involvement forms a key part of the SYV definition. However, definitions of what constitutes a gang vary widely, particularly as described by putative gang members, the criminal justice system, members of the public and the press. Although the term is used in common parlance by some young people to describe their social relationships (Liddle & Harding, 2022) it is viewed by others as problematic in its tendency to ascribe criminality, particularly to certain racialised communities (Taylor, 2023). Moreover, its role in stigmatising and racial profiling, particularly of Black and Muslim youth (Williams and Clarke, 2016), and the potential for punitive policy outcomes against these groups have been highlighted (Hallsworth and Young, 2004). Further, many young people themselves do not identify the groups they associate with as gangs. Despite being contested, the term gang is widely used, due to its centrality in describing violent group conflict. As such, we will use the term gang where it is used by the primary study authors.

2.2 Population of interest

Our key populations of interest for this review are CYP aged 10-24 years, acting as perpetrators or accomplices in acts of serious violence. Our definition of CYP expands the age-range from YEF's usual focus of 10-17 to an upper limit of 24. This is to ensure potential studies where CYPs have retrospectively reflected on their past experiences of involvement in serious violence and/or their journeys of desistance are included.

Our primary focus are CYPs with direct involvement in SYV. However, we include CYP considered to be 'at risk of involvement' in serious violence as there may be important narratives that speak to the pathways of involvement in or desistance from SYV. The concept of "at risk" of involvement in SYV is defined in this review as CYP with a history of school exclusion; engagement in group non-violent crime, including protests and riots; substance use; and carrying weapons. This definition was agreed with the YEF as describing experiences that may increase the likelihood of CYP becoming directly involved in more serious violence. The YEF works on the principle that violence can be prevented. In policy and practice more broadly, CYP who are at risk of involvement in violence are seen as a priority group. Understanding what factors place young people in this "at risk" category is essential for supporting them to move away from pathways that could lead to violence.

2.3 Review questions

This systematic review looks at qualitative research conducted in the UK with CYP, aged 10 – 24 years, involved in or considered at risk of involvement in serious violence.

The review focuses on three key research questions:

1. What is the range of existing UK qualitative research conducted with CYP at risk of or involved in serious violence, how representative are these studies (e.g., in terms of geographical, social context, types of CYP and forms of violence, use of social media) and what are the gaps in the existing evidence?
2. What do CYP perceive to be the pathways to and influences on their involvement in or desistance from serious violence?
3. What are CYP's experiences of being involved in serious violence and how do these vary across different CYP, social contexts, geography and demographics?

A set of detailed sub-questions are included in Appendix 1.

3
Methodology

3 Methodology

3.1 Review methods

We conducted a systematic review and meta-ethnographic synthesis of the qualitative literature on the experiences of CYP involved in, or at risk of involvement in, SYV. Meta-ethnography is a form of qualitative synthesis that is particularly suited to developing conceptual models and theories. The method was first devised by Noblit and Hare (1988) as a tool for synthesising contradictory concepts from interpretive study accounts with unique contexts. The aim is to translate and re-interpret primary data (in the form of participant quotations) and the themes and concepts developed by the primary study authors, to develop higher order themes (possibly in the form of new theories and concepts) across different studies.

Meta-ethnography helps to analyse data that involve multifaceted social phenomena such as SYV, which are influenced by multiple interacting factors such as socio-economic conditions, community structures, and individual behaviours. Meta-ethnography combines elements of both inductive analysis (driven by existing data) – allowing for themes and concepts to emerge organically, together with a deductive approach which encapsulates the generation of new ideas. This approach is particularly advantageous in systems-based analyses because it helps reveal underlying patterns and relationships that might not be apparent through purely deductive or more rigid methods. An interpretative approach supports a richer synthesis by considering how different studies' findings relate, contrast, and build upon each other to illustrate systemic complexities (Sattar et al., 2021). The aim of using meta-ethnography is to generate new conceptual framework to understand CYP involvement in SYV building on qualitative evidence prioritising their own voices and lived experience.

Meta-ethnography is based on methods of constant comparative analysis where findings are constantly refined as each new study is added. Using principles of framework analysis (Gale 2013, Downes 2016) we tested emerging findings against a theoretically informed starting point using a logic model (Appendix 3) which was derived from previous literature (Gunter, 2017; Harding, 2020; Windle et al., 2020; Wood and Alleyne, 2010) and posits a number of theoretical mechanisms and pathways for participation in SYV. Our logic model was developed at the onset of this review using a multidisciplinary approach proposed by (Wood & Alleyne, 2010) and further refined by recent theorists, (Densley, 2013; Densley et al., 2020; Harding, 2020; Windle et al., 2020). The logic model provides a theoretical framework to suggest how involvement of CYP in SYV may be attributed to a range of individual, social, environmental factors. The model was used iteratively as we synthesised the data both to help interrogate emerging findings and consider gaps in evidence. We were interested to highlight areas where the mechanisms and experiences of CYP deviated from existing theoretical models both in relation to perpetration of violence and desistance. To reduce bias, we employ refutational analysis, actively addressing inconsistencies, contradictions, and alternative viewpoints across the data.

Using an iterative process of constant comparison we examined how our findings align with existing theoretical models, drawing on a social ecological model alongside the Social Determinants of Health (SDOH) framework (WHO, 2010) that combines structural factors (macro-level) with cultural, social (meso-level), and individual psychosocial factors (micro-level) that impact health and wellbeing. System-level perspectives help illuminate the fluid and interactive nature of complex social phenomenon, with feedback loops to represent the nonlinear and iterative nature of the contributory factors. While interactions between system levels mean that distinct levels (meso, macro and micro) can be hard to define, adopting a systems thinking perspective enables a more holistic understanding of the phenomenon. Structural determinants, such as access to the labour market, social care, healthcare and welfare services, intersect with cultural, social and environmental factors that can shape social norms and individual behaviours.

The evidence base on the social and structural determinants of health and violence outcomes is well established (Armstead et al., 2021; Friedson & Sharkey, 2015; Hipp, 2010), yet reasons given for committing violent acts, the complexity of their enactment and the way such acts are influenced by different factors are inconsistently described in the literature. Concepts such as *structural violence*—which include unequal access to resources, education, and healthcare—help explain how broader social structures shape patterns of violent behaviour (Armstead, 2021). While the relationships between violence and its associated factors can vary, the ecological framework at the centre of this review provides a way to map influences across multiple levels: individual, relational, community, and societal.

An intersectional approach complements this by showing how social categories such as race, class, and gender intersect within and across these ecological levels to create unique patterns of risk and protection (Crenshaw, 2013). For example, a young person's experience of peer influence (relational level) may be shaped not only by their social network but also by systemic inequalities linked to race or socioeconomic status (societal level). By integrating macro-structural factors (like poverty or discrimination) with micro-level psychological and relational dynamics, this combined lens helps explain both entry into—and desistance from—serious youth violence.

The review protocol was registered with PROSPERO[4]. We report the search and screening results following the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis (PRISMA) guidelines (Rethlefsen et al., 2021).

3.2 Search methods

A draft search strategy was compiled in the Ovid Medline ALL database by an experienced information professional (JF). The search strategy included strings of terms, synonyms and subject headings to reflect the following concepts: serious violence; children and young people age 10-24 years; qualitative research; geographic setting. In an effort to capture more research focusing specifically on CYP experiences, the qualitative research filter was later expanded to include terms relating to young people's self-reports (Zeigler, 2018). The search strategy was restricted to studies conducted in the UK (Ayiku et al., 2017) and published from 2000 onwards. While this cut off was largely pragmatic, we were mindful of the rapidly changing social, cultural and economic contexts over the last couple of decades which inevitably creates a new context for the behaviour and experience of young people.

The search strategy was refined with the project team and YEF. The draft search strategies were then adapted for each database to incorporate database-specific syntax and controlled vocabularies. Bibliographic databases were chosen to cover the topic through a variety of disciplinary lenses. Therefore, as well as databases with a general academic coverage, specialist databases covering the social sciences, education, criminology, medicine, mental health and child development were also included. A list of the 22 databases searched are provided in Table 1.

Table 1: List of databases included in the search

Supplier	Database name	Dates of database coverage
ProQuest	Applied Social Sciences Index & Abstracts (ASSIA)	Complete database to search date
EBSCOhost	British Education Index	Complete database to search date
EBSCOhost	Child Development & Adolescent Studies	Complete database to search date
ProQuest	Criminal Justice Database	Complete database to search date
EBSCOhost	Education Abstracts (H.W. Wilson)	Complete database to search date
Ovid	Embase Classic+Embase	1947 to 2025 January 02
EBSCOhost	ERIC	Complete database to search date
Ovid	Global Health	1910 to 2025 week 01
ProQuest	International Bibliography of the Social Sciences (IBSS)	Complete database to search date

4. https://www.crd.york.ac.uk/PROSPERO/view/CRD420250595429.

Supplier	Database name	Dates of database coverage
Ovid	Medline ALL	1946 to January 02, 2025
Ovid	APA PsycInfo	1806 to December 2024 week 4
Ovid	Social Policy & Practice	202412
ProQuest	Social Science Database	Complete database to search date
ProQuest	Sociological Abstracts	Complete database to search date
ProQuest	Sociology Database	Complete database to search date
EBSCOhost	Teacher Reference Center	Complete database to search date
Clarivate Analytics	Web of Science Core Content. This is a series of databases which are searched simultaneously. The databases included in the search were: · Science Citation Index Expanded · Social Sciences Citation Index · Arts & Humanities Citation Index · Conference Proceedings Citation Index – Science · Conference Proceedings Citation Index – Social Science & Humanities · Emerging Sources Citation Index	SCI-EXPANDED 1970-present SSCI 1970-present AHCI 1975-present CPCI-S 1990-present CPCI-SSH 1990-present ESCI 2019-present Data updated 2024-12-31

Search strategies were run during September and October 2024. All results from the database searches were exported and uploaded to EndNote 21. Duplicates were identified and removed using the method described on the LAORS blog (Falconer, 2018) and deduplicated search results were exported from EndNote 21 in .ris format. After screening had begun, it was agreed by both funders and the project team that additional terms should be added to expand the range of violent acts included in the study. Therefore, the searches were re-run with additional terms added on 03 January 2025. Updated search results were deduplicated between databases and also against the original search results. This left a group of unique references only retrieved by the updated searches which were added to the list for screening.

A grey literature search was also run, incorporating various terms used in the database search, as well as browsing the websites of known institutions active in the field. A list of the websites included in the grey literature search is provided in table 2. The DuckDuckGo search engine was used in an incognito Google Chrome browser from a computer in London UK to search for grey literature from other organisations. Search terms from the databases search were used to construct the search strings.

Table 2: List of organisational websites included in the grey literature search

Date	Organisation	URL
2024-09-25	Ben Kinsella Trust	https://benkinsella.org.uk/
2024-09-26	Catch-22	https://www.catch-22.org.uk/
2024-09-30	Youth Endowment Fund	https://youthendowmentfund.org.uk/
2024-10-01	Children In Wales	https://www.childreninwales.org.uk/
2024-10-01	Children in Scotland	https://childreninscotland.org.uk/
2024-10-01	NSPCC	https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/
2024-10-01	National Youth Agency	https://nya.org.uk/
2024-10-01	Personal Social Services Research Unit	https://www.pssru.ac.uk/
2024-10-01	The Children's Society	https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/
2024-10-03	Barnardo's	https://www.barnardos.org.uk/
2024-10-03	Leaders Unlocked	https://leaders-unlocked.org/
2024-10-03	St Giles Trust	https://www.stgilestrust.org.uk/
2024-10-03	The Children's Commissioner	https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/
2024-10-03	UK Youth	https://www.ukyouth.org/
2024-10-04	SaferLondon	https://saferlondon.org.uk/
2024-10-04	The Young Foundation	https://www.youngfoundation.org/
2024-10-11	Scottish Government	https://www.gov.scot/
2024-10-11	Welsh Government	https://www.gov.wales/
2025-01-07	Early Intervention Foundation	https://www.eif.org.uk/
2025-01-07	Foundations	https://foundations.org.uk/
2025-01-07	CFEY: Centre for Education & Youth	https://cfey.org/
2025-01-07	Russell Webster	https://www.russellwebster.com/
2025-01-07	Crest Advisory	https://www.crestadvisory.com/

Date	Organisation	URL
2025-01-07	London's Violence Reduction Unit	https://www.london.gov.uk/programmes-strategies/communities-and-social-justice/londons-violence-reduction-unit-vru/our-research
2025-01-07	Scottish Violence Reduction Unit	https://www.svru.co.uk/
2025-01-07	West Midlands Violence Reduction Partnership	https://westmidlands-vrp.org/
2025-01-08	Violence Reduction Network: Leicester, Leicestershire & Rutland	https://www.violencereductionnetwork.co.uk/
2025-01-08	Bedfordshire Violence & Exploitation Reduction Unit	https://bedsveru.org/
2025-01-08	Humber Violence Prevention Partnership	https://humbervpp.org/
2025-01-08	Greater Manchester Violence Reduction Unit	https://gmvru.co.uk/
2025-01-08	Wales Violence Prevention Unit	https://www.violencepreventionwales.co.uk/
2025-01-08	Kent and Medway Violence Reduction Unit	https://kentandmedwayvru.co.uk/
2025-01-08	Essex Violence & Vulnerability Unit	https://www.essexvvu.co.uk/
2025-01-08	Sussex Violence Reduction Partnership	https://www.sussex-pcc.gov.uk/about/sussex-violence-reduction-partnership
2025-01-08	Merseyside Violence Reduction Partnership	https://www.merseysidevrp.com/
2025-01-08	Cleveland Unit for the Reduction of Violence	https://www.cleveland.pcc.police.uk/curv/
2025-01-08	Nottingham City and Nottinghamshire Violence Reduction Partnership	https://www.nottsvrp.co.uk/
2025-01-08	Thames Valley Violence Reduction Partnership	https://www.tvvpp.co.uk/
2025-01-08	South Yorkshire Violence Reduction Unit	https://southyorkshireviolencereductionunit.com/
2025-01-08	Northumbria Violence Reduction Unit	https://northumbria-pcc.gov.uk/violence-reduction-unit/
2025-01-08	Avon & Somerset Violence Reduction Partnership	https://asvrp.co.uk/
2025-01-08	Nacro	https://www.nacro.org.uk/

Full details of the search strings used for each database and the grey literature search are published in the LSHTM Data Compass repository https://datacompass.lshtm.ac.uk/id/eprint/4568/ (Falconer et al 2025).

3.3 Inclusion and exclusion criteria

We defined our inclusion criteria as:

- Primary qualitative studies conducted in the UK
- Include first-hand accounts from CYP, aged 10 – 24 years, involved in or at risk of involvement in SYV as previously defined, and/or their experiences of desistance
- Studies reporting conceptually rich qualitative data both in findings and context/setting relevant to the review questions
- Research published since 2000

We defined our exclusion criteria as:

- Studies not using qualitative design or not conducted in the UK
- Studies that do not include experiences reported by CYP themselves
- Studies where CYP are outside of the 10 – 24 age bracket and those where age groups were not reported
- Studies that look at violence not covered in our definition of SYV or were undefined
- Studies where CYP were not involved in and not at risk of perpetrating SYV as defined in Section 2.2
- Studies that evaluated interventions aimed at reducing violence with no data on mechanism
- Studies that only reported thin qualitative data with little or no details on the wider context
- Non empirical publications (e.g., letters, editorials, conference proceedings etc)

Studies published prior to 2000. The inclusion and exclusion criteria listed above have been amended from the protocol (see Section 3.9 Deviation from Protocol). We added an assessment on the conceptual richness of relevant studies to speak to our central focus as meta-ethnography requires studies with sufficient rich or thick qualitative data, combined with description of context and setting (France et al., 2023). We assessed study richness using an approach adapted from France (2023). Primary studies were assessed as rich where the findings align closely with our review objectives and have provided in-depth context and setting descriptions, often drawing on theoretical perspectives or adopting an ethnographic or case study design. Studies assessed as having thin data are those where only part of the study relates to our review objectives, few reported qualitative findings, or mixed-methods studies with few open-ended questions, with little or no context and setting descriptions. Details of the criteria are provided in Appendix 4. Lastly, we added an exclusion criterion for studies that evaluated interventions to reduce SVY which did not include findings on mechanisms.

In cases where the study population included a wider age range than our criteria, the study was included if we were able to ascertain that the majority of the study population (≥50%) or the mean age of the sample met our criteria. Studies that reported disaggregate findings by age group were also included. Similarly, for studies conducted both within and outside of the UK were included if the findings have been reported by country or where the majority (≥50%) of the sample was in the UK.

3.4 Screening

All references identified were downloaded into the EPPI-reviewer software (Thomas et al., 2010) and were screened on title and abstract by RB, JM, and HB. Two reviewers (RB and JM) piloted the screening of successive batches of the same randomly generated 50 titles/abstracts, resolving disagreements with members of the wider team where necessary (RP, HB, YEF). Once a batch-level agreement rate of >90% was reached, remaining references were screened on title and abstract for inclusion by a single reviewer (RB, JM and HB).

Full text review was done for studies that met our inclusion criteria at title/abstract screening by two reviewers (RB, JM), applying a comparable dual piloting process before moving to independent screening. For some papers, we consulted with the wider project group at LSHTM and YEF to ensure that we maintained a shared understanding of process and agreement with the outcomes. We maintained a record of the selection process for all screened material.

In our initial title and abstract screening, we included studies that described their study sample as 'young people'. In subsequent full text review, we excluded studies in which we were unable to identify a specified age range.

Assessment of richness in data, context and relevance to our review questions were done at the full text review stage by two reviewers (RB and JM) with consultations held with the wider team (both LSHTM & YEF) to reach consensus.

3.5 Data extraction

All included papers were read by RB and JM. Concept maps were drawn for each of the papers included in the review to represent relationships between concepts and ideas.

Included papers were then uploaded to NVivo 12.0 (QSR International Pty Ltd, 2018) where data on study aims, methodology, sample characteristics, and findings were extracted. We used open and axial coding to organise the data (first order participant direct quotations and second order study author concepts and interpretations) into themes and subthemes which were refined through iterative discussions.

3.6 Quality assessment & guidelines

3.6.1 Primary included studies

Although there is limited consensus on the use of quality appraisal in qualitative research, we agree with Sattar (2021) that such assessment provides an important and rigorous means of recording whether key methodological steps have been followed in the selected studies. While we did not exclude studies based on their quality appraisal, the results of this process influenced the strength of the assertions we were able to make.

A number of established tools for quality assessment of qualitative literature were trialled: Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP, 2024), the Joanna bourg Critical Appraisal checklist (Lockwood et al., 2015) and COREQ (Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research) (Booth et al., 2014). In our case, particular attention was paid to adopting a tool that considers the appropriateness and ethical considerations of the methods, including the conduct of interviews with stigmatised and marginalised populations. Having reviewed these tools against a couple of the included studies, we opted for CASP – a checklist which provides a 10-point, structured framework that encourages critical thinking, considers ethical issues, and supports evaluation of methodological rigor, relevance, and trustworthiness. For this review, we added an additional criterion for assessing whether the research 'authentically' reflected the voices of CYP. We have recorded this on the table under the heading 'validity of response'. Our criteria for assessing this included the following questions:

- Was an effort made to pilot research tools or methods with young people?
- How participative was the research process – i.e., were there opportunities for the young people to engage in a way that addressed power imbalances?
- How amenable was the setting to providing an environment in which the young people were able to provide responses representing their own perspective – or was there a sense of power weighing down on them – e.g., were they in a custodial or youth justice setting?

While we acknowledge that it may not always be possible or appropriate to meet these criteria—particularly with CYP samples—we argue that attending to how easily respondents can express their views, within the context of the setting's embedded power dynamics, has ultimately enhanced the quality of the work.

Each item within CASP was scored on a scale from 0 to 2 (0 = unable to ascertain, 1 = partially met, 2 = fully met). We used the same scoring for the new validity item, giving each paper an indicative score out of 22. Our scoring system departs slightly

from the CASP scoring system, which asks for yes, no, cannot tell for each item (CASP, 2024). This was felt to better reflect the quality of the included studies. Due to variations in reporting practices, especially between academic and governmental/organisational settings, quality scores were considered indicative only, and no paper was excluded on the basis of a lower score. Included papers were assessed by RB and JM. Moreover, it is important to bear in mind that CASP prioritises methodological over conceptual strength. While some reviewers instead choose to score by "conceptual richness", there is no clear guidance on how to select such studies, and no formal empirical comparisons have been conducted on different approaches to ordering study accounts (Sattar 2021).

3.6.2 CERQual assessment of confidence in review findings

GRADE-CERQual was used to systematically assess confidence in overall review findings (rather than the quality of individual papers), (Lewin et al., 2018) by examining four key domains:

1. **Methodological limitations:** This refers to the degree to which issues in the design or execution of the primary studies might affect the validity of their findings
2. **Coherence:** This domain examines the consistency between the data from the primary studies and the review findings, assessing whether the data provide a clear, logical explanation for the patterns or themes identified. When assessing coherence, it is important to consider the difference between more descriptive review findings and more explanatory review findings
3. **Adequacy:** This assesses the sufficiency of the data supporting each review finding, taking into account the richness (depth and detail) and quantity (amount) of evidence available
4. **Relevance:** This domain evaluates how closely the evidence from the primary studies aligns with the specific context of the review question, considering factors such as population, perspective, setting, and the phenomenon of interest

3.6.3 Reporting of meta-ethnography

The process of conducting meta-ethnographies is complex and often poorly reported. To increase the quality and transparency of this study, in addition to the use of the Enhancing transparency in reporting the synthesis of qualitative research (ENTREQ) framework for reporting the synthesis of qualitative research (Tong et al., 2012), we draw on eMERGe reporting guidance (France et al., 2019), which provides nineteen criteria to ensure a standard and routine process is followed through the various stages of meta-ethnography. The eMERGe guidance (Appendix 2) was developed in response to the wide range of methods in meta-ethnography and offers particular insights into documenting: the translation of concepts; the synthesis of translations and the development of new line-of-argument synthesis.

3.7 Analysis and synthesis

We followed the steps below to conduct our meta-ethnography:

i. Reading and re-reading of papers (each paper was read initially by 1-3 members of the review team depending on perceived complexity of interpretation)

ii. A concept map, presenting a visual depiction of the key themes and theoretical frameworks, was created for each paper prior to coding to establish themes and relationships. The maps helped to organise and structure information, enabling compare and contrast of findings, examine areas of similarity and differences across studies through reciprocal and refutational translations

iii. Open coding in NVivo followed by axial coding – where codes were grouped into thematic headings

iv. Iterative session with wider project group to consider different strategies for categorisation and analysis

v. Review and refine themes and sub-themes

Both primary data and existing theories informed the analysis. Studies were compared and contrasted to explore interrelationships and grouped according to system-level factors, guided by an ecological framework. We compared and combined participants' original views (first-order concepts) with study authors' interpretations (second-order), leading to new overarching insights (third-order constructs).

Meta-ethnographies involve exploring both common themes (reciprocal translation) and areas of difference (refutational synthesis). Refutational synthesis focuses on identifying, understanding, and reconciling contradictions across studies, rather than developing concepts around similarities. As with reciprocal translation, reviewers draw on the primary data synthesis and second-order constructs to generate new third-order interpretations. In our analysis, while some tensions and anomalies were evident, they did not amount to contradictions. Our focus therefore remained on reciprocal translation, using emerging themes to develop a line-of-argument synthesis that explained different pathways into and out of SYV, as well as perceptions of risk and desistance.

3.7.1 Translation and synthesis of findings

The analysis was conducted both inductively and deductively, driven by the data as well as existing theories and concepts (as developed in our initial logic model (see Appendix 3). Codes and emergent themes were discussed regularly by the two main study authors as they were developed – with regular discussions among the wider project team, particularly if points of contention arose (such as definition of key terms including violence and interpretations of risk).

Common concepts, both as narrated by CYP who were quoted or reported in the papers (first order concepts) were matched and merged with interpretations by the authors of included papers on the same themes to create second order interpretations and are presented together in Section 5 of this report. Drawing on an ecological framework, we organised the concepts and themes by individual-, interpersonal-, community- and structural- and systemic-level influences. Creating third order constructs is the final stage of the meta-ethnography where concepts and meanings from first and second order constructs are used to generate new insights. This final synthesis finds patterns, differences and overarching themes that go beyond the original included papers to develop new lines of argument and is reported in Section 6 in the form of five new broad narratives characterising the experiences which lead to pathways to involvement in SYV, together with an interrogation of what it means to be at risk, together with emerging perspectives on desistance.

A map of findings was developed describing how the themes discussed in this report are represented across the included papers.

3.8 Public involvement & engagement

Public involvement and engagement is often used to improve the quality, relevance and up-take of research. It is also increasingly being used to inform the design, conduct of systematic reviews and verifying their results (Pollock et al., 2018).

We conducted public involvement with two key groups: young people and professional stakeholders. The aims of the consultations were to; i) inform them about the review ii) explore the perceived relevance of our research questions both to the experience of young people and to ongoing community-based work and iii) identify any gaps in our conceptual model. We held two meetings with young people from YEF's YAB. This group is recruited via an open access call with an aim to encompass a diverse group of young people with unique perspectives on youth violence, informed by their own lived experience and the motivation to make a change.

The first meeting was in September 2024 prior to searching the literature and the second in June 2025 to present and gather their perspectives on the main findings and our synthesis approach. Additionally, eight professional stakeholders (academics, policy, practitioners) were also consulted at the onset of the review, selected on the basis of their interest and expertise in this area. A summary of feedback from the consultations is provided in Appendix 6.

The public engagement element to this review provided valuable insights that deepened the research's relevance and sensitivity. In particular, input from the Youth Advisory Board helped define key concepts pre-review, challenged thinking in relation to structural violence and wanted outputs accessible to young people. Professionals broadly welcomed this qualitative review recognising the dangers of an overreliance on quantitative, easily measurable data. They highlighted regional and gender differences to gang involvement and discussed the importance of role models to support CYP. They

also advocated for more reflexive and responsive approaches that can act on promising, but less formally evidenced, interventions. Some professionals expressed concern that desistance from violence is often conceptualised through a criminal justice lens, which they viewed as punitive and overly focused on individual behaviours, rather than through a public health approach that considers the broader social determinants of health. At the same time, they raised challenges in relation to how the review findings will ultimately be used and helped develop thinking as to how inevitable gaps in the literature would be reported.

Both groups raised concerns relating to the reporting of aspects of structural and systemic-Level influences which are incorporated in Section 5.5.

3.9 Deviation from the protocol

As noted above, several deviations from the registered protocol were made, specifically regarding the inclusion/exclusion criteria (Section 3.3) and the quality assessment process (Section 3.6). Excluding studies that did not specify the age range of participants was a minor deviation, as the eligible age group had been pre-defined. At the full-text review stage, we also introduced a new criterion assessing the richness of the findings in relation to our review questions. This was necessary for our meta-ethnographic approach, which relies on in-depth qualitative data alongside contextual detail (France et al., 2023).

We further adapted the quality assessment tool to suit the aims of this review. An additional criterion was added to evaluate how authentically the voices of CYP were represented (see Section 3.6). We also modified the CASP scoring system: instead of 'yes', 'no', and 'can't tell', we used 'fully met' (2), 'partially met' (1), and 'unclear' (0). This allowed for a more nuanced assessment of study quality.

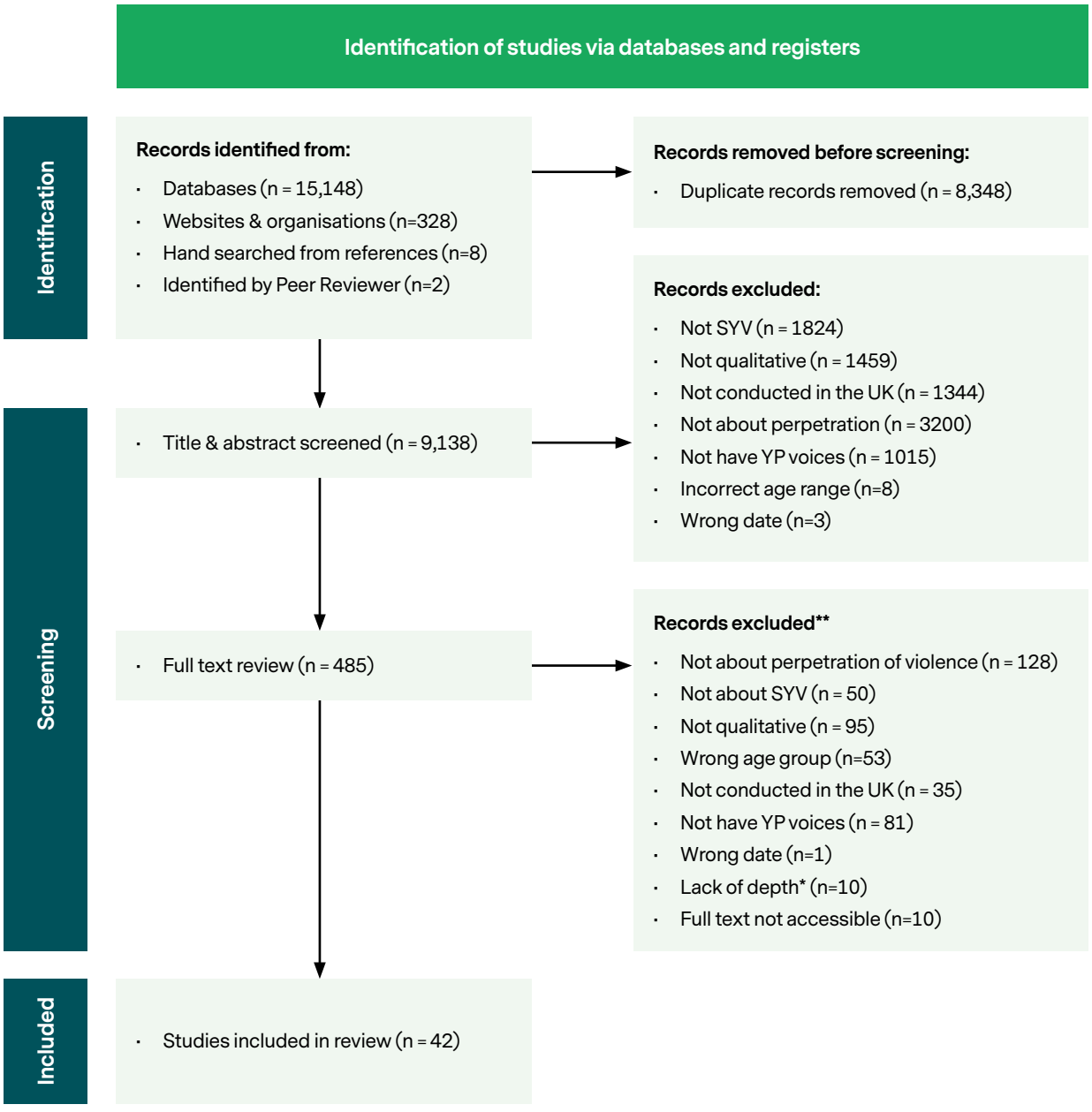
4
Findings

4 Findings

4.1 Search results

Details of the search results from each database are provided in Appendix 7. We screened over 9,100 records and conducted full text review of 485 papers. The majority of the studies were excluded as they focused on experiences of victimisation rather than perpetrating violence. We ultimately included 42 papers. The PRISMA flow chart displaying the stages and reasons for excluding studies is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1: PRISMA flow chart



4.2 Characteristics of included studies

The details of each included study are available in the Table of Characteristics, Appendix 8. Of the 42 included papers, 19 were conducted in England and two were in Northern Ireland. Two covered both England and Scotland and one included England and Wales. Seven UK based studies, often for reasons of confidentiality, gave no precise geographic location. Overall, most studies were conducted either in England or Scotland, with London, the midlands and Glasgow, in particular, well-represented.

Eleven studies took place in prisons, youth justice- or probation-related settings. Eight in council estates or high deprivation community environments, two in specialised/alternative schools and two in residential units/schools or children's care homes. Several were conducted across multiple settings such as youth offending services, community organisations and outreach, including those for women or refugees.

Data generation:

The majority of studies (n=27) generated data through interviews, including semi-structured, in-depth, biographical, and life history approaches. Three studies used focus group discussions (FGDs) as their primary method, while ten employed multiple qualitative approaches, most commonly combining interviews and FGDs (n=3), or interviews with observations (n=7). In the latter group, observations were sometimes supplemented with field notes, vignettes, informal conversations, or ethnographic methods, though methodological descriptions were often limited. Two studies described their work primarily in terms of analytical approach rather than data generation methods, such as interpretive phenomenological analysis (Young, 2009), or were broadly labelled as ethnographic without providing further detail (Young, 2007).

Gender representation:

Twenty-two studies sampled only male CYP, and where females were included, they were often under-represented. Only four studies achieved approximate gender parity: Hansson (2006) (67 males, 65 females), Beckett et al. (2013) (75 males, 75 females), Smeaton (2009) (50 males, 53 females), and Young et al. (2007) (24 males, 25 females).

Ethnic diversity:

Nineteen studies included participants from diverse ethnic backgrounds, either by design or due to the demographics of their study sites. Seven focused exclusively on White CYP, while one (Gunter, 2008) focused exclusively on Black/Caribbean participants. Some studies reported ethnic diversity by location but without detailed breakdowns—for example, Bannister (2012) described one White-majority site, one mixed White-Asian site, and one diverse site; Deuchar (2009) similarly reported high ethnic diversity in one location but did not specify details. Studies by Harding (2014) and Liddle & Harding (2020) referenced high ethnic diversity but also omitted breakdowns.

A few studies offered more detail: Traynor (2016) reported an equal division of participants (one-third White British, one-third Black African/Caribbean, and one-third dual heritage), while User Voice (2023) reported a small sample with more minority ethnic participants (n=7) than White participants (n=4). Two studies also featured more minority ethnic participants: Harris (year not specified) with a majority of Black British African participants, and User Voice (2011) with a majority African Caribbean sample.

Twelve studies did not specify the ethnicity of participants, while others used vague or outdated descriptors, such as "Caucasian vs non-Caucasian" (Evans), "British" (Thurston, 2023), or "foreign" (Harland, 2011). Northern Ireland-based studies often reported religious affiliation rather than ethnicity (e.g., Harland, 2011; Hansson, 2006). In some cases, demographic reporting was unclear or incomplete—for instance, Young et al. (2013) appeared to report demographics for a subsample not analysed in their paper.

Sample sizes:

Sample size varied widely, from as few as two participants (Bakkali, 2009; King, 2003) to 350 (Firmin, 2011) although there are inconsistencies in the reporting. Smaller studies were often in-depth ethnographies; for example, King (2003) presented two case studies selected from a larger qualitative study of 48 Black and Asian participants. Several mixed-methods studies did not specify their qualitative sample size (Barry, 2013, Evans, 2007) or combined the sample size across different samples including professionals, policymakers, or victims with CYP who perpetrated violence (Barter,

2004), complicating interpretation. One study (Bannister, 2012) reported only the number of FGDs and participant ranges without providing an overall sample size, while another required manual calculation of sample size based on some of the reported characteristics (Firmin, 2011).

Settings:

The range of SYV activities included general gang activity/involvement in violence, territorial conflicts and street crimes or a general SYV description. Others considered street or interpersonal aggressions. Some studies looked at violent assault in prisons, justice-relate settings or in care homes. Several focused on weapon carrying behaviours. Studies in Northern Ireland were largely related to sectarian[5] violence. Three studies explored desistance (Factor 2015, Gormally 2015, Young 2013). It was often challenging to differentiate, within the narratives of the included papers, between those who were 'involved in' or 'at risk of' SYV. About half of the papers included participants who were both fully involved and those who were more peripheral to SYV. Given that one of the necessary criteria for inclusion in the review was discussion of involvement in SYV, no papers focussed exclusively on at risk groups.

Age range:

The age range for inclusion in this review was participants between the ages of 10-24. Most studies included here clearly stated the age range of participants though there were a number of variations. Two studies reported the average age of participants (Evans 2007, Forsyth 2011), a couple didn't directly report age but were working through youth justice settings and youth centres in which case we assumed the upper limit would be 24 or below (Young et al 2007, Liddle and Harding 2022).

4.3 Quality assessment

Each included study was assessed for quality using the CASP checklist. As described in Section 3.6, in addition to CASP's standard 10-item list, we added one more to assess the validity of the findings. Each study can have a total quality score of 22 if all categories of CASP and our new item were satisfied. Nearly all studies scored well, though a small number of studies obtained lower scores largely due to a lack of detail in their reporting of the methodology, research participation, ethical considerations or our added score for validity of response (authenticity), see Appendix 4. The range of scores were a low of 13 (Gunter) to 22 (Beckett). Whilst these scores are indicative of quality they need to be treated with caution. The different reporting practice between academic papers and governmental or organisational reports may mean, in some cases, that authors omitted information about procedures assessed on the tool. It may also be the case that at times, limited word counts for academic papers, meant that there may not be space to elaborate on the methodology.

5. Sectarian violence is violent conflict between different religious or political groups, often fuelled by historical, social, and political tensions.

5 Synthesis findings: first and second order findings

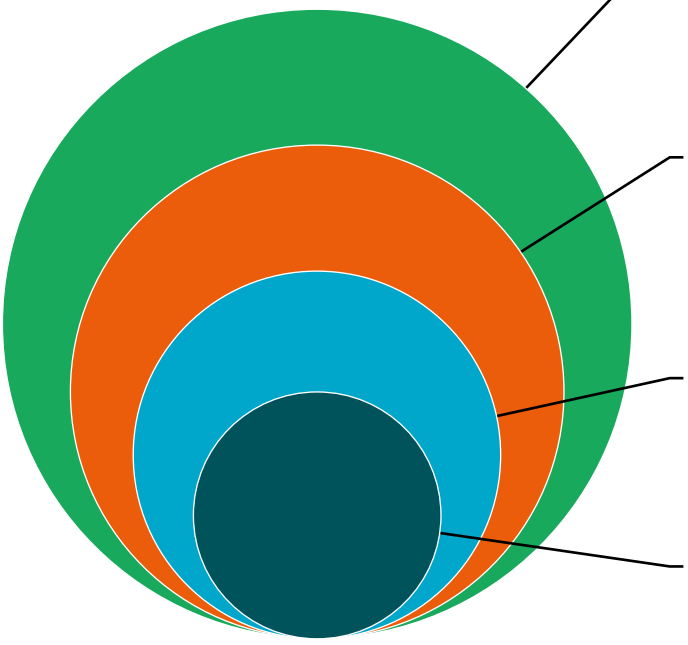
5 Synthesis findings: first and second order findings

Use of names, gender, age, ethnicity when attributing quotes was inconsistent in the included papers. Where they are given, they have been included against the individual quotes. Names provided were all previously anonymised by study authors. In addition, we have used the original descriptive terms used (such as those used to describe Black and minoritised groups), even where they are out-dated.

5.1 Structure of synthesis

The synthesis of findings is reported as follows: this section (Section 5) reviews the direct accounts from CYP, as reported by the primary study authors (first-order constructs) alongside any notable interpretation of the findings by study authors (second-order constructs). Section six then examines the results of the meta-ethnography (the third-order constructs), which present new interpretative insights that outline the broad typologies characterising children and young people's experiences of involvement in violence. Findings are organised according to the ecological framework, exploring different levels of influence on CYP involvement with SYV, Figure 2. Themes corresponding to the different levels (individual, interpersonal, community and structural) are reported. Where numbers of papers citing particular themes are given, details of the specific papers referred to can be found in the Table of characteristics (Appendix 8).

Figure 2: Ecological framework showing factors implicated with serious youth violence at different levels



Societal/Structural/Policy level

- Structural inequities (economic, race, age, gender)
- Structural and symbolic violence
- Policing and criminal justice practices
- Cultural and media representation of violence

Community & Organisation Level

- Neighbourhoods, schools, community and religious groups
- Gangs, organised crime, football firms, sectarian groups
- Access to weapons
- Identity, status and respect

Interpersonal Level

- Relationships with peers, family, care givers, partner(s), wider social connections
- Adverse childhood experiences

Individual level

- Factors relating to age, gender (including hyper-masculinity), ethnicity
- Psychological beliefs, behaviours and experiences. Income generation

5.2 Individual-level influences

Papers included in this review revealed that CYP's perception of violence and reflections on how and why they became involved are highly contingent on the specific context and circumstances in which violence takes place. In other words, the same level or type of violence will be viewed very differently and take on different meanings depending on CYP's age, gender, ethnicity, setting, personal circumstances (Barter et al., 2004). Although in an ecological framework, gender and ethnicity are often not discussed at a single level, but rather across multiple levels of influence, we include them at the individual-level to illustrate how these characteristics impact individuals' self-perception and their attitude to others. They will also be referenced at other levels of influence.

5.2.1 Age, vulnerability, independence and identity

Of the 42 included papers, 16 made some reference to the impact of age on violence.

Age, vulnerability, independence, and identity are closely interconnected in shaping young people's pathways into or away from serious violence. Adolescence is a developmental stage marked by rapid change, where the search for independence and the formation of identity are central. At the same time, this period often heightens vulnerability, as young people may lack the resources, support, or resilience to manage risks effectively. Considering these characteristics together makes it possible to see how the pressures of growing independence and identity formation interact with underlying vulnerabilities and the influence of age, creating a dynamic context in which some young people may become more susceptible to involvement in violence.

Hansson (2006) highlights how those in the younger age bracket (early teens) are particularly susceptible to peer influence, a factor that can amplify their likelihood of engaging in violence. At this stage of development, CYP are often eager to establish social belonging and may be more willing to adopt the behaviours and norms of their peer group, even when these involve risk-taking or violence. The study found that this dynamic was especially visible in instances of "interface violence" — violent encounters that occur at the boundaries between different communities. Here, younger adolescents were more likely to take on active roles, perhaps because participation in such conflicts offers a means of demonstrating loyalty, earning status, or reinforcing a developing sense of identity within their group. This suggests that the interplay between age, susceptibility to peer pressure, and the spatial dynamics of contested community boundaries can be a significant driver of early involvement in violence.

For some, involvement with street life is a phase, gone through while establishing one's identity (Gormally, 2015; Harris, 2011; Smeaton 2009). Maturity and the ability to recognise the more negative consequences of gang membership and associated violence were observed to be part of the transition from adolescence to adulthood (Barter et al., 2004; Crowther et al., 2013; Gormally, 2015; Hansson, 2006).

Developing the ability to reflect on consequences as children mature was discussed as a significant factor in a number of the papers in the review, though the findings did not always consistently fit into clear age parameters (Barter et al., 2004; Crowther et al., 2013; Gormally, 2015; Hansson, 2006; Smeaton, 2009;). Studies looking at episodes of 'reactive' street violence reported that it often tended to be 'young kids' who would initiate trouble, such as throwing stones (Hansson, 2006), with young people reporting how they were encouraged to play an active role at the 'front line' of opposing factions.

For younger CYPs, entry into gangs was more performative, the act of playing the 'gangster', acquiring status and respect were central motivations. It was suggested that those in their in early teens may not have developed adequate maturity and reflective abilities to enable them to curb their impulsivity.

> ***Because they are just 13, they don't know any better. They don't have no fear.*** (West African male youth in Harding 2014 p. 199)

Young people, mostly under the age of 16, who have become detached from their family (Smeaton, 2009) are more likely to diverge into alternative and often dangerous networks that lie beyond the protection of mainstream society. The process is interpreted by Smeaton (2009) as a natural response to marginalised and isolated lifestyles – not to join the 'gang' would simply perpetuate feelings of exclusion. When daily lives are shaped by isolation, disadvantage, or lack of belonging, becoming part of a gang may provide friendship, support, and a sense of identity that they cannot find elsewhere.

Descent into violence, in this case, may be a secondary (unintended) outcome emerging from the desire to belong.

> ***It made me feel older and it made me feel as if I was part of something. … Other people would think keep away from him; he's a fucking lunatic. … People would keep away from me because they knew I was part of the firm.*** (Smeaton 2009, p.61)

There was a sense from some that young people, even when not instrumental in initiating violence, could be used as scapegoats and left to take the blame. (Hansson, 2006)

> ***See if there is a riot … we tend to be in the front-line and we will be the ones getting caught … it's all kids … we will all be caught.*** (Protestant male in (Hansson, 2006, p. 21))

The age hierarchy in street gangs was mentioned in a couple of studies. The County Lines model employs a structure delineated by age where the younger members work as 'foot soldiers' demonstrating their loyalty through acts such as carrying knives (Barter et al., 2004, Harding 2014)

An increasing need to establish independence can also lead CYP into taking part in gangs and criminal activities, particularly those with opportunities to earn money for themselves. The desire to have their own money to spend as they see fit rather than having to ask parents was a motivating factor.

> ***I loved it out with a lot of lads my age. I was free to do whatever I wanted to do.*** (Holligan 2015. P.130)

> ***They're going out, they're buying trainers, you can't be always saying "I've gotta go to my mum, ask my mum or my dad to get me a pair of trainers", you've got to learn to stand on your own two feet, so if that's – if it has to be the way, then it has to be the way. I don't wrong no-one for doing it; it's how you're doing it. You can do it and be discrete about it. That's what I believe.*** (Bailey in Young 2013, p.47)

In addition, some CYP also acknowledged they had chosen their lifestyle themselves despite efforts from parents to dissuade them.

> ***I chose to go on the street. My mum and dad always tried to get me off the streets. She would come to parties, drag me out, I would be standing on the block, my man then would say "Your mum! Your mum!" I would run. She tried her best. I didn't want to – I just wanted to be on road. Families can only do so much … feels outside is a better place.*** (George in Young et al., 2013, p.54)

Hiding gang related behaviour from parents was reported both to protect the parent (particularly the mother) from disappointment or anxiety, but also out of a belief that they were of age and parents no longer had the need or right to know. (Young et al., 2013)

> ***My parents just say to me "Don't bring police back to my door!" That's it, and then you're good with your parents, that's all, that's the rule with parents in our area basically.'*** (Joshua, male, 14–17 in Young et al., 2013, p. 18)

5.2.2 Race & Ethnicity

Whilst a number of included studies (n=15) specifically considered the role of race and ethnicity, a substantial proportion (n=15) of the papers did not report the ethnic breakdown of their sample (see Section 4.2 for more information on the ethnic breakdown of the sample).

Gunter (2008) reports that young Black men, are more likely, over their life course, to have been targeted by the police, and other authorities and as such many have internalised representations of 'dangerous Black youth'. Some CYP are offended by and indeed actively resisted the negative stereotypes.

> ***It's like if someone saw me on the street corner and I had my hood up, like jogging bottoms on or whatever and I'm standing there, obviously they think 'oh what's he doing, he's probably gonna mug someone or he's doing drugs'. But it's only what they see, they just see me [tall young Black male] they just see my clothes and they get the wrong idea. So really they have to come up and actually talk to me, then actually find out how wrong they were.*** (Mikey in Gunter 2008 p. 353)

Deuchar (2011) found, in a study of refugees, that many experienced intense feelings of marginalisation and isolation during their resettlement process, leading to violence being used to right what was perceived as a social injustice, primarily against racialised abuse from White youths.

> ***I got arrested for assault … for one of these White men. They were being racist. … Basically, I was at a party, yeah, and two of my friends were going to the chippy shop and we saw my friends arguing with these White men so we went over, yeah, and said 'what's going on?' and this White man head butted me so we beat him up.*** (Smeaton 2009 p.51)

Experiences of racism led to some CYP following a moral code not to rob people of their own race/ethnicity:

> ***So when I started robbing, I wasn't robbing people my colour, I was robbing fully White people. And that was the thing I had against White policemen you know what I mean?*** (Tony, London, Black British, aged 17). (Traynor 2016 p.182)

However, for some gang-involved CYP, racial division was less a part of their experience and did not necessarily play a role in conflict within and between gangs (Bannister et al., 2012; Deuchar 2011).

> ***There would be times when you'll be up fighting and the whole street would just be full of people … literally every gang we fought with was all just White people and I was the only Black person there … it's not so much racially driven, it's all about competition … it's about who rules the town as opposed to 'we want to fight you because you're different'.*** (male in Deuchar 2011 p. 682)

> ***They (the local gangs) are both Black but they don't like each other … they've got a gang and … if we never had a gang they would still be bullying us …*** (female in Deuchar 2011 p.683)

Further discussion of race and ethnicity can be found in Section 5.5.5 on structural-level factors and 5.6 on desistance.

5.2.3 Gender

Gender, particularly in relation to masculinity, is discussed in 30 of the 41 papers.

Both male and female CYP report similar themes relating to involvement in violence, such as boredom, struggles for identity, friendship, money, status, survival and anger at inequities (Barter 2004, Hansson 2006, Factor 2015, Firmin 2011, Beckett 2013). Female CYPs speak of involvement in violent lifestyles, largely through association with male partners or relatives (Firmin 2011, Beckett 2013). Barter et al (2004) found in their study of children in residential homes, that although motivations for violence differed between boys and girls, both engaged in perpetration of violence. Girls here justified violence in terms of retaliation, resistance to grievous bodily harm, protection and assertion of rights against both males and females. Boys, on the other hand, framed violence in the context of a 'macho' masculinity where emotions are pushed away in an effort to present a tough, impermeable veneer (Harding 2020, Holligan 2015a, Holligan 2015b, Hesketh 2018, Bakkali 2019, Barker 2025). Males also resisted being labelled as 'victims', seeing this as weak and associated with feminine characteristics (Barker 2025).

5.2.4 Female involvement in violence

Low-level violence for girls often focussed on domestic or relational issues, particularly in situations where their lives felt out of their control. The motive for collusion with male partners had two key drivers: love or fear (Firmin 2011).

> ***Cause every time when I've had a fight here when it's not been my fault but I've never, like, I would do anything I can to avoid a fight but then sometimes that's going to be the only way to resolve it. So you just do it and it will finish after that.*** (Jessie, aged 16 in Barter 2004 P.73)

> ***Last night we were fighting, hence the black eye. Me and my boyfriend never used to fight but now we fight all the time and they've banned me now from the building permanently which does my head in 'cos all I try to do for my boyfriend is look after him and that.*** (Smeaton 2009 p.51)

> ***Mostly girls don't fight unless another be staring … and callin' them names. Most girls argue over mandem and over who's been lookin' at who and saying this and dat.*** (Young woman, Young et al 2017, p.149)

Girls recognised that they could acquire elevated status by being with the hardest most macho young men in the gang and appeared at times to gain vicarious pleasures witnessing aggressive encounters (Firmin 2011, Beckett 2013, Harding 2014). More serious physical violence was used by girls as a last resort to resist systematic bullying (of self and others) or to protect family members. In contexts where girls' ability to assert power is significantly limited, acts of violence were generally reported in a positive light – as opportunities where they had asserted agency and thus gone some way towards righting wrongs. For example, in institutional settings violence at times erupted in response to perceived unjust treatment or retaliation either from peers or adult carers. Here, Amy discusses the tensions in relationships with other girls living with her in her children's residential home.

> ***It's like the same thing I done to Sherry when she wrecked my room, she ripped my pictures, my favourite pictures and so I got her and I pushed her and I stamped on her, I was like, 'cause she stamped on them and she ripped them so I said, 'You don't like it when I stamp on you so don't stamp on my stuff and throw my stuff around.'*** (Amy in Barter 2004 p.73)

Female involvement in gang activities and sexual violence in gangs is discussed in more detail in Section 5.4.5.

5.2.5 Performative masculinity

Masculinity is discussed as a key theme in 20 of the 42 papers included in the review.

The search for an identity that would provide self-esteem and meaning within otherwise difficult lives was a strong theme in many of the studies. Presenting a façade of tough, impenetrable, authentic masculinity was often part of this (Bakkali 2019, Barter et al 2004, Barker 2025, Fraser 2013, Harding 2020, Harland 2010, Harris 2011, Hesketh 2018, Holligan 2015, 2017, 2018, King 2023, Palasinski and Riggs 2012, Thurston 2023, Trickett 2015). In this account, Adem reflects on the challenges faced by young men trying to forge an identity in modern, post-industrial Britain, which may have led to the rise in macho posturing:

> ***For people who are strong … in the past you might have used this {strength} to defend your family this doesn't happen anymore. All these typically male things – there is no place for them – the best thing you can do is get your thoughts in order – At the end of the day men are so lost in the struggle with all these feelings. There's no real place for this physical strength … it's harder for men to navigate the world and all their feelings.*** (Adem in Barker 2025 p.)

Gaining status through the performance of masculinity requires an audience to observe the act. Fighting was something often 'performed' in front of others to gain 'celebrity status' (Holligan & McLean, 2018). The identity as a fighter and the power afforded by it, in terms of how others viewed them (and in particular, feared them), was valued (Harland 2010).

Being prepared to proactively attack a member of the opposition afforded 'top guy' status whilst not being able to stand your ground was seen as a weakness that could isolate young men from their peers through a loss of respect.

> ***I don't think I could respect somebody that wouldn't stand their ground. Aye, I would think they were a bitch for it . . . they'd need to prove themselves before I'd hang about wi' them honestly.*** (Ben in Holligan & McLean, 2018, p. 11)

Here, a young woman suggests that pressures on men to demonstrate strength and courage override motivations to use violence as a means to material gain.

> ***[The young men I know] 'jacked' people not for material gain but for peer pressure as most of the time people would be like 'oh, if you don't do it you're a pussy and rare, rare, rare. So you do it, more time, to show off in front of your friends and to prove to 'em that you are not an idiot.*** (Young woman in Young et al 2007 p.159)

In instances where there were no witnesses to an act of machismo, second-hand narration of the event could be just as powerful (Harris 2011). Problematically, once the audience has gone the performer is left with their own suffering, remorse and inadequacy (Bakkali 2019). This cycle of violent performance and lapses into vulnerability is full of ambiguity, contradictions and tensions, and prompts uncontrollable feelings of fear and defensiveness. Life as a hard-man is precarious, perilous and exhausting (King & Swain, 2022).

Harding (2014) illustrates how respect and honour are central to the street social field, often defined and earned through the expressive use of emotions and violence—which Trickett (2015) also identifies as a key feature of gang-associated masculinities. For young men excluded from mainstream routes to achievement and success, such as education or employment, and lacking the cultural and social capital to pursue legitimate alternatives, hyper-masculinity offers a powerful means of establishing identity and status (Barker, 2025). Within this context, street capital (Harding 2014) is accumulated through adherence to a code of honour rooted in public displays of toughness, emotional intensity, and the capacity for violence. These performances are not random but strategically enacted to signal credibility, deter threats, and assert dominance in the street field. Thus, honour and respect function not only as emotional or cultural values, but as vital forms of symbolic capital that structure hierarchies within gang environments. The notion of an 'uncontrollable' masculinity serves to take responsibility away from the perpetrator (Mills, 2001). Creating myths and illusions, supported by language, style, fashion, social media and posturing are all complicit in achieving authentic masculinity.

> ***… he thought he was like trying to test us all out … like hard man, he wanted to be the boss so he had to fight us all, but I'm not going to put up with that so I kicked the shit out of him and he didn't come near me after that.*** (Stuart 15 year in Barter 2004 p.74)

> ***I'm not scared of anyone just … I know I will get battered by people but there's no point in being scared, you can just fight with them all.*** (Nathan In Crowther 2013 p.72)

The imperative, in any fight, is to show (others) that disrespect would not be tolerated– even if entering into the fray was likely to result in loss or injury.

> ***I don't care how hard they are . . . I'd just have a fight with them . . . if you don't win you don't win, if you win you win.*** (Tom in Crowther 2013 p.72)

> ***BK: And what would you think of a man if you saw him back down? Azeez: If that's one of my [friends], I'd be like 'stop being a pussy'. I don't know many people who would back down. Once you back down one time, people think you always a pussy.*** (King 2023 p.1054)

> ***Interviewer: Can I ask you about [when] the gang confronted you?***
> ***Bankz: [laughing] Yeah. I made them shit themselves, innit. Fuckin pussies aint gonna mess with me no more. They think they oh so ghetto and shit, fuck that. I'm ghetto.*** (King 2023 p.1055)

The use of weapons, beyond simply carrying them, was viewed as a test of masculinity and those not willing to use them would lose respect among peers:

> ***If I want to carry a gun at fourteen, I've got to be the bigger man; that's how it is: if you ain't gonna pull the trigger, then don't have the gun. … The majority of people (who are carrying guns), I'd say ninety percent will use a gun.*** (Smeaton 2009 p.57)

Identity as a fighter could be ambiguous and context dependent. Admitting to fear, attack, coercion was a sign of weakness and therefore rarely voiced. Fighting was entered into both to 'contest disrespect' and 'show no weakness' (Crowther 2013).

> ***I am a fighter . . . but I don't really go out and try and cause beef. I'll just leave it but like if someone comes up to me then . . .*** (Sean in Crowther 2013 p.70)

> ***Everyone wants to be the biggest, baddest and the most untouchable but if you get robbed people are going to say 'you got robbed by so and so' so you are a victim and no one will take you seriously.*** (Tyson in Briggs 2010 p.13)

For some, projection of 'hate' onto others created a release and psychic well-being – as if the passing on of the emotional load was, at least, a temporary off-loading of pressure (Holligan and Deuchar 2015.) Those (particularly boys and men) unable to talk to others, trust them with their emotions, vulnerability and inner pain, may be more likely to resort to a violent, physical response.

Both race and social class were seen to influence the construction and expectations of masculinity. Boys of African Caribbean descent were viewed in one study (Palasinski & Riggs, 2012) as being tougher and cooler than Asian boys who were more likely to be subject to homophobic name calling. Fraser (2013,) in their study of post-industrial Glasgow, shows how restricted spatial mobility and post-industrial economic constraints create a classed "street habitus." Hypermasculine behaviours and territorialism are seen to reflect broader struggles shaped by class-position and lack of opportunity.

Some recognised that mental health issues are incongruent with the tough veneer of masculinity and therefore were trivialised and rarely discussed.

> ***There's a lot of people that like they can't, there might be nobody they can talk to, you know what I mean? They might tell their bredrin-their friend like 'yo man, listen man, I'm going through something' and their bredrin might be like 'man toughen up man, stop crying, it's not that deep man, just bitching' you feel me? You can't go to your friend and be like 'brudda man I'm going through suttim kinda mad' they'll just be like '[kisses teeth] listen man stop crying, toughen up man, stop moving like a punk' like or a bitch, do you know what I mean? You just laugh like haha, then you just go home and it's like-it's like who you gonna go to? That's why a lot of people kinda, that's why I know a lot of men confide in women and that, they just doing all that.*** (Bakkali 2019 p.11)

Boys cared about how they were perceived by girls, but their involvement in or proximity to violence created tension, as girls were understood to value less aggressive and more emotionally restrained traits.

> ***The girls that I know, they wouldn't say it but they want you to be nice, smart and rich. Not crude and rough. Right? But you don't have to be gangsta …*** (Palanski 2012 p.17)

Asserting hypermasculinity was often underpinned by misogynistic and extreme sexist behaviours where women are derided or treated as objects of male desire. The exemplification of heterosexuality through the demonstration of multiple sexual encounters with women was key to how group members were judged by peers (male and female) (Trickett 2015). The hard macho identity, sought by many boys and young men, struggled to accommodate a vision of the world where girls were respected as equal partners. Instead, many accounts portrayed girls as 'slags', 'sluts' and 'mad heads' only valued as far as they served the needs of men (Hesketh 2018 p.128)

> ***This sounds horrible, but girls were viewed like a piece of meat. Some of my mates used to batter their girls. I have seen them go to hospital with broken noses and jaws. They were just something to have on their arm when they wanted to show off. When they don't want them on their arm they get a beating and get a crack to get them out the way.*** (John in Hesketh 2018 p.128)

> ***They were there because they wanted to be and we would smoke weed with them and get them pissed and just bang them. They never got involved in any criminal activity just there for sex … just slut bags, you could shag for a bit then see what else there was".*** (Charlie 23 years in Hesketh 2018 p.129)

Further discussion of gender and hypermasculinity is found in Section 5.4.5 (female involvement in the gang).

5.2.6 Violence to generate income

The use of violence as a means to securing financial incentive is discussed in 15 of the 42 papers.

The power and influence of money coloured many accounts of violence (Factor 2015, Barker 2025, Firmin, Hesketh 2018, Harding 2020, Harris 2011, Thurston 2025) with some individuals reporting substantial earnings. The concept of deviant entrepreneurs is used (Hesketh & Robinson, 2019) to describe how dealing in drugs and the violence that forms a standard part of these transactions – to protect territory and maintain the status quo – is an adaptive behaviour for young people who can see no options for earning larger amounts of money through legitimate employment or are drawn to the potential easy way to earn larger sums of money.

> ***The gang thing where I live, there are reasons why it's that big around Norris Green. It's not just about terrorising people for a laugh anymore. It's going bigger; there are older people involved in the background. It's all about the graft now, making money to get by. Getting doe in so you can have the nicer things in life. There are no jobs around by me, so we have to make our own jobs. It's easy for a group of scally lads to go into business, if you know the right people.*** (Hesketh 2018 p.140)

> ***You do bigger things, you want more money … then you get greedy … Fire and passion to succeed and then when you get chased and that … I think its boss, exciting, money; it's everything.*** (Hesketh 2018 p.129)

> ***Like out of town, like out of county lines basically. So yeah, I'll do that. I was like 'yeah, I'll have clothes on my back, nice clothes on my back'. I've known people do county lines that come back with three, four grand innit. And I'm there like 'yeah, that could be me'. So, I went and done it, that's happened innit.*** (Male, 18 User Voice 2023 p.8)

Among a number of gang involved CYPs, there was a sense that some violent crime was justified on the basis of lives spent in poverty. In such cases, motivation was focused on finding a means to earn a living. Violence was used in one-off robberies (sometimes to get immediate cash for drugs for personal use) or to secure and protect more organised drug markets. The motivation to acquire money could be broader than simply for the benefit of the individual – providing for the needs of family members (particularly mothers) (Barker et al 2025).

The buzz and the adrenalin linked to being involved in violent crime was often indistinguishable, it seemed, from the thrill of acquiring easy money:

> ***It feels like an adrenalin rush … you just buzz and you fly when you are doing it and if it goes good, you want to do it again. You think of the money, easy money.*** (John in Hesketh 2018 p.130)

A number of respondents mentioned how legitimate money was linked to prospects of mainstream success and the opportunity for success in that area had frequently been thwarted. Here Ethan, in prison for a violent crime, voices regret for ambitions and the lost opportunity to earn money legitimately.

> ***Like, I played professional football and like, I was one step away from playing for the first team that's like the proper team … it would've made me. It would've meant that I'd of had money, had things around me. I've got money and that but it's not, it's not the problem. It's like, you always want legit money init.*** (Ethan in Thurston 2024. p.117)

5.2.7 Violence as retaliation

Violence as a means of retaliation, protection or as a form of social justice was discussed in 30 of the 42 papers included in the review.

Opportunities to express agency are limited for young people who have been pushed to the margins by a myriad of complex social, individual and structural factors. In circumstances where young people are surrounded by hostility and discrimination, they may find coping with slights (both real and imagined) particularly challenging and feelings of persecution quickly come to the fore.

> ***… last time … she tried to pick on me and she got what she deserves. I kicked her and I punched her and I smacked her in the face.*** (Amy, aged 13, in Barter 2004 p.70)

> ***I split the lad's head up, the same kid who did me over before, I did it with a chair leg. I just smashed his head in, but I did that because he took the piss out of me. Now he's going to look into the mirror and see a scar on his fucking forehead and realise I did that …*** (Thurston 2021 p. 142)

Verbal abuse or even a look was sometimes seen as enough to trigger a violent response.

> ***It will come down to a wrong look over anything, you could get stabbed, you could get shot, so you never know.*** (Manz, 20 years, in Harding 2020 p. 37)

> ***Last guy to try and stare me doon man, fucking ended up in hospital.*** (Derek in Holligan et al., 2017, p. 144)

For some, there was a clear distinction between violence used as retaliation—which was considered acceptable—and violence directed at those perceived as innocent, which was deemed irresponsible.

> ***Violence, I think it's a very necessary thing – people think it's stupid and they don't think it's necessary but I think it is. I think it's important to have a little bit of violence sometimes because I think violence can be used in the right way. If someone is taking the piss out of you, you should be able to retaliate, and if someone is bullying you or if someone is fighting you, you should fight back, you have the right to fight back. But I think it's stupid when you're fighting over postcodes and things like that and you're hurting innocent people or pedestrians, civilians, people who aren't involved in things or people's family members, that's when it gets too far.*** (Liddle & Harding, 2022, p. 14)

The ultimate disrespect, most likely to provoke a violent response, was to insult or verbally abuse a young person's family members, particularly their mother. Slagging off someone's mother was a personal affront and threat to status and masculinity.

> ***No one would ever say anything about my mum because I would get up and hit them so hard.*** (Andy, aged 13 in Barter et al 2004 p.74)

> ***If someone called my mum a twat or something, I would flip out at them, I wouldn't care and I wouldn't stop until they were on the floor.*** (Patrick, aged 12, in Barter et al 2004 p.74)

For many, violence was justified by being retaliatory or a response to others' perceived aggression. In cases where young people grew up in physically and emotionally abusive or neglectful settings, the use of violence against adult perpetrators was viewed as the personal enactment of justice. The ability to assert power over abusers was experienced as empowering (Thurston 2013).

Some CYP described having no other choice but to take part in violence to resolve their issues with others.

> ***Don't wanna fight. It's just that I have to sometimes. Cos they won't, they won't like settle for being mates and they won't settle for just having an argument and then walking our separate ways.*** (Marcus in Crowther 2013 p.70)

> ***Ay, that's the only way to sort it out like … with bottles, stones … attacks on houses in the Bogside, just to get them to stop*** (Protestant males in Hansson 2016 p.22)

> ***I was fighting last night … stupid stuff … we battered his friends, and then he saw me on my own … two of my friends battered one of his friends … and then they singled me out.*** (Catholic male in Hansson 2006 p.33).

Pre-emptive attacks, i.e., being prepared to be the first to draw a blade, are seen a means of asserting control, while the possibility that the opposition may strike first is viewed as 'nanny-talk' (Harding 2020 p.45). Harding (2020) argues that carrying a weapon allows young people to shape how others see them, using it as part of 'myth-making' to build up a reputation. This can create both symbolic and practical forms of protection, aimed at defending their status as well as their physical safety, even if not always successfully.

Harding (2020) refers to 'the rules of the game' which exist within the groups or gangs ('the social field') in which young people operate. The concept is used to describe the relationships, power dynamics, cultural and social norms, and social structures that influence individuals' behaviour and status within a group. In the context of gangs, the social field shapes how young people gain respect, build identity, and navigate their roles within the gang. The unpredictability of the social field (or the 'rules of the game') leads to CYP living in the heart of territorial conflict to take immediate action if there is any sense of threat:

> ***I don't care if I see them with their mum, sister, whoever. It goes off straight away. Shooting, stabbing, whatever you're going to do.*** (Pulla, 18 years, in Harding 2020 p.44)

5.2.8 Violence in response to emotional triggers

Violence in response to emotional triggers (anger, social slights, impulsivity, excitement seeking, fear, love, vulnerability) was reported in 34 of the 42 papers included in the review.

Young people described their own emotional triggers, particularly in relation to any perceived 'wrongs'. In some cases, violence was used as a valve to release a build-up of pressure – as such violence was more often reactive rather than planned – tending to bubble up spontaneously (Holligan 2015; Young et al 2007). Several CYP described an awareness of their own difficulties in managing their anger while acknowledging a lack of resources to draw upon to help them control it. In one case, the young person expressed a desire to seek help externally.

> ***I'm trying to stop it, but most of the time it goes out of control and I just flip.*** (Callum in Crowther 2013 p.71)

> ***I want to go to the doctors and see if I can get on an anger management course …*** (Hesketh 2018 p.126)

> ***When somebody grabs my neck, I don't care who it is, I just go berserk on him. … It ain't nobody else's fault, it's just like it's this thing I can't control any more.*** (Barter et al 2004 p.70)

Whilst some young people report feelings of achievement and elation after a fight, boosted by the elevation of their 'personalised street biographies' (Harding 2020 p.46) – others spoke of the shock, almost disbelief that they had

committed such a violent act. Moral dissonance or detached emotionality were interpreted both as an act of self-protection and as an endorsement of a macho identity which did not embrace self-reflection or emotion (Holligan 2015).

> ***… sometimes you don't make the best choice, because you think it's your only choice … then you have to pay the price … that's what you have to do, and then you try and come out and better yourself, because you don't wanna go back there.*** (Shelley, 17 years in Factor et al., 2015, p.27)

Lee reflects without remorse on his time in the football gang 'firm' and recognises that the anger, following his father's death, was a contributory factor. The 'firm' provided him with a sense of unity and belonging:

> ***… I was an angry lad. I was a really fucking angry person and that was my way of getting a release. Do you know what I mean? That would make me feel better at the end of the day. I'd be walking home absolutely pissed out of my head (after a day at the football fighting) having been with forty other boys who were all part of one of the top firms in Scotland. … Well organised, together and strong as well'.*** (Lee in Smeaton 2009 p.64)

Fear is a strong trigger to violence, expressed by a large number of narratives. Despite the high prevalence of fear, there was agreement that public displays of fear will be perceived as weakness which may lead to greater violence:

> ***There is an element of worry but you can't show that, you can't show that you're scared. … If you show any weakness, they're (people who are looking to cause a problem) more likely to think 'let's take him on.*** (Smeaton 2009 p.65)

> ***Sometimes … ah see somebody fa ah ken [that I knew] mebbe 10 years ago 'at ah hud a barnie wi'. I'll see these fowk comin' towards me … an' ah can feel myself startin' tae build inside; th' heart's poondin', an' ah teel myself, "Recht, [right] it's okay" an' 'en ah hink, "Recht, whit if they attack at me?" Yoo've got tae teel yerself, "No, jist donner [walk] hame, an' jist nod yer head.*** (Young 2013 p.42)

Linked to fear is a strong element of vulnerability which sits awkwardly alongside pressures to be tough and in control (Liddle & Harding, 2022). The following conversation between five males, aged 14-16 living in inner London, give a strong sense of the underlying precariousness of their position.

> ***Male 5: Everyone's frightened. Deep inside people don't be reassured, maybe don't show it, but everyone is frightened about everything.***
>
> ***Male 2: You're not really safe anyway.***
>
> ***Male 5: Exactly. No matter who it is, you could be the most respected person in the whole school and will have the most security ever around you, you could be one of the rich earnings people with the most amount of security, but at the same time, the one time where you're no longer safe, alone, someone is going to take you. Someone is going to rob you.*** (Liddle and Harding 2022 p.14)

Young people who do not engage in violence when confronted are perceived to be weak. Here a young gang-involved man is talking with derision about a close friend who, hadn't acted like a 'real man':

> ***I heard he was like begging for mercy … Ant man Raymond was going on like a pussy. I tell you certain people they ain't what they seem. Man can't walk road no more, he's lost his stripes.*** (Sweet Boy in Gunter 2008 p.360)

When physical violence results in injury and harm, some young people describe their actions as not intending to harm, but rather, the situation got out of hand and the outcome was unavoidable, suggesting a lack of understanding of their own actions. Many comments about serious violence highlighted how hard it was to clearly articulate the reasons it came about:

> ***I've seen guys who are put to stabbing someone or fighting a guy that they were laughing with and talking with only a second ago.*** (Myron, 21 years in Harding 2020 p. 41)

At times, perpetrators of violence appeared unable to voice clear causative factors which have led to the violent act and were themselves perplexed by its unpredictable onset. The retaliatory nature of conflict depended on the particular combination of participants and the mood of the crowd.

> ***You can hardly say, it just kicks off … insults fly… and then bricks and bottles are thrown … or sometimes things can happen just out of the blue*** (Protestant Male in Hansson 2006 p. 21)

Mental health and low self-esteem may also be significant. Mental health issues were commonly mentioned in papers, though more by study authors than the CYP participants. Whilst mental health challenges (depression, anxiety, insomnia, ADHD, autism, self-harm, insomnia, eating disorders) were common in young people displaying violence, these appeared to often go undiagnosed (Barker 2025, Smeaton 2009). Establishing a positive identity was, for most, a monumental task and young people frequently described themselves in disarmingly negative terms as 'little shits' or 'bastards' (Smeaton 2009, Palasinski and Riggs 2012, Young 2013, Barker 2025, King 2023, Crowther 2013). Impulsivity and problems with emotional regulation were recognised as traits which could lead to trouble, often encouraged by peers around them. Here Ethan, (serving prison time for violence) despite recognising that his behaviour can get out of hand, upholds himself as 'not a bad' person.

> ***Everyone was scared of me … because I, I will do it, init. Like if someone told me to do summats I will do it init. Like if someone told me to go down the hill in the trolley, I would do it … But I like who I am and I wouldn't be who I am if I didn't have them friends around me, I'm not a bad … I wouldn't say I was a bad person.*** (Ethan in Thurston 2024 p.120)

5.2.9 The role of drugs and alcohol

The role of drugs and alcohol as an influencing factor in SYV was discussed in 12 of the 42 review papers.

Multiple studies identified that being under the influence of drugs and alcohol and drug dealing increase the likelihood for entering into violent encounters (Barry, 2013; Forsyth et al., 2011; Harding, 2020; Hesketh, 2018; Young et al., 2009). Substance use was an indicator of a willingness to contravene societal norms and was seen as a mechanism to gain membership of social groups (Taylor 2015). The ability to control anger and aggression was understood to be diminished when under the influence of drugs and alcohol. Moreover, growing dependency on drugs was commonly cited as a reason for carry out violent crime (Smeaton, 2009; Taylor et al., 2015). A CYP could have initially started out as a casual drug user but over time became more involved and entangled.

> ***First started with stealing for weed to use, then dealing drugs, proper grafting. That's how it goes around where I live. You start off getting involved with the boys because there is nothing else to do. You are drawn into it, trying to escape through the weed. Then as you get older and there is no work, you take the only job there is, proper graft for the big boys. I got caught serving some beak [cocaine] to a couple of lads outside a pub, been caught a few times now but it doesn't stop me because the money drives you.*** (Gary in Hesketh 2018 p.142)

In some cases, drugs (particularly cannabis) were reported to reduce the risk of violence, however more common were the accounts where violence was facilitated by the use of alcohol and/or drugs, with a rise in feelings of antagonism and aggression (Forsyth et al 2011, Hansson 2006, Smeaton 2009). Some accounts suggested that alcohol and drugs exacerbated underlying mental health challenges, yet there was a lack of self-reflection with respondents sometimes blaming the substances taken rather than any underlying condition. Both alcohol and drugs were factors that appeared to increase unpredictability of behaviours.

> ***Valium sends me wild when I take it, that's when I committed ma first offence in 2006. That's what I had. I had Valium. I'd never take them again. I had vallies and drink. It was Morgan Spice [rum], and Buckfast ['tonic' wine].*** (Forsyth et al 2011 p.474)

> ***It had to be Valium, it gives you confidence. When you mix it, it's the devil's mixture. It's pure evil eh, totally evil, you can do things and you don't remember doing it or nothing. I always just wake up on them and I'm lying in the cells or something and I can't remember what I've done. Some bits come back to you but there are some things I cannae [cannot] remember at all. I can remember the [current] offence, but I cannae remember using the bottle, but I can remember kicking him in the head and that and stamping him on the head, but I cannae remember hitting him with a bottle.*** ('Murdo': 17 years old, in Forsyth et al 2011 p.472)

> ***Through taking drugs I got into prison. … I kept arguing with ma bird all the time. I couldn't take it out on her so I went out and battered boys. I lost my temper a lot. I smoked green every day. At weekends I took eccies [ecstasy], speed and coke. I needed green to feel normal. The people I was with smoked it. I didn't want to feel the black-sheep. Drugs changed the way I acted towards my family. Drugs have fucked my life up. I started at age 8 or 9.*** (Holligan 2015 p.131)

Some CYP are disarmingly honest in their appraisal of how drug dependency spurred them into committing violent robberies:

> ***I've done everything to get money. I've done cash point robberies. Hitting people and taking their money. Or, I've held a knife to them just before they press the cash point button, put the knife to them and say 'get the money out'. One man said 'there's only twenty pound in it' and I say 'well I've been on the streets for years so press the balance or I'll plug you anyway'. So he pressed the balance and there's like so much in it. And you're only allowed to take two hundred and fifty out or three hundred so I tell him to take the lot out. They were trying to get away with a score and because of the lie, and because of the drugs, afterwards I said 'because of the lie, you're going to get bounced about a bit' and really it's not their fault; it's the drugs.*** (Smeaton 2009 p.118)

> ***How did I become involved with the police? Through smoking weed basically, hung around with the wrong people, got into fights all the time. Ended up going out robbing stuff like that and it led to heavier drug use like cocaine.*** (John in 25, in Hesketh 2018 p.138)

Some CYP expressed clarity that drugs were a significant factor in their descent into violence.

It may be that one of the attractions of using drugs was to numb one's mental acuity is that the violent act was hard to recall (Liddle and Harding 2022) – or that recollection of the violent act became something 'other', separate from an individual's 'everyday' identity. Certainly, some CYP acknowledged how drugs could impact beneficially on their ability to fight:

> ***It [cocaine] doesn't make you want to go out and fight, but if you fight, you're just on your toes and if someone were to start something you'd go for them.*** ('Adam', 17 years, in Forsyth et al 2011 p.473)

> ***[on ecstasy] if you start fighting and someone knocks you down, you just get back up fighting again. You don't feel anything. It makes you dance as well.*** ('Stevie' 19 years old in Forsyth et al 2011 p.473)

5.3 Interpersonal relationships (family and peers)

5.3.1 Adverse childhood experiences

Adverse childhood events are discussed in 16 of the 42 papers included in the review.

A substantial number of papers cited how CYPs involved with violence had lived through multiple adverse childhood experiences (Bakkali, 2019; Barker et al., 2025; Factor et al., 2015; Hesketh, 2018; Holligan & Deuchar 2011 , 2015; Holligan, 2015; Taylor et al., Thurston 2024, 2015; User Voice, 2023; S. Young et al., 2009). These comprised of loss or absence of parents (particularly absent fathers), parental mental ill-health, substance abuse as well as episodes in institutional care. Such experiences have contributed to CYP becoming at risk of involvement with gangs, exclusion from schools, and taken into care, all of which can put CYP along the pathway of eventual involvement with SYV. Several studies identified a link between parental neglect, deprivation and youthful criminality (Hesketh 2018, User Voice 2013).

> ***If my mum and dad [had] given me that stable life that I needed you never know maybe I wouldn't be here right now.*** (Male, 22 in User Voice 2023 p. 13)

Ben, serving a prison sentence for violence, blames his current predicament on the extreme violence witnessed as a child together with experiences of neglect.

> ***I say it to my mum now that she was like partly to blame because if she walked out of that household I wouldn't be, I wouldn't have seen what I seen. I wouldn't have seen my mum getting beat up and plates getting thrown in her face and stuff like that, so, that's obviously when she finally got up and left … If I was to, if I hadn't seen what I seen in that house, I wouldn't be the way I am.*** (Ben in Thurston 2024 p.113)

For some CYP, positive lifestyle choices had come to an end and, following abuse and neglect from adults, they had resorted to a 'deviant individualism' (Young 2013) characterized by an early understanding of the power of violence. Some did not have their basic needs met and took to the streets to vent their anger by engaging in criminal and violent activities. Several CYP described needing to escape their home environment as a reason for their involvement in gangs and even opting for prison as a better option than their actual home life. Shelley, for example, could see no other option but continue to commit crimes which would land her in jail.

> ***… I tried to turn to social services, I didn't have any family … all I'm doing is committing crimes … 'you owe money, go and commit some crimes'…I knew I was going to go to jail…there was a time before I went in, that I wanted to go to jail … it needed to happen, basically.*** (Shelley, 17 years in Factor et al., 2015 p. 27).

Declan, serving life for murder, in a young offender institute, attributed his decline into serious violence to the need to escape his warring parents.

> ***I just went out to escape. I went out all the time, never in the house, roaming the streets with a lot of lads my age. I was free to do whatever I wanted from the age of 9 onwards. It became a gang from a group of kids just because you are from there which has a name. My mum and dad didn't want to believe they were the cause of it.*** (Declan in Holligan 2015. p.129)

There was a suggestion from some that the quality of the relationship between parent and child may be more important than family structure, such as single parent families (Hesketh 2018). Indeed, it has been argued that a strong bond between parent and child is instrumental in helping CYP to build morally stable values which will facilitate abstinence from criminal behaviours. However, in practice, many CYP in this review lacked access to positive adult role models.

5.3.2 Relationships with fathers

The importance of family relationships (including relationships with fathers) was discussed in 13 of the 42 papers included in this review.

Many CYP criticised their parents for not giving them the safe home environment needed. However, fathers were particularly highlighted as a contributor to CYP involvement in gangs, especially among boys. While some yearned for a father figure and male role model to 'watch you play football; tell you all about girls and that stuff' (Smeaton 2009), such relationships were more often notable by their absence. Exposures to domestic violence by a male carer, either as witnesses or as victims, made home life filled with fear and anxiety from a very young age. One study suggested that the emotional trauma of early adverse experiences could result in a tendency to show less empathy to others – increasing risk of becoming violence involved (Hesketh 2018).

> ***My dad was a bastard … but my mum was always on the right side of the law … When I was younger, my dad used to have a belt. He used to belt us. He was just a rough man … If you done something wrong, instead of getting the cane you would get a belt.*** (Ian, 22years, in Hesketh 2018 p.122)

> ***I lived around a violent alcoholic father who was constantly beating my mother and me … it was a fear based environment. (Terry, in Hesketh 2018 p.122)***

> ***"There were nine of us, six sisters, and three brothers, including me … my dad used to batter us. I tried to commit suicide at the age of 12. My dad was a horrible man if I did anything wrong my mum would tell me off, my dad would batter me physically"*** (Zak in Hesketh 2018 p.122)

> ***I never got along with my step-dad. I think that's why it all started in the first place … I used to argue with my dad and go out and get into trouble, then my dad used to hit me … I stabbed him because he were beating my mum up and pushing her around.*** (Shaw, 2014 p.1832).

Some CYP who were parents themselves used violence to deal with differences in their parental relationships with ex-partners and assert their parental role. Here Shaun describes how he beat his ex-partner's new boyfriend as a way to prove that the new boyfriend was unsuitable to be a protector to his ex and their child.

> ***Basically I ended up scrapping with him [daughter's stepdad] and beating 7 bells of shit out of him and I basically rang her [ex-girlfriend] up while he were there, video call and all that, and I were like is this the guy you're getting to try and replace me? Is this the guy you want to be dad to my kid? Love, he can't even protect himself, let alone protect you two. Basically I wanted to teach him a lesson, to prove to her that yeah, I was better than him… coz basically that's the dad's job, to protect and provide for her, and if he couldn't even protect himself what the fuck is he gonna do for a three-year old kid and a girl.*** (Thurston 2023 p.133)

In one case, a CYP described learning boxing, which is normally seen as a positive outlet and training to control and manage anger and violence. However, in this case, the youth described learning to be violent through boxing.

> ***Violence was part of every day in my house. I've just got used to it. And then I used to do the boxing and that trained me to be violent. Me dad beat me that much that I didn't really feel pain.*** (Bob in Smeaton 2009 p.46)

5.3.3 Family involvement in crime and violence

For those whose families were also engaged in sectarian violence, gangs or broader criminality, the pressure to follow the same course can be strong.

> ***My brother would encourage me to do so much of it. When we used to be out he'd be like, "Look at that girl, don't you like her chain?", "Rob her!" or "That girl's looking at you; fight her!" He used to encourage me to do these things all the time … I loved my brother, he was my role model and I wanted to be like him.*** (African Caribbean, female, in Young et al., 2013, p. 41)

> ***It was jist kin' ay a body [one] ay those situations whaur you'll groon up an' wud see yer uncles fightin' in th' causey [street] an' see them fightin' in th' streets mebbe wi' firearms, an' as a young bairn ye thooght, it was tough; that's gangsters an' that's whair you'd loch [like] tae be … I looked up tae them.'*** (William, White, male in Young et al., 2013, p. 41)

> ***We wir brooght up in"at. It wasn't an option whair ye cud either say tae yerself ye didnae want anythin' tae dae wi' it. … it's the "name thing", it's fa yoo're related tae an' whair yoo're fae e'en though ye ne'er wanted anythin' tae dae wi' it.*** (Simon in Young et al., 2013, p.41)

CYP who were estranged with their criminally-involved parent were sometimes still influenced by them to engage in criminal activities:

> ***Lived with my dad until I was seven, then he went to jail for murder. Don't even remember the guy now except for the drink and the smell of his weed when he used to smoke it. That's how much of an impact he had on my life as a kid. Although a few years ago from jail he managed to sort all the equipment I needed to start my own cannabis farm for my birthday.*** (Den, in Hesketh 2018, p.123)

> ***My mum is schizophrenic and my dad's a user – I used to pick needles off the floor at the age of 6 … By the age of 8 I was involved in gangs and drugs. One of the lads around the estate – he just came up to me one day and gave me money to buy a football and he just chatted with me. I didn't realise he was the one who used to supply my dad with drugs.*** (Morgan in Barker 2025)

Young people were insightful as to how aggression was passed through generations with a range of different reasons used to explain animosities – religion, family feuds, fighting for territory or widespread disaffection. Accounts of fighting for the honour of the community were reportedly glorified by older generations.

> ***People say the war is over. But you still see trouble all the time. Catholics and Protestants don't mix and you never feel safe in other areas. Everyone talks about peace, but people are still brought up to hate each other. It's not those my age, it's my dad and his dad, the trouble goes back too far.*** (Harland 2010 p.421)

The role of the older generation in sustaining generational aggressions was sharply observed by one young girl:

> ***If they are not encouraging them, they are certainly not stopping them.*** (Protestant female in Hansson 2006 p.26)

5.3.4 Peer relationships and the importance of the social bond

Peer relationships and the importance of social bonds were discussed in 22 of the 42 papers included in the review.

Young people's cultural norms and behaviours are shaped by close interpersonal relationships such as peer and friendship groups, particularly as they reach adolescence and gain independence from the family unit. Peer and social groups are key contributing factors for CYP to become at risk for carrying weapons, joining gangs, or indeed perpetrating violent acts.

Studies described how young people in groups are often labelled as gang members by authority, with negative connotations. However, many CYP described themselves as simply hanging out and socialising with other young people. For many groups of youths who may be viewed as gangs, violence does not necessarily play a central role. The depiction of 'road life' for example, as exemplified by the Rude Boys in Gunter's (2008) study, does not exclusively centre around hyper masculine violent behaviours. Indeed, for the majority of Rude Boys, the focus is on social activities such as youth club, raving, 'catching joke' and 'hanging on the road' (Gunter 2008). Gunter critiques media and policy discourses that portray gangs primarily as violent criminal groups, and instead explores the social and cultural dimensions of what are often labelled as gangs. He focuses on young Black men (many of whom are of Caribbean descent) in urban environments, particularly in London, and how their involvement in street-based peer groups is shaped by social exclusion, racial discrimination, and identity formation.

> ***We don't fight with anybody anymore but it's just we're all together but people will look at us and say well that a gang ain't they, know what I mean, like polis [police] look in their cameras and go … phew … oh there's a gang, know what I mean, but it's no like that, it's just a crowd of us.*** (Al, 19, male, Gormally p.160)

For some CYP who do join gangs, it was a way to feel part of something. Group membership provided a sense of belonging, freedom, protection, excitement and friendship or even 'a substitute family' (Holligan 2015, Barker 2025, Gormally 2015, Harding 2020, Young et al 2007, Smeaton 2009, Gunter 2008).

> ***If anyone's got problems with any of us, then they've got problems with all of us … that's what we do. One night there was about ten of us and we all said, we all just put out hands in the middle of the circle and said if anything happens to any of us, it happens to all of us.*** (Smeaton 2009 p.61)

The emerging need for adolescents to establish their own independence away from their family may also contribute to their decision to join gangs. For some CYP, joining gangs could almost constitute a replacement family given a large number of CYP reported problematic family environments.

> ***I've been put in hospital at aged 7 due to my older brothers. My mum has been in jail for attempted murder … When I was with my family there was no life at all. As soon as we got back from school we were locked up, and the next thing is everybody started to fight. I joined a gang at 14. It was better than being with my family.*** (Holligan 2015, p.129)

> ***… A gang and family is like, basically, the same thing except, the gang, you go out fighting and with family, you don't.*** (Smeaton 2009 p.61)

Street gangs can evolve from adolescent peer groups and are built around neighbourhood networks. Some emphasise the protection of territory or 'post-codes' that form a part of group identity forged within a protected personal and communal space, bonded by strong inter-personal (though precarious) ties (Bannister 2012). Often, they emerge in response to external threats (Traynor, 2016) and with the imperative to earn money, some grow into drug distribution enterprises. Similarly, being part of a group means offering protection to friends, as part of the moral code of the street.

Yet, while friendships and finding one's place in peer groups was important, many relationships with peers were infused with mistrust and suspicion. Matty, serving time in prison, talked with regret about the moment people he previously described as role models committed violent sexual assault.

> ***I just saw them kick the door down and beat fuck out of him but because they were vallied [sic] up out of their heads and I was scared then, I was fucking terrified, because I'd never seen them be like that … I just went mad after all that, because I didn't have anyone to look up to no more because I'd looked up to fucking sex offenders.*** (Matty in Thurston 2024 p. 122)

Once in a gang the dreams of friendship and belonging were often left unfulfilled. The brutality and violence of everyday life meant that individual survival was prioritised over developing trusting friendships (Barker 2025). Attention turned instead to self-interest, with the acquisition of status and power, through material gain, trumping more relational goals.

> ***So you've gotta watch out for all of them, you understand, and on top of that it's snakes, normal people that will snake you, you understand?*** (Sage, 21 years; Harding 2020 p.38)

Yet while friendships were often precarious, riven with suspicion and mistrust, peers also offered protection. Defending peers with physical violence was part of the moral code of the street.

> ***At the end of the day, you're going to have it on your conscience (if) you didn't back them (your friends) up enough.*** (Glasgow, White Male, 15 years old; Bannister 2012 p. 12)

> ***Like I'd stick up for people and everything, like if someone said something about them I'd say "what, you can't be saying that about them." And probably end up fighting with them over them.*** (Callum in Crowther et al 2013 p.71)

> ***In the gang you soon start playing with like guns, knives, trying to stab people, beating people up … We protect each other. It's what we do in the group.*** (Shaun in Thurston 2024 p. 123)

In some cases, violence was presented as a game. Here, Lee talks of how his football firm, named as the baby crew, made up of young people aged 13-15 used to play 'hunt the emo' which involved antagonising Goths. Violent interactions would often end with taking phones or cannabis from the victims:

> ***… cos I was a wee hooligan, I was a wee Baby Crew boy. … I'd be walking with four or five boys, right, and I'd see a couple of Emos. I'd spark a joint, right, and start smoking it, right, and wait for somebody (a Goth) to walk past and intentionally bang into them right and say 'what the fuck do you think you're banging into?' and crack (Lee gestures to indicate that he would head butt the Goth). That's what I used to be like. I used to love it.*** (Lee in Smeaton 2009 p.60)

5.3.5 Loss of significant relationships

Maladaptive, violent behaviours, in those with little residual resilience, were sometimes linked to the end of relationships or the loss of important people (Thurston 2024). Shaun recounts how his girlfriend's miscarriage set him off on a downward spiral.

> ***I just went on a bender, went on a spree basically… it was underground fighting. Basically you get a phone call, you get took to a place, you get told you're scrapping him and you get paid afterwards…I was at such a low point of my life, I had no feelings, no emotions, I had no one at that point, I didn't really care… I was letting my anger out, though even though I was letting my anger out it didn't help, it didn't change anything. I just didn't have any feelings. Fighting didn't even spark feelings in me, I was still just numb. I'd just lost her so I didn't have anything, I didn't feel nothing, I had nothing to lose did I, because I'd lost everything… I fell head over heels straight away, I seem to go with my heart over my head, because basically, shit that happened when I was younger, obviously I may have attachment issues.*** (Shaun in Thurston 2024 p.130)

5.4 Community-level influences

The community-level refers to the immediate contexts in which social relationships occur—such as neighbourhoods and peer groups—shape norms, opportunities, and exposure to violence. Themes listed in this Section relate to factors implicated in violence where influences are highly context specific, relating to characteristics of the immediate environment including infrastructure (or lack of it), access to peer groups engaging in violent activities or access to weapons and the way that, within these environments, the drive to want to take control over one's life and exert agency may lead to perpetrating violent acts.

5.4.1 Relationship to the immediate environment

Relationships to the immediate environment including the normalisation of violence and the strength of social connections are discussed in 34 of the 42 papers included in this review.

CYP connection to their neighbourhood shapes their identity, safety, and social behaviours. High-crime or socio-economically deprived areas often foster environments where violence becomes normalised, and local norms can encourage defensive or aggressive behaviour. Disinvestment in these areas may also reduce access to positive social institutions reinforcing vulnerability to SYV.

Studies show that street violence is closely tied to the dynamics of social exclusion and inclusion, connecting individual behaviour to wider community and societal forces (Ilan, 2012 in Holligan, 2017). In this context, violence can become a way of expressing defiance against broader social inequalities. Such patterns are often concentrated in areas of multiple deprivation, where marginalisation is high and the presence of the state and public infrastructure is limited (Harding, 2020).

Young people's accounts of their immediate environment tended to be characterised by negative descriptions of localities with poor resources, high deprivation and conflict, and little in the way of positive leisure or recreation opportunities (Bannister 2012, Barter 2004, Barker 2025, Hesketh 2018, Holligan 2015). In some cases, even schools were described as unsafe environments where bullying and harassment take place. Neighbourhood effects create territorial stigmatization and structural violence which impact on emotional development and nourish individual capacity for violence (Holligan 2015).

Holligan (2015) suggests that place itself can be transformed and imagined as a violent force, reflecting anger at the injustices experienced in disadvantaged communities. Despite the power of place to influence behaviour most participants are tied through social and economic constraints to the area in which they were born or raised. Holligan (2015) uses the concept of 'actor–network' theory, through which people, places, objects, and even ideas become 'actors' (sometimes called "actants") that interact with each other in a network. This means it's not just individuals (like young people or police) who shape events, but also things (like weapons, street corners, housing estates) and contexts (like poverty, policy, or media portrayals). Together, these human and non-human actors form networks that create and sustain particular social realities—such as the persistence of youth violence in certain places. Using these ideas, Holligan (2015) suggests that violence and identity in disadvantaged communities cannot be explained only by looking at young people themselves—but must also consider the wider web of relationships between people, spaces, and structures that produce those outcomes.

None of those interviewed in Holligan's (2015) prison study envisaged moving elsewhere on their release. In this way, criminal subcultures are left to flourish, deepening cycles of offending. Indeed, although on one level people view their surroundings dispassionately, home is home and there were significant numbers who maintained a sense of connection and even affection for their immediate neighbourhood (Holligan 2017).

The pressures to get involved in prevalent acts of criminality are intense, with respondents often attributing their behaviour to their local environment.

> ***I grew up with them {gangs} on me doorstep. I just grew up in the wrong place. You know what I mean? Everyone around there is affiliated with a gang. There's all drug dealers on every street.*** (Ethan in Barker 2025)

> ***If I had been brought up in a better place with better people I probably would have turned out differently so it's not all my fault"*** (Frank, 24 years in Hesketh 2018)

Violence in many of the areas was reported to be highly prevalent and normalised:

> ***… like violence, to us, is just life, you know what I'm saying? It's life man. For someone to get stabbed up, it's an everyday thing man, like for an ordinary man, it's a shock, but for us it's … someone got stabbed.*** (Mel, 19 years in Harding 2020 p.40)

> ***It was in my neighbourhood every day. Right in front of my face someone would be getting, somebody would be having a fight, and then someone would get stabbed, right in front of my face like it was nothing. Someone was running off, everyone was scattering about the place and then there was a body just dying right in front of me. And the worst thing about it is you walk past it because it's an everyday situation.*** (Myron, 21 years in Harding 2020 p.40)

> ***Yeah, it's (violence) everywhere ain't it. I mean you see it everywhere … on TV, on games, ruckin (fighting) on the streets. It's what happens … what people use to … sort things out … and get things done. At some point you have to get involved. It's the way it is*** (male, 14 years Young et al 2007, p.106)

Fear and feelings of being unsafe in certain localities restrict young people's movement – constricting them to areas where they feel protected whilst avoiding areas where there are perceived threats – leading effectively to increased marginalisation and isolation.

> ***I'm safe in this wee area here (indicating the area immediately around their home).*** (Glasgow, White Male, 14 years old in Bannister 2012 P.11)

> ***We can't even go to the cinema, if we go, we are chased out (Protestant female), while a friend stated simply: We can't get anywhere*** (Protestant male in Hansson 2006 p.28)

> ***It's a shit hole. All ma pals are in trouble … It's my second time in jail: breach of the peace, police assault, two assaults with permanent disfigurement, terrifying witnesses, and vandalism. There's a guy out there who's got 500 pound on my head. I can't take the wee bairn to the beach in case I bump into other people.*** (Holligan 2015 p. 133)

Young people discuss the negative effect of living in difficult surroundings and how that impacted their ability to make positive life choices.

> ***There's not much to do in the place. Everybody knows everybody … I moved there when I was 6. If I hadn't moved I wouldn't be in this position I'm in now. … It's just the environment. The people you hang about with.*** (Holligan 2015 p133)

> ***I bide [grew up] in Barrowfield … an' thaur used tae be ae lot of violence; ae lot of violence. … th' folk that lived in it created th' violence, th' feud got split in two.' (Simon, White male, 18–24 years old) 19.*** (Young 2013 p.36)

> ***It was a rough upbringing, a bad estate in Liverpool all kids running around like three and four in the morning on the streets … you were just left to do your own thing and that.*** (Paul, 19 in Hesketh 2018 p.121)

Recognition of how limited their life choices have been meant that many CYP directed their anger outwards, towards the evident inequalities confronted. Gary, for example, whilst acknowledging his role in choosing to join gangs, points out that his options were limited:

> ***… I went down the wrong path with the wrong people but it was the only one I had … "it was on my doorstep, I had no choice".*** (Gary in Hesketh 2018 p.177)

> ***I was just being a wee fud, I thought I was a gangster. And it was because I hung about with all the bigger ones, telling me to do things.*** (16-year-old male in Barry 2013 p.353)

Such environments are not conducive to CYP making positive life choices. Lack of ambition, aspiration and little sense of connection to societal services, networks and institutions were all linked to pathways to violence.

> ***I was proper lost, I didn't know what I wanted to do, I just, going with the flow.*** (Stephen in Bakkali 2019 p12)

While some young people referred to their ambitions, these were often unsupported by clear frameworks by which such goals could be achieved (Hesketh 2018). Instead, the immediate influence of peers can strongly determine the direction taken. In such boundaried settings, young people hold on tenaciously to the social field inhabited by those around them, thus outcomes are predetermined and there is a tendency to follow the same trajectory as their peers (Harding 2020). There is a feeling of inevitability for young people who grow up in violent environments to, follow the trajectory set by family and peers in this social field or habitus (Hansson 2006, Harding 2020).

> ***It becomes destiny to carry a knife (or to be stabbed). The display of knife wounds itself is already part of the myth-making within street gangs and again plays a role in generating street capital and reputational enhancement.*** (Harding 2020 p.40)

Acceptance of often bleak and brutal lifestyles echoed through the accounts given.

> ***It comes with the Game, it's the lifestyle, this shit comes with it. So if you want to be on this ting, then this comes with it, innit, you're gonna have to be part of what it is and deal with the consequences.*** (Boss, 24 years in Harding, 2020, p. 41)

For some, violence was simply a means of survival in a landscape where doors were closed and alternative choices in short supply:

> ***Survival man, that is straight survival man. Sometimes someone's going to take someone else's life for something you did, there ain't nothing to live for man, they don't know how to look for them, they might just go out there and be making money, it is what it is man, Life for Life.*** (Boss, 24 years in Harding 2020 p.37)

5.4.2 Postcodes and defending territory

Territoriality is a key feature of youth violence, where postcodes or neighbourhoods become symbolic markers of identity, loyalty, and conflict. Defending territory is often less about geographic ownership and more about asserting group status and survival within contested urban spaces.

Despite the ambivalence many expressed in relation to their immediate environment, the imperative to protect one's territory, particularly that which is connected with families over generations, was strongly ingrained. For some young people this sits alongside the retaliatory nature of aggressive protectionism. Territoriality was strong between or even within housing estates, between postcodes or across geographies bounded by religious demarcations. (Deuchar 2011, Bannister 2012, Smeaton 2009).

Aye, it's your right, like if you walk down there (rival area) you would get a tanking, so why should they be able to walk through yours? (Glasgow, White Male, 15 years, in Bannister 2012 p.12)

Fraser (2013) notes how, when asked where they were from, his research participants, living on a housing estate in Glasgow, responded with 'Ah'm Langview' (I am Langview) rather than 'Ah'm fae Langivew' (I'm from Langview) – emphasising how their identity is inextricably linked to place. Bourdieu would describe this as a form of instinctive 'feel for the game'—a learned way of behaving where people follow unwritten rules set by those within a particular group (Fraser 2013). Territoriality it seems is often more concerned with reputation, metaphor and field dynamics than spatial dimensions (Harding 2014). The ostensible focus on boundaries and turf wars may result from the fact that young people, newly establishing themselves in the social field, find it easier to establish physical boundaries, defined by territory, rather than relational boundaries (Harding 2020).

An understanding that territoriality and hostilities were inherited from previous generations ran through many accounts – maintaining hostilities and fostering alliances (despite underlying insecurities and uncertainties about the levels of commitments to these relationships – see Section 5.3.3) becomes part of upholding family honour.

It's passed through the generations, it's handed down, it's natural. You have to stand your ground. It's like a family thing, these are the only people, and you call them friends, brothers. (Tower Hamlets, South Asian Male, 18 years in Bannister 2012 p10)

5.4.3 Carrying weapons

Issues relating to the carrying or use of weapons are discussed in 17 of the 42 papers included in this review. Weapon carrying is often a response to perceived threats, shaped by environmental risk and collective narratives of protection, reputation, and deterrence.

For many CYP who live in violent and deprived contexts, carrying weapons is a common sense and logical response to local external threats and can be an effective means to earn street capital and respect (Harding 2020). Choice of weapons was determined largely by availability. Where traditional weapons weren't readily accessible makeshift options were employed including bricks, stones, bottles or pens. There was one report of a rolling pin wrapped with barbed wire and pinned with nails (Holligan et al 2017). In urban centres, knives (often kitchen knives) and guns were the weapons of choice. The choice of weapon was sometimes selected based on how close the perpetrator could get to the target (Harding 2020).

Weapons serve several purposes: they act as armour against fear and vulnerability, provide physical protection, signal status or masculine strength, and help build street capital (Harding 2020; Holligan 2015). While the protective function and the idea of armour overlap, the latter often refers more to psychological reassurance, whereas protection for some comes from being prepared to use the weapon if necessary. One dominant narrative across different contexts in this review suggested that weapons provided security and protection, particularly when navigating outside local and familiar, geographic territories. Holligan (2017) explains this using Signal Crime Theory, which says that carrying a weapon sends a message about danger. For young people, it can be a way of making sense of their surroundings, showing they have control, and dealing with situations where they feel others have an unfair advantage (Harding 2020).

> ***If I'm on the bike going down to the shops, then I wouldn't carry it (his knife); if I was in a car, I wouldn't carry it. But, if it's like here in the city and I've got to walk to the Co-Op and past the college, then I'd carry it. Now, the thing is, there's always so many people out to get you. … It's all because of gangs, innit?*** (Smeaton 2009 p.56)

> ***I really had to carry a knife because I'd been threatened, like saying 'if we see you next time we'll stab you'. Every single night I go training and when I come back they definitely see me so one day when I went training I took a knife with me and put it in my bag for protection … it kind of made me feel safer 'cos when I confronted the guy he pulled a knife and I stepped back and I pulled out mine so I was as guilty as he was. If he stabbed me, I was going to stab him as well.*** (Deuchar 2011 p. 682)

Participants demonstrated the complex inter-relationship between weapons and respect. Holligan argues that young White men in Glasgow carry weapons, both as a symbolic and agentic response to the fear and uncertainly they feel manoeuvring their locality. Carrying weapons and engaging in street violence is a way of giving meaning to marginalised and criminalised existences and is indicative of the level of criminal 'risk' or fear that CYP experience (Holligan 2017).

> ***No, it never feels safe, but that's why you have people you know, you carry what you need to carry.*** (Manz, 20 years in Harding 2020 p. 36)

> ***I suppose you could say you are always intimidated, always looking over your shoulder as a guy. As a Protestant you are singled out*** (Protestant male in Hansson 2006 p.29)

> ***No I don't do fear. I'm not scared … it just makes you kind of wary. On edge kinda. It gets to you. Like people walking behind you. Back then – I used to leave my house and I had to make sure I'm on point. That's why I carried a knife.*** (Omar, South East, in Barker 2025)

Weapons were often acquired as a response to threats or actual attacks. The justification of protection meant that the weapon carrier tended not to see themselves as violent, with some insisting they have no desire to use them. Rather that carrying a weapon was a rational response to the circumstances they live in.

> ***I wasn't violent in a sense where, you know, I would go out and attack people and stuff like that, I would, just like any person in that situation, I would carry a weapon to protect myself.*** (Staffie, 22 years, in Harding 2020)

> ***My body armour? – Well, why do you think blood? Well, it's protection, innit? Sometimes, you understand, sometimes Man coming for niggers, understand. It's just safety measures, you understand, safety precautions from Opps, Enemies, Pagan, you understand?*** (Boss, 24 years in Harding 2020 p.37)

> ***I've always been cautious and never go out without my knife; not because I feel like stabbing somebody but because I don't want it happening to me. Maybe it's me being a bit paranoid or something but I've kind of been running with some people who've had bad things happen to them.*** (Smeaton 2009 p. 54)

> ***When I started out on my own it was scary because you got no one to back you up. Even the lads I hung around with, if they knew you were grafting and they weren't getting a share, they could turn. I have been threatened loads of times, been smacked around, bottled, had my bird's doors go in by lads looking for money. One had a***

> ***gun and had my bird by the neck. I was out, when I came back she kicked off on me, so I had to get a gun, but that's the world you're in.*** (Frank 24 years in Hesketh 2018 p.141)

> ***Like if I was round the shops yeah and someone come up to me yeah I'd know for a fact that I've got 5 seconds for me to hit him or if it's longer than that me and him talking then it's going … he's going to end up cracking me.*** (Sean in Crowther 2013 p. 69)

Some CYP who are involved in criminal activities explained they needed to carry weapons because they knew others on the street would be carrying them:

> ***Then when [the muggings] were regular, we knew people we were jacking [robbing] would be backed up too. Word was that people were getting jacked on-road, so more people were backing up. So, we knew that we had to carry, 'cos mandem gonna be carrying [knives].*** (Azeez in King 2003 p. 1057)

> ***Y'know the gangs usually attack in packs and you need something to balance the odds. You won't just pray to Jesus innit?*** (Bryan in Palasinski and Riggs 2012 p.14)

> ***If you roll with the right sort of people, it's very easy to get a gun. If I wanted a gun, I could go get one now. … to do what they gotta do, whatever, innit? To do robberies. … Some people might just have them to like have them as a status thing but that doesn't mean anything. Some people have them to use them and some people have them to do their routine: say they're going out doing robberies every day, they'll have that gun not willing to shoot someone but if it really comes down to something, they will use it.*** (Jimmy in Smeaton 2009 p.56)

In the following narrative, Mark argues that even when carrying a knife, it is still important to be able to read the situation. While recognising that girls are not interested in 'thumb-sucking' men he advises that there are times when it is important to recognise when you have been beaten

> ***It's not about being macho or seeking trouble. It's about being streetwise. Girls don't fall for thumb-sucking wimps do they? But sometimes it might be better to hand your wallet over to them rather than to argue. Especially when their arguments are longer and sharper than yours. Or when you feel that they can use them quicker than you. That would also be streetwise. Y'know what I mean?*** (Mark in Palasinski and Riggs 2012 p.17)

Some described using novice gang members to carry weapons to avoid gang members being searched or arrested. Novice members were seen as disposable and replaceable. For some CYP, the decision to carry weapons can be due to peer pressure or a way to gain status:

> ***I didn't need to carry a knife … I was looking at my older friends and I was thinking like 'yeah everyone's got this', like them lot all had like their guns and … and I thought oh the closest thing to that was a knife so I'll carry this instead.*** (Male, 19 years in User Voice 2023 p. 16)

> ***Craig: If you found that college is not for you and there are no jobs to be found, then some try to command respect in other ways. Playing a tough guy whose path should not be crossed is one of them. But most knife carriers, they don't actually intend to spill blood. When they find themselves in trouble, it's usually enough for them to take it out y' know. And then after a while they don't even have to carry it anymore.*** (Craig in Palasinski and Riggs 2012 p.18)

> ***Shanks are a bit more serious than a gun, you know. … I'd rather get shot than get shanked up … I'd rather take a gunshot than get stabbed. … I never used to carry a blade really; it just didn't, it just didn't inspire me. The guns inspire me more, you know. When you look in a mirror with a gun loading up, thinking you are a little bad boy with a 56.*** (Brad. In Smeaton 2009, p.55)

While many accounts were coloured with male bravado and apparent indomitability, glimmers of fear and vulnerability were often evident, hovering close to the surface and impacting on mental well-being (Bakkali 2019, Barker 2025, Hansson 2006, Harland 2010, Smeaton 2009, King 2023).

> ***Like there's a lot of people on road, like they might have that bravado like 'yeah reh reh reh' the tough guy, but when the lights go out it's just them and their thoughts and it can turn people crazy still, and I've seen it turn people crazy and they might feel depressed and, but people don't know that. … you don't know what these people are going through, you lot just think it's a joke, joke, joke, joke.*** (Stephen in Bakkali 2019 p.10)

Many studies included CYP descriptions of carrying weapons to protect themselves, and in some cases, using violence as protection. Although in most cases, it was also acknowledged that this more commonly resulted in escalation (Crowther 2013, Deuchar 2011, Harding 2020, Holligan 2015, King 2023, Palasinski and Riggs 2012, Smeaton 2009). Some CYP, even those with a history of previous violence and knife carrying, acknowledged that it could be taken too far. Moral judgement contrived that knives should only be used when the need was pressing.

> ***I've stabbed people when I've had to. When I've had to do it, I've done it in the leg or the arm … I don't really like knives, eh, but sometimes I've had to. There was some boys who would take it over the top, eh, and start stabbing them in the chest and that. I was really against that, eh, and got pissed at some of them boys. … When you're doing that, it's coming out of the category of being a laugh and making it too serious. … The ones who take it too far are basically violent and aren't in it for the laugh … sometimes it's the ones you least expect; the ones who are lawyers and that.*** (Smeaton 2009, p.56)

> ***Something had happened with his girlfriend and sister and it escalated until my man's getting a gun out and shooting his best friend; that's his boy who he's grew up with since he was little. … No-one's gonna mess with him again … word will get round on the street: my man's just popped his best mate.*** (Smeaton 2009, p.57)

Ease of access to weapons clearly played a part in their ultimate use and many respondents indicated that if needed they were easily obtained.

> ***(x) could sort me out with a gun. If I've got loads of people after me and they all want to stab me up … I could get a 40-Calibre, silverplated bullets that might put a few holes in people.*** (Young male, Young et al, p.152)

5.4.4 Group violence: Gangs, football firms and sectarianism

Issues relating to group violence including gangs, football firms[6] and sectarian violence are discussed in 34 of the 42 papers included in the review. Violent groups or gangs often emerge in response to local social disorganisation, peer pressure, or the absence of legitimate pathways to status. Within certain communities, group involvement can offer protection, identity, and economic opportunity, but also fosters collective norms that valorise violence. Group dynamics amplify individual behaviours and make violence more likely, particularly in the pursuit of respect or revenge.

The reason for entering into groups that participate in violent acts relates in part to the discussion in 5.3.4 around peer relationships.

Whilst contested by some respondents in this review, the term gang was generally understood to define groups of young people who were involved in criminal acts, including violence. There were clear similarities between gangs, football firms and sectarianism in the accounts from young people. Group behaviour shared a number of characteristics including aggression and macho posturing combined with the vying for status, rank and striving for a sense of belonging. There was a sense that collective gatherings provided power and protection. Identity was bound closely to the position that one was able to achieve in the group setting:

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6. A football firm is taken here to describe a group of football supporters, who engage in organised violence and intimidation against rival fans (Smeaton 2009 p.58)

> ***(Estate name) has always been the hardest estate. This is where we're from. I'm not being funny and all but we are hard, and they (young males form other estates) think, they try and fight, they always see if they can come up and fight us.*** (Bradford, White Male, 15 years in Bannister 2012 p.13)

> ***It's not turf, its respect.*** (Bradford, White Male, 15 years in Bannister 2012 p.13)

> ***If you're not in a gang, you're not part of what's going on. …People want to be seen as like the alpha male, like the rude boy, the bad boy. They'll be scared of him, they want to be the biggest, the best.*** (Firmin 2011 p.49)

Respondents tended to be more afraid of opposing groups of young people, rather than penal sanctions and the justice system. Many CYP, particularly those suffering racism and discrimination, (Deuchar 2011) took the law into their own hands and operated their own version of street justice. Traynor (2016) explains the physical and psychological insecurity that CYP who have been involved in violent acts, using the concept of 'security gap'.

> ***You won't get battered by them if you join them (the group)*** (Glasgow, White Male, 15 years in Bannister 2012 p. 12).

Sometimes, taking part in group violence could come about by chance, often based on the locality where CYP lived. Football firms are one such groups which are characterised more by recreational violence and rioting, with an element of organised crime for financial gain. For example, one CYP explains how he became connected with one such group after being kicked out of home at the age of 15.

> ***Older people, gangsters and all sorts … these weren't homeless people but proper gangsters – Hibs boys; people who go to matches and are into organised crime and are like high, high up people … I used to go to this pub and we would meet up at this pub and they would organise a fight … they would arrange a place for us to meet and organise a diversion for the police and that on the other side to where the big fight was happening. I just used to be right in with the bigger boys.*** (Smeaton 2009 p.35)

Many of the respondents lived in areas of high deprivation and the promise of quick financial gain was a strong incentive to get involved in gang-related activities. Those disenfranchised from education and legitimate employment turn to the apparently 'easy' money to be gained from life on the street – the subculture of 'badness' becomes an option (Gunter, 2008).

> ***People come from poverty they don't know how to get a job, you know what I mean? Sometimes they get roped into it*** (Male, 22 years in User Voice 2023 p.8).

The life of glamour, designer goods and fast cars which invades them in their surroundings and on social media creates the sense of inadequacy and yearning for a life constantly out of reach, reminiscent of Hirsch's (1976) concept of a 'politics of envy'.

> ***I used to look up the road out the window and there's loads of people in nice cars and listening to music, nice clothes and motorbikes and I would say, 'I want to be like that one day innit'. And then I've done it.*** (Male, 21 years in User Voice 2023 p.8)

> ***I don't think they're forced. I think that they've – they've seen the glamourised life through some of the elders and they want some. There's no way that they're gonna get up every morning, they're not doing nothing with their life, knowing that they can make money: there's no way these youths will say "All right, I'm going to sit down for a while" – they'll observe it for a little while, but after that they – something ticks in their brain, they'll go to the elder one and say "Blood, I beg you bring me in, what's happening? You've seen me every day, you've seen me struggling and I beg you bring me in." So sometimes it's the youths that actually push it to the elders to say "I wanna make money" and then the elders bring them in.*** (George in Young 2013 p.38)

> ***I remember one of the things that made me wanna get into selling drugs was – I remember, … one of them was having a birthday party and they must've gone to town. Erm, I remember seeing the receipt and it's a bit over £1000 just on shoes … at the time, coming from a single-parent household where we hadn't really got much money, and you see someone spending £1000 on shoes and that.*** (George in Young 2013 p.38)

Though it is hard to unpick from these accounts whether violence is always implicit in activities for financial gain (mainly focussed on dealing drugs) – the undercurrents of violence, used to protect markets and coerce operatives, was never far from the surface. In some cases, such as with the County Lines model, or coercive football firms (Smeaton 2009), gangs employ violence, territory, secrecy and intelligence to enable the control of drug markets (Hesketh and Robinson 2019). In organised gangs, where drug dealing is integral to operations, the role of violence is primarily to control drug markets and individuals operating in the gang at lower levels.

Entering into gangs for some CYP was purely circumstantial reflecting their environmental context and the peer groups they mixed with. It was common for groups with long standing hostilities to simply re-enact learnt behaviours (Bannister 2012). Some explained that CYP could be bullied into joining gangs and may not have agency to refuse.

> ***I don't think people necessarily want to be part of a gang; I don't want to be; it just happens. The whole reason I was part of it (the gang) was because of my postcode. You're born into it, basically. … It happens because you're raised up in the wrong area and that's it.*** (Smeaton 2009 p.62)

> ***Most guys believe it or not yeah get involved in gangs because either they get bullied or they're scared of being bullied. The gang members get bullied by other gangs. You see it all the time in jails but they won't admit it.*** (in Firmin 2011 p.50)

> ***Like, stuck in mud, really. You are knee deep in crap, in other words, as soon as you come into the world. You can't help but not get in trouble and stuff.*** (Bradford, Asian Male, 15 years old in Bannister 2012 p. 10)

> ***Sometimes it's not fair cos they put you up to do it. – Like you literally don't have a choice about it, they will get you, they will kill you instead basically so you have to.*** (Firmin 2011 p.50)

> ***Where I live, you have to do things like that sometimes to get on, do you know what I mean?*** (14-year-old female in Barry 2013 p.353)

In some cases, despite the normalisation of violence and pervasive brutality, there were apparently contradictory moments where CYP strove to do the right thing. Here, following a group attack in a skate park, the young narrator is keen that it should be known how, following the attack, they placed their victim in the recovery position.

> ***One time. … In the skate park some man walked through and started on me for no reason. Se we, like, started punching and beating him up. And we all ran away, but me mate put him in recovery position. … There was eight of us at the time.*** (male aged 15, YOT sample, in Young et al 2017 p.151)

Harding (2020) talks of the need for young people to grasp 'the rules of the game' and to be constantly vigilant to presenting risks within the UK street gang context (Harding 2020). The social field, within which gangs are located, presents a landscape in which risks have to be constantly re-balanced. Whether or not to take the first strike and to act pre-emptively was part of the risk assessment constantly being played out in young people's mind. The normalisation of behaviours leads to the assumption that such behaviour is acceptable and moral stand points are revaluated (Harding, 2020; Harland Ken, 2011; Smeaton, 2009). The extent of the normalisation of brutal acts leads to detachment and lack of empathy (Smeaton 2009).

> ***It was in my neighbourhood every day. Right in front of my face someone would be getting robbed, somebody would be having a fight, and then someone would get stabbed, right in front of my face like it was nothing. Someone was running off, everyone was scattering about the place and then there was a body just dying right***

> ***in front of me. And the worst thing about it is you walk past it because it's an everyday situation.*** (Myron, 21 years in Harding 2020 p.40)

> ***It depends on what scale you want man, like violence, to us, is just life, you know what I'm saying? It's life man. For someone to get stabbed up, it's an everyday thing man, like for an ordinary man, it's a shock, but for us it's … someone got stabbed.*** (Mel, 19 years in Harding 202 p.40)

> ***violence is just the way it is—you gotta be able to handle it.*** (Harland 2010 p. 419)

One further perceived 'benefit' of the violent group encounter was the sense of anonymity it offered and the opportunity presented to set aside individual moral standards. Hesketh (2018 p.60) talks of the process of 'neutralisation' whereby gang membership offers the opportunity to transfer moral responsibility to the group. The masks and balaclavas referred to by some respondents are the preferred uniform of anonymity, lending themselves to a sense of separation or deindividuation from the violent act (Hesketh 2018).

5.4.5 Female Involvement in the gang

Although often overlooked, girls and young women are active participants in the ecology of SYV—whether as instigators, facilitators, or direct perpetrators. Community norms about gender, reputation, and relational power shape how girls engage in or are drawn into violence. Their roles are often closely tied to local social networks and informal economies, making their involvement highly context-specific.

The perspective of young women and girls in relation to gangs is considered in 11 of the 42 papers. In the majority of these accounts, women tended to place themselves either as passive accomplices or as 'bit' players performing minor roles in violent acts. Their role was generally seen to be more peripheral, carrying drugs or weapons, or setting up attacks for other gang members (Factor 2015).

> ***I got passed a knife and weed as well cos I couldn't get searched. And they couldn't search me cos I was 13 when it happened, they would need my mum with me to take me down to the police station to strip-search me and they would need a female police officer so I got away with it.*** (17 year old young woman in Beckett et al 2013 p.21)

> ***Girls are also used for things like carrying guns into clubs, carrying drugs, all of these things that you're going to be put in vulnerable situations, because you're seen as that easy route … a man is going to be searched thoroughly going into a club. A pretty girl might just walk in easily.*** (Male. Firmin 2011 p. 50)

> ***Accessory to murder, definitely. Being alibi as well, that's another one. Like 90 per cent of the times if a policeman stops a lad he won't check the girl he'll just go for the lads. Say if they walked ahead, it wouldn't look like you were with them, if they don't look the same.*** (Male. Firmin 2011. P.50)

> ***So they … they use that, and I used to hold drugs, guns, anything that they'd ask me to do for a bit of money I would do it. 24-year-old female released from prison in 2014.*** (Female in Factor 2015 p.23)

Harding (2014) offers a distinctly gendered analysis of the gang social field, arguing that the male/female binary becomes a dominant mechanism of power and control, particularly in contexts where individuals have unequal access to capital. While gang structures replicate and intensify broader societal patterns of male privilege and dominance, women are often left to navigate alternative routes to influence. These avenues are frequently found within familial and social networks. The value that girls and women bring to the gang is framed in terms of relational and manipulative skills—positioning them as "in the game, but not in it to win it" (Harding, 2014, p. 225). When their actions are viewed within the context of the social field girls are seen to take on the role of 'network controllers' and thus gain status as the 'arbiters of reputation' (Harding 2014 p.234)

Although girls may occasionally engage in violence, Harding suggests that the strategic use of social skills to build and manage networks offers a more viable route to accumulating street capital—an approach they may rely on in lieu of direct violence.

5.4.6 Sexual violence/cultural and societal norms about gender and the role of women

Sexual violence within gangs is focussed on exclusively in one paper (Beckett 2013) which provides a series of accounts from males and females. Women and girls are deeply affected by the manifestations of the sexist and patriarchal world developed within street gang culture and reflected in wider patterns of sexual harm and victimisation between young people (Beckett 2013). Gang-associated sexual violence and exploitation appears highly prevalent – though widely under-reported. Beckett (2013) reports that in the sample of 96 young participants she spoke to, virtually all discussed incidents of gang associated sexual violence or exploitation – with the majority of cases being reportedly perpetrated by men. Motivations for sexual violence to some extent mirrored physical violence (power, status, revenge, retaliation and respect), some said the victim deserved it, others that it was sexually motivated. The most common response was that false accusations had been made and, in the perpetrators mind, the behaviour was acceptable.

Many chilling examples of such violence were narrated, often with a jolting air of normality. Sexual violence, which appears to go largely unreported, is an anticipated and accepted part of gang life. Half of the 75 young men who took part in this study explicitly described such acts as sexual victimisation, violence or exploitation.

> ***They just get passed around the guys, that is main their role, yeah … and then from once they've been around the circle or like the gang or whatever, then they're no longer of use and you probably won't see them girls again, coz obviously their use has been, all that they've got to offer has been given … Yeah then they'll just, they'll see the next girl or whatever, or the next group of girls and the same thing will happen over and over and over again.*** (16 year old young man in Beckett 2013 p.19)

> ***They always get treated crap, sometimes there's abuse – physical abuse, also psychological abuse, you know making a girl feel like she's worth nothing, do you know what I mean? A lot of manipulation, reverse psychology, that kind of stuff. It's like a woman is just an object and that is all she is, a trophy, nothing more, nothing less. Has no feelings, you don't need to respect her, you don't need to treat her right.*** (21 year old young woman in Beckett 2013 p.20)

> ***A lot of gang members do beat up their girlfriends a lot … My friend, one of them went in prison for it, I actually went around to his house and stopped him. {he}. gone to her house, beat her up, took bites out of her back, like big bites out of her back, I mean literally smashed her face with a frying pan … And like even, there's just so much domestic. I think it's cos the lifestyle that gang members live in, what they're used to is violence, that's all they know is violence basically, yeah. Your life becomes one big violent thing so as soon as you get hot headed all you do is some violence, so soon as they get into a bit of argument with their girlfriend or whatever it's just straight to violence, they don't think about what they're doing.*** (24 year old young man in Beckett 2013 p. 18)

Accounts ranged from everyday examples of disrespect to sexual attacks (by one man on one woman), to tales of gang rape.

> ***There must have been about more than 17 guys, they're fighting each other to get to this girl…That's because she got seen and there was rumours going around that she was going out with someone from the opposite side.*** (24-year old young man in Beckett 2013 p.20)

Sexual exploitation, it appears cannot be separated from the pervasive themes of patriarchy, power, and violent hyper masculinity that characterise many gang-involved environments (Beckett et al., 2013; Harding, 2014). In some studies the normalisation of sexual violence and the pressure to achieve sexual conquests was fanned by social media, sharing of images and through musical channels – with drill music getting particular mention (Beckett 2013). Women were widely objectified, sometimes being used as a tool to humiliate rivals. As noted by one 17-year old male:

> ***Your kind of like fucking his sister just to violate him, just to take the piss out of him really.*** (in Beckett 2013 p.7)

Accounts were also shared of young women being used as a tool in inter-gang rivalry. Some spoke of being given money by male associates to beat up females in rival gangs or of girls being kidnapped and raped.

> ***Like, they can kidnap a person's sister and threaten her and probably beat her up and that, and then make her sleep with you and that, or rape her …*** (17-year old man in Beckett 2013 p.27)

Women who were gang involved, or on the periphery of gangs were accorded status according to their sexual 'availability' – those understood to have many sexual partners were disrespected (Beckett 2013) or the validity of their associations with existing gang members. Girlfriends, 'wifey's' or 'baby-mum's' were accorded status and protection, whilst younger females, who were more likely to be in casual sexual relationships, were noted to be at the highest level of risk of exploitation. For those seen to have been overly generous with their sexual behaviours the imperative to gain consent was disregarded.

> ***He will tell her to come meet him while he's with all his friends … then she would come and then realise that the whole gang's there and most of them will probably end up having sex with her as well, if it's not his actual girl … the boy that tells the girl to come will try and convince her to have sex with all his other friends as well. He would go first and then he will just convince her after he's finished to have sex with like second, the third, the fourth boy, the fifth and it goes on and on.*** (16-year old man in Beckett 2013 p. 23)

Both males and females could be equally critical of women's behaviour, with some accounts suggesting that the victim's actions—such as flirting or placing herself in risky situations—had contributed to them being raped. There was a lack of understanding, from both males and females, of what consent meant and how it could be granted or refused (Beckett 2013).

Although less frequently reported, Beckett (2013) also highlights the sexual victimisation of young males, emphasising the complex victim–perpetrator dynamics that can arise in peer-on-peer abuse—particularly within hierarchical, group-dominated settings.

5.4.7 Violence and agency: achieving status, friendship and respect

Violence as a form of agency to achieve status, friendship and respect was discussed in 33 of the 42 papers included in this review.

In communities where legitimate opportunities for success are scarce, status becomes a critical social resource. Young people may pursue status through alternative means—such as violence, intimidation, or gang affiliation—where respect and reputation function as forms of street capital (Harding 2014). These status hierarchies are socially constructed and reinforced within the local peer culture.

Respect, status and the need to establish one's position in the social hierarchy, featured in many explanatory accounts of engagement with violence (and are closely linked to themes of masculine performativity and belonging, Section 5.2.5) (Harris 2011, Harland 2010, Holligan 2015, Barker 2025, Hesketh 2018, Barry 2013). Willingness to use violence to protect territory or peers was central to acquiring group status. Pressure (both interpersonal but also collective environmental and community pressures) to take part in violent acts was pervasive – both on the street and in residential or institutional settings (Shaw 2013, Holligan & Deuchar, 2015).

Reasons for violence in group settings alternately centred around: establishing oneself in the 'pecking order'; securing status through displays of masculine posturing (described as performative); securing protection against hostile factions; for security; for identity and friendship; to control drug territories, frightening off the competition and securing material wealth (Harding 2014, Harding 2020, Deuchar 2011, Holligan 2015, Bakkali 2019, Smeaton 2009). Similar patterns of coercion and control were identified in aggressive peer groups in children's residential homes (Barter 2004) as in street gangs.

Violent behaviour in such groups was normalised:

> ***There's not really any point being in a young team if you're not going to go out and fight or do anything.*** (15-year-old male. Barry p.353)

These needs are often met not just by being part of a group, but through the shared experience of violent conflict with other groups. Some accounts alluded to the process of 'deindividualization' where individuals put on hold their established cognitive and moral constraints –finding ways to justify acts that they would in other contexts view as reprehensible (Palasinski and Riggs 2012, Hesketh 2018). Group violence may support this mindset by providing a level of anonymity – with the crowd masking individual responsibility. Masked faces and hoodies, the traditional dress of the street gang – goes further towards separating the individual from the actions of the group (Hesketh 2018). Individualisation supports a greater level of freedom from personal responsibility (Hesketh, 2018). Casting oneself as having 'got in with the wrong group' or having been a victim of circumstance was common and a further abrogation of personal responsibility.

The use of violence often followed the logic that engaging in behaviours perceived as masculine and 'hard' would secure affiliation and bonding to a social group (Harris 2011, Holligan 2017, Hesketh 2018, Gunter 2008).

Violence may present as an opportunity to distinguish yourself, to achieve recognition, to carve out local status (Fraser 2013). Matza's (2018) concept of 'drift' is employed to explain how lack of commitment to mainstream values can sway those (non-violent) young people who normally occupied central ground, towards the financial incentives of easy money and associated crime (Gunter 2008).

> ***You want tae make a name for yourself. Ye don't want tae be jist anyb'dae. Ye don't jist want tae be wan ae these faces in a crowd. Robert: It's aw about reputation. Aw gang fighting. There's nothing in it anyway, except for reputation. Jist so some people will say 'he's crazy' an that.*** (Michael in Fraser 2013 p. 981)

> ***Daz: In every single scheme, there's always wan person who everyb'dae 'hinks is the gemmiest an aw that. AF: So there's always one person you respect more than everyone else. Dylan: Aye. Gemmer, bolder. AF: What's does a gemmie mean? Dylan: You wouldnae run. CM: Jist someb'dae ye wouldnae mess wi'.*** (Fraser 2013 p. 981)

Some claimed that in some places violence could be entered into simply for reputational rather than transactional aims (Harding 2020, Gunter 2008). When asked what 'badness' and 'being on the road' looks like, Mackie's response gives an insight into the constant violent posturing to protect territory and control transactions which may lead to both financial and reputational gain:

> ***It's about juggling and runnings, we do whatever ennit. Shotting ….we can't have no little pussy holes thinking they can take liberties. Man's supposed to be shook [scared] when they see us on the endz.*** (Mackie in Gunter 2008 p.361)

Street capital (Harding 2014), contributes to status and acceptance and could be earned through a number of routes including money, clothes, behaviours, music as well as knowledge and the ability to assess risk (Harding 2020, Smeaton 2009). Authenticity was particularly important to some and was characterised by having experienced poverty and deprivation. It is critical to be recognised by peers as an 'authentic player in the game' (Harding 2020). In urban street gangs Harding (2020) notes how authenticity is enhanced by full engagement with the 'rules of the game' – demonstrating acts of hypermasculinity and carrying knives – 'fakery' is to be guarded against. Those adopting the lifestyle just to look cool and posture, when there was no financial need, were held with contempt (Barker 2025).

> ***In this day and age, a lot of youts –they see other men – and they decide they want to be like my man – so they start peeing on the walls – they start saying that they're on to this area – cos my man's come to this area and they're from his area – they start maybe selling drugs – this and that – they're just trying to be in with what's cool. Are you getting me? Obviously there are certain men that are circumstantial – I'm not going to lie – certain guys are circumstantial. The way those guys start their lives, from the very beginning – it's a bit messy innit –***

> ***they never have the greatest start in life. Maybe they was born into it – maybe their dad was a gang member or even their mum sometimes as well. You get me? Sometimes their mums are just maybe a crackhead or something … You get me? There are certain people who just didn't get a chance to see another life. They was in it from the beginning.*** (Tyrone, South East in Barker 2025)

Tyrone (above) demonstrates the distinction was made between someone who entered into 'road life' due to their underlying circumstances and those who were better off but were seduced by image or lifestyle. Violence was a currency, a primitive form of justice, that was understood and accepted as a normal part of life on the road.

> ***Every man thinks they have something to prove … say this guy wanted to think he's hard, he's a big bad man, so he's gonna try and prove it to his friends, isn't he? So he's gonna go on and do something that his friends will be like "yeah, yeah, yeah".*** (Peterborough, Black Male, 18 years, in Bannister 2012 p. 12)

Violence is like nature, if you know what I mean, because you win some, you lose some; you get put down and then back up, live and fight another day. (Smeaton 2009 p.55)

> ***When I fought … never really know them (the opponents) … when I stabbed … one o' their top boys a while back, I thought fuck sake man when the blade went in, but then I was pure like fuck it man, afterwards … wid have been him or me.*** (Dean in Holligan & McLean, 2018, p. 11)

Tests of loyalty/initiation

Prospective gang members are sometimes put through acts of initiation. These are challenges, such as carrying weapons (discussed in Section 5.4.3), or enduring physical harm, were sometimes part of the process of joining gangs and successful negotiation of such challenges accrued immediate status. Indeed, carrying weapons is a central part of the construction of hyper-masculinities and the legitimisation of violence. Toughness is repeatedly tested and needs to be constantly reaffirmed. Tests of loyalty may involve a series of acts including the carrying of weapons and execution of violent acts:

> ***Each gang member, yeah, has a task to do before they get in the gang – a skill – so they (other gang members) know they can be trusted. What they (other gang members) wanted me to do in our gang is one of the gang members shoot me with a 2:2 air rifle. I stood up, held me arms out and he shot me … in the arm with a 2:2 air rifle. … It doesn't hurt; pain is the game, if you know what I mean. … I've done many a task … I've been shot, I've done battering people, know what I mean? … rob(bing) houses, go smash someone in the jaw … batter someone, take anything off them, street robbery.*** (Smeaton 2009 p.62)

Friendships and allegiances

Some declared that gang membership and embracing violence was a doorway to making friends and creating a sense of family (see Section and 5.3.4 and 5.4.5 for more discussion of how violence is used to secure friendships and status within a group). Yet, as competition increases and vying for position intensifies, so do the potential risks (Harding 2020). Where opportunities to build positive identity among peers were limited, establishing a strong male identity or building acclaim as a 'fighter' could lead to respect of male peers and create an allure to attract females.

Pressures of constantly re-establishing status and rank

Whilst some shrugged off the pressures connected to the pursuit of status as being something you had to accept without fuss, others recognised the harm or that to walk away from a fight ran the risk of abuse and being labelled as weak. There was an understanding that respect was not guaranteed into perpetuity, maintaining status as a fighter necessitated ongoing demonstrations of 'hardness'.

> ***P: I fight nearly every day now you know. R: What's that like for you? P: Its bollocks, like it's horrible. R: Why is it horrible? … you walk from a fight you get called a faggot. You get called a shitbag and whatever else.*** (Rob in Crowther 2013 p. 72)

> ***Yeah well it's obvious isn't it lad, if you don't fight back then fucking hell you're just going to get terrorised for-like-ever.*** (Oli in Crowther 2013 p. 72)

> ***P: Just you get people walking up to you that you don't even know just asking you for a fight. R: And why can't you say no? P: It's just because . . . I just wouldn't say no.*** (Tom in Crowther 2013)

The imperative to assert rank through violent acts was demonstrated in this account from Ben who talks of an incident when a fellow gang member was threatening to stab him in the neck. Determined to prove himself to be 'the main man', Ben describes how:

> ***I wanted to show people that he isn't what he makes out to be … so I went downstairs, I got like a kitchen knife and I started sticking it in his leg and then I started stomping on him… I just wanted to like, put him down a bit and show others that he isn't as big as what he makes out, because I knew he wasn't but nobody else did, and I wanted them to see all that.*** (Thurston 2023 p. 126)

As gangs evolve into deeper levels of criminal involvement this strengthens the group identity and cohesiveness. Commitment to secrecy grows more entrenched and emphasises the need for loyalty and the protection of gang members from authority figures (Harris 2011). Street gangs and football firms display similar characteristics where marginalisation leads to the union of disenfranchised individuals who build protective, often anti-social group defences to forge and maintain identity and status. In Northern Ireland, the association between religious identity and the threat of violence remains strong with young people growing up in communities polarised by long standing divisions. Strong paramilitary influences in certain communities leave young adolescent males with a sense of disconnection (Hansson 2006, Harland 2010). Sectarian divisions, determined by ethnic, nationalist and religious sensibilities contribute to paralysis and fragmentation as well as often intense territoriality (Holligan 2015) continuing the normalisation of violence from communities and families, extending from one generation to another.

Despite accounts of serious injury, the risks of association with violent groups were generally understood. Here a young member of a football 'firm' recounts an experience of being launched into an aggressive mob:

> ***You might be lucky one day, you might not. … I was quite unlucky one time. I was in first, it was my turn to be in first, I was sixteen, and I ran to jump up at the top boy who was standing right in front of me and do a flying kick, right, and I completely missed it, right, and he pulled me into the whole crowd and put to the ground. I was kicked up and down and I was unconscious … I woke up in the boozer two hours later and I was like 'how did I get here?' Me pal was like 'you got booted to fuck, you got booted to fuck.*** (Smeaton 2009 p.59)

And here Aidan describes a fight arranged on social media, between Aidan and an opposing gang member who was showing disrespect towards Aidan's gang:

> ***Everyone was round in a big circle, all hyped up like; I thought they were all gonna jump in and join in. At this kind of fight, anything can happen. I smashed the Chinese kid (the one that wanted to fight Aidan) in the face and there was blood everywhere. … My whole top was covered in blood. … One of my mates pulled me out of the toilets to get me out of the way but this guy (who stabbed Aidan) is coming at me, for me, so I jump up and kick him in the chest and then crack him in the face again. This big Black guy came up and said 'I'm gonna fuck you up for what you've just done'. And I was like, in my head 'I've just had two fights, do I need to have another one?' so I just picked a brick up of the floor and was like come on then.*** (Smeaton 2009, p.46)

Strategies within gangs to assert authority were generally understood, involving gradations of retribution. If an aggrieved individual was unable to reciprocate directly then other family members or loved ones were used as weapons.

> ***If they can't get you, and they know that they can't get you they're moving on to the next thing that's closest to you, your family. If they hurt one of your family members that's the only way without physically hurting you, that they can hurt you.'*** (Joshua, African Caribbean, male, 14–17 in Young 2013 p. 49)

Yet, even for those who participated in extreme brutality there was a moral code of the street – the rules of which were understood by opposing gangs (Holligan 2015, Barter 2004) – whilst some violence was seen to be justified, there were unwritten rules determining actions which were out of bounds – such as harming family members not directly involved in gang life (Young 2013).

> ***We fight to let them know we are not bams, it's respect, not reputation. To let them know we are not going to sit there and take their shit. So like if they come into our scheme you're going to get chopped. We got a bit of a name for ourselves. You had to do it to prove to them you cannot walk through our scheme as we cannot your scheme. Tough shit it's a public highway. We don't go about chopping up civilians unless they try to draw dirty looks? All my troops stay in the Valley.*** (Holligan 2015 p. 132)

Rules of conduct, sometimes referred to as a 'culture of honour' exist across a variety of different settings. At the heart of these systems of informal rule setting is a form of loyalty related to the search for respect and the contingent levels of protection this confers (Gunter 2008).

> ***I've got friends that have created serious violence and not once been touched in their lives … like I got stabbed so bro went over and kicked it or he got stabbed so I went over and whatever. It's nothing to do with what happened to me it's just our moral code, 'you can't do that to my brother', you feel me…*** (User Voice 2023 p.14)

Accounts of group violence were often contradictory, with respondents both expressing regret at the lack of reason for certain acts, whilst, at the same time, prioritising the reputation of and loyalty to the gang beyond their personal safety.

> ***They'll fight and they'll fight for their territory or their reputation cos' you've got to have reputation in a gang. … If you take my gang, for instance, we need to obviously prove to other gangs that we ain't no pussy hole and we ain't gonna take no shit."*** (Smeaton 2009 p.47)

Yet, whilst it was important to be seen within the peer group to be defending your own turf and reputation there was recognition that such behaviours need to be hidden from outside observers:

> ***Yeah. Most mans cover up [their faces] on Insta or Shapchat cos they don't want next mans peepin' at them. If shit goes off, like mans call you out … then you don't want mandem knowing your face … the feds [police], they be peeping too …*** (King 2023 p.1054)

Here, Lee explains why he had a tendency, when he was younger, to 'intentionally bang a goth' as they went by, giving an illuminating insight into the importance of fashion, looks, image and appearance.

> ***I think it's 'cos they were a bit different. … I class myself as a Chav. I wear all the Burberry gear and all that. I still am (a Chav) to an extent but I'm not a nasty cunt any more. I've calmed down a lot since then. I think it was just 'cos they look different, they acted different; they acted like they were scared of you all the time so you thought 'right, you're scared of me so I'll give you reason to be scared of me.' Not only that, I knew they always had hash on them so I was like 'give us your hash, give us your mobile phone'. That's how we had a good time.*** (Smeaton 2009 p.60)

Many CYP admitted to feeling lost in the pursuit of friends and a stable identity and the challenges of finding secure relationships were often reflected upon.

> ***If you are a scally lad and you're in a firm like that, you have not got a mate. You may think he is your mate, but you have not got a mate, they're all dirty horrible scum, we are all horrible people.*** (Hesketh 2018 p.142)

> ***I wanted to become one of the boys because that's the big thing around where I live, and it's the only thing. There is nothing else.*** (Frankie, 19 years in Hesketh 2018 p.137)

5.4.8 Violence to counter boredom and banality

Violence to counter boredom and banality was discussed in 17 of the 42 papers included in this review. In communities marked by deprivation, limited recreational infrastructure, and a lack of meaningful opportunities, boredom can become a chronic condition.

One reason cited by young people for participating in violent inter-group conflict was the search for something to do – a means of alleviating feelings of social suffering. Violence and vandalism represented a distraction – with the anticipation of the risk adding to the adrenalin rush (Deuchar 2010, Hansson, Barry 2013, Barker 2025, Bannister 2012, Hesketh 2018). The excitement of finding activities to break the mental anguish and chronic banality of marginalisation has been identified by a number of scholars (Hesketh 2018, Harding 2020, Barker 2025).

The element of excitement, produced from the crowd, appeared similar across different types of violent grouping (football crowds, street gangs or sectarian groupings). Whilst the initial response to finding oneself within an aggressive gathering was often terror – this was quickly replaced by the excitement of being in the thick of action and feeling that they were an essential part of a team.

> ***My first time was X (name of the opposing football firm). I was about fourteen when I got my first proper scrap. I shat myself, I really did 'cos they put me on with about six big boys. There was about twenty of us and more of them and I thought 'this is suicide, it really is'. I was about the youngest there. Anyway, I ended up having a bottle put over the top of me head and I had to go to hospital and have stitches on the top of my head. … I couldn't resist the buzz; it was a great buzz for a laddie of that age; you've never seen anything like this and then – bam! You're right slap bang in the middle of it all and it's just like you wanna just go for it and you don't want to show anybody you're a pussy, know what I mean? You're with all these older guys and you don't want to fanny about. There were a couple of my cousins there and I didn't want to let them down. They're like: 'we're proud of you son; you done well.*** (Smeaton, 2009, p. 58)

> ***If it's boring, then people just start fights don't they!*** (Glasgow, White Male, 15 years old) Bannister 2012 p.13

> ***The adrenalin rush, that's what you click onto as well … once you get to doing the stuff (fighting), then you start getting a buzz out of it and then you start getting an adrenalin rush from it and you want to do it again and again. It's like taking drugs, but then … yeah, it's like that.*** (Peterborough, White Male, 16 years, in Bannister 2012 p.13)

> ***"Crazy mate, you just go mental and you run into another scheme and you get caught and get battered and you batter them and it's brilliant.*** (Glasgow, White Male, 13 years old, from Bannister 2012 p.13)

> ***If there were more things in the community for us to do, if they built like a community centre … rather than go out and batter random people, but there's no, there's nothing for us to do.*** (15-year-old female in Barry 2013 p.359)

> ***I like fighting, it's good craic (fun). I don't know why. It gets the adrenaline going and you try and build a reputation. Starting fights is just something I do when I'm bored. I like to talk about fights I've been in—it gets me excited and I go looking for a fight.*** (Harland 2011 p.420)

The concept of edge-work is used in the literature to describe behaviours of voluntary risk-taking where individuals engage in activities that push the boundaries between order and chaos, life and death, or control and loss of control.

Edgework is seen to be a positive choice to escape a state of isolation and marginalisation – offering excitement, empowerment and providing a sense of being alive (Hesketh 2018, Barker 2025, Harris 2011).

Some young people were unable to clearly articulate a reason for the violence they had perpetrated:

> ***Yeah, for nothing but it escalates when you've tried to stab him and he's tried to stab you and you've tried to shoot him and he's tried to shoot you, doesn't matter what it's about no more it's just on.*** (User Voice 2023 p.16)

5.4.9 Progression into SYV

Progression from being on the periphery of SYV (or at risk) to becoming fully involved is discussed in 14 of the 42 papers included in the review.

An emerging narrative of 'us' versus 'them' was evident. Young people who felt excluded from mainstream opportunities developed a sense of solidarity with their similarly marginalised peers. Progression up the gang hierarchies brought with it greater awareness of the financial goals, where big money and big deals were facilitated with more premeditated and organised forms of violence. The journey from stealing small amounts to fund a weed habit, to becoming entrenched in more formal gang mechanisms, with deeper, more menacing undercurrents of violence, was commonly recounted.

> ***Criminal life started off growing up with the elders, hanging around with the elders getting up to no good. I was growing up in the area (Toxteth) surrounded by drugs, criminal activity, and groups. You may call it groups, we call it boys or youngers; we call it that for a reason like if something happened, they are there for you. We all grew up with the elders, the 'Mandra' we call it. I was a younger I wanted to learn from the elders. Started doing messages for them, dropping things off on my bike. Elders are the older lads; well adults say early to late twenties to forties. They don't hang around the street obviously because they are running shall we say businesses but us youngers help them make their money and they share their experiences with us. Then when we become elders when we reach their age and have kids, we get a share or know what to do ourselves. We are introduced to people and the trust grows.*** (Tukrit, 22 years in Hesketh 2018)

An attempt to take over a drugs line is a high-risk business:

> ***If they try to take over, then obviously it's gonna get sticky innit. We're not gonna sit here, you have to retaliate and it comes at a price. One time maybe they run off, then the next time someone could end up dead, stabbed, because these days you get a lot of young youths that you see carrying shanks and that. And then you've got adrenaline and everything, they will not think about what they're doing.*** (Boss, 24 years in Harding 2020 p.43)

Debt-bondage is used (Liddle and Harding 2022, Harding 2020, User Voice 2011) as a form of coercion in which individuals are trapped in ongoing criminal exploitation through the belief that they owe money to the gang or individual controlling them – and is a way that those who are most vulnerable are actively pulled into gangs and forced to participate in increasingly violent activities. This model often follows a pattern in which a CYP is given drugs or money up front, which is later taken from them—frequently through a staged robbery. As a result, the CYP is thrown into debt and forced to continue their involvement until the debt is repaid. Debt-bondage not only increases the risk to the young person but also makes them more vulnerable to being forced into situations where they are required to use or perpetrate violence (Liddle & Harding, 2022).

> ***I reckon he got me robbed so I'd work for him more and more and more, you know what I mean? Like, yo, you're in debt now. You're not getting paid innit. (Male, 18, who was 14 at the time of the incident)*** (User Voice, 2023 p.9)

5.4.10 Victim/perpetrator: the blurred line

The blurred line between being a victim or perpetrator of SYV are discussed in 8 out of the 42 papers included in this review. The transition from low-level antisocial behaviour to serious violence is often influenced by cumulative community experiences—exposure to violence, peer dynamics, lack of prosocial role models, and cycles of retaliation. Local environments may provide the conditions for this progression through normalization, desensitization, and embedded pathways into criminal networks.

There is a blurred line between reports of being a victim of both sexual and physical violence, and becoming a perpetrator, with both young men and women experiencing the progression and overlap between both states (Beckett 2013, Crowther 2013, Firmin 2011, Smeaton 2009, Liddle and Harding 2022). This blurring was also evident in street violence, where it was often unclear whether violence was used defensively or initiated as aggression, and within more formal gang structures, where young people might be violently coerced into acting as accomplices before later maturing into operatives who oversee younger recruits in drug carrying and violent acts.

> ***Like if I was round the shops yeah and someone come up to me yeah I'd know for a fact that I've got 5 seconds for me to hit him – or if it's longer than that – me and him talking then it's going . . . he's going to end up cracking me.*** (Sean, in Crowther 2023, p.69)

Many narratives given in the review suggest that violence begets violence and it was often unclear at what point the transition from being a victim to a perpetrator was crossed. By perceiving themselves as victims of circumstance CYP took on the mantle of victimhood – imagining themselves in a fight against a brutal external environment where a myriad of structural and contextual factors emasculated them and robbed them of agency (Young 2009).

5.5 Structural and systemic-level influences

5.5.1 Structural inequities

Structural inequity and its relationship to SYV is discussed in 19 of the 42 papers included in this review.

Several authors argue that it is exclusion by mainstream society that pushes young people to develop their own codes, rules, and narratives (see for example Holligan 2017, Barker 2025, Harding 2020, Bakkali 2019.). The impact and tensions arising from a complex overlap of deprivation, isolation, and the failure of services to offer adequate support lead to class- and race-based stigma and discrimination. Those who are already marginalised are often compelled to erect protective barriers. Violence is used as a means of defence against the pervasive sense of exclusion from the opportunities and advantages associated with mainstream society (Barker 2025, Holligan 2015). Some study authors suggest that constructing a robust, secure identity was more accessible in a time before the rise of social media and the decline of blue-collar employment (Bakkali 2019; Holligan 2015). Identity is negotiated across all levels of society and becomes increasingly problematic amid conflicting pressures and the opposing values of excitement, protection, opportunity, and respect (Hesketh 2018).

The lack of legitimate opportunities exacerbated by growing structural inequities has seen young people grow increasingly detached from civic structures and grow less confident that actions they take will impact positively on outcomes (Bakkali 2019). Options to earn money legitimately are constrained and replaced with criminal activities – akin to Hesketh's (2018) notion of the 'deviant entrepreneur' (see Section 5.2.6). Violence is integral to the success of this model.

The severely limited choices available to many children and young people (CYP) who turn to violence are rarely acknowledged (Barry 2013). At the same time, the contradictions and perceived hypocrisy within society intensify what Bakkali (2019) calls *'munpain'*—a psychosocial concept that describes the deep distress and frustration caused by structural forms of violence embedded within contemporary society.

The tenuous frameworks produced to help make sense of lives, blighted by blatant inequity, can be threatened by the perception that mainstream society is looking on, demeaning the search for identity. Violent behaviour, normalised in many participants who talked in these studies, is characterised by the often contradictory expressions of both vulnerability and brash posturing. As Holligan (2017) asserts here the use of violence by young people on the street is intended to:

> ***Engender paranoia in a psychic world that is unsettled, confrontational and yet inclined towards camaraderie. Their agency is expressed in their mode of resistance to the threats and dangers they construct as ever-present, but that wary temperament shifts them towards a marginalised identity which their weapon-carrying cements.*** Holligan 2017 p. 150

Multiple study authors discuss the wider shifting socio-economic and political environment as contributory factors and results of structural inequities as they relate to CYP involvement in SYV. Holligan 2017 asserts that the collapse of 'solid modernity' and its replacement by the politics of divisive capitalism with growing inequalities, pressures on services, drug crime and high immigration has fractured the traditional social space and created a loss of identity where status has to be constantly reasserted and reproduced. Traditional opportunities to follow previous generations into non-skilled, industrial, blue-collar employment have disappeared and in its place the route to prove manhood is no longer so clearly visible. In its place some adopt violent behaviours in an effort to establish masculine identity (Hesketh and Robinson 2019).

The post-industrial world means work identity may be harder to achieve for those lacking qualifications – and to counter the sense of emasculation, chronic lack of self-esteem and lack of meaningful place, some young men embrace a violent protest masculinity. The political ambitions of New Labour and later Conservative-led governments, to raise aspirations in schools, have been enacted against a backdrop of rising inequality which offers a sense of 'cruel optimism' (Bakkali 2019). Promises of success are often realised by those whose journey through childhood and education is smooth, but for the most marginalised—those who struggle to meet societal expectations—these promises become a form of cruel optimism (Bakkali 2019), fostering not hope but a deep sense of betrayal and suspicion. Young people seduced by the possibilities offered by the promises of contemporary society, *"struggle to find the material bases to actualise these aspirational selfhoods, exposing them to the cruel optimism of neoliberal individualism."* (Bakkali 2019 p. 13)

5.5.2 Criminal Justice System, Policing & Prisons

Perceptions of the police and the criminal justice system are discussed in 15 of the 42 papers included in this review. The criminal justice system was seen to reinforce structural inequities through perceived discrimination and racism and accounts of the police service were exclusively negative. Young people reported not being assisted by the police when they sought help – or singled out and stereotyped as trouble makers because of where they lived or how they looked (User Voice 2023, Traynor 2019).

> ***"The police have never tried to keep me safe in my opinion. I've actually been through experiences where the police have picked me up under false pretences of arrest then dropped me into the opposing gang area, yeah, the police at no time have kept me or my friends safe."*** (User Voice p.30)

Many respondents spoke of the challenges of early criminalisation and how police records, received through early brushes with the law, could set them on a path from which it was hard to recover.

> ***"What? I'm going to go home {from prison} sign on get £5 to £6 a week? I can't live on that, let me look for employment. Let me be free. Don't mollycoddle me when you don't know how to mollycoddle."*** (Male, 22. User Voice 2023, p.28)

> ***"I'm not able to get employed, not to get paid employment without contacting your supervising officer, but when you contact your supervising officer they're like 'nah, we need you to sign on, we need your risk lowered'."*** (Male, 24, User Voice 2023, p.30)

The police, whose role it is in society to help maintain law and order, were generally referred to with disdain. They were frequently accused of harassment, discrimination and being ineffective in the role of protecting and maintaining safe localities (Harding 2020, Harland 2010. King 2023, Palasinski and Riggs 2012). Some CYP noted the absence of police and the sense that keeping the order and maintaining the status quo had to be taken up at the level of the citizen on the street. In cases where there was police presence it was viewed with mistrust. Police were seen to be obstacles put in the paths of young people rather than a presence that brought about justice, protection and neighbourhood safety.

> ***Azeez: Well, aint no man looking after me except for me! Aint no police giving a shit. I look after myself and if that means being backed up then, whatever […] Aint no-one for people like us.*** (King 2023 p. 1058)

> ***The police don't let you have fun. They want to stop you doing everything. You can't even sit in the park. They stop and ask you for your name and address.*** (Harland 2010 p.425)

Failure to provide protection extends further than just criminal justice and is also mentioned in relation to services such as schools and health (see Section 5.5.3 and 5.5.4) Inequities in the way young people are treated at broad system levels contribute to the logic that self-defence is both morally and ethically justified (Palasinski and Riggs 2012). Observations and experiences of extreme inequities and injustices conspire to create a climate where weapon carrying is viewed as a legitimate response to a society failing to protect those most in need.

5.5.3 Education systems

Experiences of school and the potential impact of this on SYV is discussed in 14 of the 42 papers included in this review. Studies that explored educational themes with CYP have found that many described not seeing the relevance of school alongside experiences of unaddressed bullying within the school environment, leading to their disengagement with school.

> ***School was something that taught me how to read and write. Once that was out of the way it became a noose around my neck that's all. I didn't want to be there, the lads I hung around with didn't want to be there and the teachers didn't want us to be there.*** (Hesketh 2018 p.133)

> ***I used to think, maybe maths, maths would help me, but all this stuff like English, I was like I don't need to know this 'cause this isn't gonna help me, get through, erm my man up the street that every time I come back from school he's trying to take my phone.*** (Bakkali 2019 p.13)

> ***I was bullied at school … that's why I get angry … I have been hit … I was small, and that … and one day it built up in my head that bullying like from year 5 until say year 9 all the way through, it just built up and I just wanted to calm down … My attendance was about 75% sometimes 80 to 95%. Qualification wise, I wasn't good at that … I turned into the class clown … At year ten, I tried to knuckle down. I could not do my GCSEs because I got kicked out because I wrote "fuck off" all over the exam papers.*** (Paul, 19 years in Hesketh 2018 p.132)

Some studies noted CYP may have had learning difficulties that were not recognised nor supported in schools, contributing to their isolation and exclusion.

> ***I couldn't do it. I just used to get up. I'd do about five minutes of work, and I'd get up and get into a fight with someone. I don't know, it's just completely hard for me to even concentrate on what I'm doing.*** (Adam in Young 2009 p.59)

> ***I know I've got [mental health] problems. I was proper naughty at school and that got me excluded … but I'm not diagnosed.. Me mam was an alcoholic and she never took me to the doctor – I've only just got put on the list …*** (Franklin, North West in Barker 2025)

There were perceptions that boys who do not do well in school have fewer options that girls, leading to boys feeling they

need to seek alternatives. Fear of not being able to survive within the school system, compounded by lack of self-esteem, have at times resulted in the adoption of behavioural strategies built on bullying and victimising others.

> ***I was a bad lad in school if you know what I mean … I used to do things to kids. I used to pick on a few kids quite a bit, but I was a little dwarf thing with an odd ear and a tiny body. I was a little tramp; I had dirt behind my neck and everything. So, I thought if I go to school, I am going to get victimised here, so I made as many people as possible fear me. It was like getting them to do this and that just intimidating them … make them not skit me which I was quite successful at actually! … I do regret what I did in school; I should have spent more attention in school. I made a lot of people in school suffer so that probably affected them*** (Tony, 25 years in Hesketh 2018 p.132)

School experiences for most respondents in this review were negative, with many children either excluded or emerging with few or no qualifications (Barker 2025, Bakkali 2019, Gunter 2008, Young 2013). A number of CYP remarked on what they saw as the poor outcomes gained from attending college: *'Why should I go to college when I can get so much money on the streets?' (Irwin-Rogers 2018 p.474).* The content of the curriculum was frequently held up as irrelevant, with pressures on the academic curriculum meaning there was little room to offer practical life skills, which would have been of value in the transition to independence and adulthood. Increasing disaffection meant the option to drop out of school and 'go solo' was often considered a viable course of action (Gunter 2008). School exclusion was experienced by significant numbers of young people in this review –being replaced, in some accounts, by a descent into uncertainty, drug dealing, robbery and violence (Gunter 2008, Hesketh 2018, Barker 2025).

5.5.4 Social Services, Welfare and Care system

Experiences of social services, welfare and care system and their potential impact on SYV are discussed in 9 of 42 papers included in this review.

For some young people the sense that they were presented with no other choice than resort to violence, was overtly linked to contextual or structural violence inflicted on them either by family or when in care. This respondent describes his urgent need to escape when care staff tried to restrain him:

> ***I found it difficult 'cos I wasnae used to the staff putting the holds on me and restraining me. And that's when I started picking up all those assault charges. … I'd struggle and go off me nut and get done for assault. They'd do me for assault for the stupidest things like one time I kicked open a door and they did me for that.*** (Barry in Smeaton 2009 p. 48)

Young people in care lack continuous family relationships as well as opportunity, resulting in a greater likelihood of involvement in the criminal justice system (Barry 2013). Residential care can exacerbate relational challenges between residents and staff leading sometimes to the use of inappropriate restraints from staff (Smeaton, 2009). Those taken into care following family break down voiced a sense of despair and loss of hope. In the face of the brutality that they have confronted, gangs and criminality appear as a rational choice.

> ***Once you are in care, you don't really care and you think 'well, I'm already here, nothing else can happen now'. I just kept on doing it, robbing places and all that.*** (Barry, 2013, p. 353)

In a number of cases where safeguarding concerns were identified, CYP were placed into care by social services (User Voice 2023). However, some respondents felt that the alternative support offered was inappropriate or inadequate. Accounts included reports of violence occurring within care homes, involving both peers and, in some instances, staff (User Voice 2023). These settings were not always perceived as safe or supportive, and for some young people, experiences within care were described as contributing to further involvement in criminal or violent behaviour. In certain narratives, CYP framed their own use of violence as a reaction to the harm or neglect they experienced from individuals tasked with their care.

For those living in institutional settings, such as care homes, the sense of powerlessness about their treatment provoked

a deep and violent response, even for relatively minor transgressions. CYP vying for power resort to aggression in an effort to regain control over their lives. For example, Claude describes the strategy he used to get his stolen cigarettes off another resident:

> ***I tied a piece of rope round their neck and kept on pulling it until they gave me my fags back … and they actually did … it was actually a good method.*** (Claude, 14 years in Barter 2004 p.71)

Similarly, Jane who found herself in court for attacking a resident who had called her names.

> ***Like fucking being up in court over assault 'cause some girl walked past me and called me a 'scouse slapper'… so I just twatted her … don't like being called names when I'm not them.*** (Jane, aged 15 in Barter 2004 p.35).

The accounts chime with Section 5.2.7 where violence is discussed as a means of retaliation – or something used to counter a social injustice. Aggression in institutional settings becomes a normative and habitual response to the perception of abundant inequity and the sense of being taken advantage of. James described how he received his first custodial sentence at the age of fourteen for assaulting a member of staff in a residential placement, who he felt was unfairly restraining another resident:

> ***He were restraining this lad on the floor, and this lad said, 'Get off me', and he wouldn't get off him, so I ran up to him, I pushed him off and my knee hit him in the nose and I broke his nose … I got six months for that.*** (Shaw 2013 p.1833)

5.5.5 Race and ethnicity

Bonding and bridging social capital (Putnam, 2000) play an important role in shaping the inclusion and exclusion of racially minoritised groups. Bonding capital refers to strong ties within close-knit networks, offering emotional support and belonging, while bridging capital connects individuals to wider social groups and opportunities. Racialisation and systemic racism are key forces limiting access to bridging capital: young people from minority ethnic groups frequently encounter discrimination, stereotyping, and exclusion, which compound structural inequalities such as poverty, housing insecurity, and under-resourced services. Refugee status can heighten these barriers by making individuals more visible as "outsiders" (Harland, 2011) and by shaping how they navigate territorial or sectarian dynamics within host communities, but these dynamics are inseparable from broader racialised structures of marginalisation. Research cautions against framing exclusion as a product of cultural difference or self-segregation, as such narratives obscure systemic inequities and reinforce harmful stereotypes (Cogburn, 2019). For example, young Black people involved in gangs reported being persistently stereotyped as hostile or aggressive (Gunter, 2008; Deuchar, 2011), limiting opportunities to build bridging connections and reinforcing cycles of exclusion. Addressing these barriers requires a critical focus on racism and structural inequality, with refugee status understood as one of several intersecting axes of disadvantage.

> ***I ain't naming no names or nuttin' but, you know what I hate … it's people putting us all in the same bracket like, I hate that … we ain't all the same, all shady and up to no good. It bugs me when they [people] see us on the [street] corner and they start getting all didgy and holding their bags, or they go on like we're all shotting [dealing drugs]. Just pure negativity when it comes to Black youths, but like I said when you really check it me and them lot [Arms House Crew] we ain't the same. I'm going college, taking my driving lessons, they're on road the only thing they know is badness, that shit ain't for me.*** (Mikey in Gunter 2008 p. 357)

> ***People might have a bad opinion about people who are Black*** (Deuchar 2011 p.679. Male immigrant in Glasgow)

> ***Sometimes you'd get slagged or whatever for your accent and you don't really feel like you want to belong in a way and even if you do you don't feel like you belong with the right people*** (Deuchar 2011, p. 679. female immigrant Glasgow).

Institutional racism was remarked on in a number of papers – being picked on by police and teachers because of ethnicity (Gunter 2008, Barker 2025, Deuchar 2011, Harland 2011, Hesketh 2018). Racism from peers, both verbal and physical aggression was also mentioned (Gunter 2008, Deuchar 2011, Harland 2011, Hesketh 2018). Racial prejudice experienced by minoritised groups could lead to the strengthening of ethnic-minority 'in-groups' – or for people from ethnic minorities to seek out White allies (Deuchar 2011).

> ***If you don't have a White friend they'll start annoying you … but you see if you've got a White friend, they'll like be nice to you*** (Deuchar 2011 p.680 female immigrant).

5.5.6 The role of social media

At a structural level, social and national media play a significant role in shaping the contexts in which SYV occurs. Social media, through apps such as Snapchat, were mentioned by young people as fuelling conflict through antagonistic posts or the presentation of unachievable fantasy lifestyles (Barker 2025, Holligan 2018, King 2023, Harding and Liddle 2022). For many CYP, including those involved in gangs, social media is embedded in daily life and functions as a powerful tool for self-promotion, gang branding, and economic activity such as drug sales (Liddle and Harding 2022). It also serves as a mechanism for recruitment, surveillance, blackmail, and the policing of loyalty. Social media platforms enable the rapid circulation of images and narratives that reinforce a narrow ideal of masculinity—one that prioritises dominance, toughness, and status. This creates pressure for young men to perform a hyper-masculine identity online, which may not only be at odds with their offline reality, but also deeply entrench cycles of violence and retaliation. As one young person put it, "they're constantly having to keep up a persona that they show on social media amongst each other," (Liddle and Harding 2022 p.57) indicating the performative and often performatively violent demands of maintaining credibility online.

5.6 Desistance

Desistance from SYV was directly discussed in 18 of the 42 papers included in this review.

Points of transition out of violence are gradual and are dependent on a cognitive element of actively wanting to find a way out of violent activities (Harris 2011). Clear ambitions, with active attempts to realise career goals were seen as mechanisms for desistance from violence (for example, wanting to become a youth worker and actually approaching youth organisations for work experience).

The ability to escape from lifestyles suffused with violence and violent behaviours, is dependent not only on individuals being able access opportunities but also having the confidence and self-belief that by taking a certain course of action, real change can result. Importantly, uprooting individuals and expecting them to live new lives away from all previous networks may be unrealistic and needs sensitive support (Harris 2011). Yet staying attached to selected networks and pastimes can strengthen bonding social capital with delinquent peers and reinforce reoffending (Holligan 2015).

Developing a sense of agency is key, enabling the building of active resistance so as not to be sucked, passively, into the violent lifestyle of their peers. Moreover, work with CYP needs to consider how dignity can be maintained and how previous violent lifestyles may have contributed both to their self-esteem and eased the mundanity and tedious sense of exclusion, which characterises the lives of many marginalised young people. Being part of a group can provide young people with belonging, community, and solidarity (Fraser, 2013). While violence may sometimes emerge as a by-product of group membership, this is not always the case. Recognising these nuances is important for designing more effective interventions. The community spirit and friendship offered by membership of the gang may facilitate transition away from certain behaviours whilst maintaining the bonding social capital gained from the sense of belonging (Gormally 2015). Attention should also be paid to individual anxieties about problems presented from previous gang connectedness – and support should be provided for moving out of dangerous routines or geographical areas without cutting off important relational ties (Harris 2011).

5.6.1 Creating constructive opportunities to engage

Providing meaningful opportunities for change involves both attending to building trusting relationships and creating structural openings.

> ***A few more people telling me 'no'. That's what would have helped, or something more constructive to do with my time instead of getting into loads of trouble. A bit more one to-one support. If I had that I reckon things would have changed. Someone I could get on with, someone I like, someone to look up to really. Then, I reckon I wouldn't have done all that stupidness.*** (Sam in Young et al., 2009, p. 49)

Creating ways out of SYV must embrace an understanding of how devalued life has become for many young people involved in persistent acts of violence. Repeated experiences of brutality can lead to a loss of self-worth which is experienced materially, symbolically and physically (Bakkali 2019). Young marginalised men are at particular risk of succumbing to violent crime, a reflection perhaps of the low value placed by themselves and others on their bodies. Understanding how low self-esteem and lack of worth impacts on a young person's ability to desist must be central to all efforts to support desistance from youth violence (Bakkali 2019). Narratives collected in this review suggest that change is needed at all levels: individual programmes to build self-esteem and positive constructions of masculinity as well as structural programmes to improve access to health services and review the way schools engage marginalised youth, together with trauma-informed support in care homes and youth justice settings.

> ***"My new friends don't see the original me when I use to hang around with scallies no. I think people change … but that change must come through you by creating chances that allow you as a person to grow and change. If the chances are not there then you can't change. So far as the real me what is the real you or me? I think we change constantly as we move from one area to the next. They see the real you in that moment you are that person"*** (Terry in Hesketh 2018 p.164)

Young people's identities are fluid and can shift between being a "fighter" and other roles wrapped in complex peer relationships (Fraser, 2011). Gunter (2008), drawing on Matza's (2018) concept of drift, shows how the Black young men in his study often occupied a middle ground—enjoying the social benefits of gang life—while moving in and out of offending, particularly when opportunities to make quick money arose (p.354). Desistance work may therefore need to focus not only on supporting young people to avoid crime, but also on recognising the pro-social benefits that peer groups provide and creating alternative, legitimate routes to financial security. Practitioners can play a key role by fostering the conditions for change and acknowledging that young people's movement across different social worlds is often flexible and shifting (Gormally, 2015)

Apprehension by the police and the prospect of imprisonment caused some gang-involved young people to modify their behaviours, particularly when supported by access to legitimate educational or vocational opportunities (Factor 2015).

> ***Barry: I suppose my motivation [for doing programmes] is for getting out . . . it helps that I've been doing programmes.*** (15-year-old male in Barry 2013 p.354)

> ***. . . if I carry on doing my legit thing, in the future I could be making more money than I make from this now. So it's just another way to look at it . . . and legit is much less stressful I can tell you.*** (Merlin aged 16 in Traynor 2019 p.204)

In prisons desistance work was found to be impacted by creating positive personal relationships between wardens and inmates such as through handwritten letters inviting prisoners to participate in interventions (Factor 2015) privileging an emphasis on strength-based approaches rather than risk factors.

> ***Well, there's plenty of stuff to do in here [secure unit] – football, the gym and swimming. When we were outside there was nothing to do but hang about street corners . . . If you put in more football parks and youth clubs in your areas, that would help you sort out offending.*** (15-year-old male in Barry 2013 p.359)

5.6.2 Growing up, identity and the capacity for reflection

A consistent theme across the literature is that desistance from SYV is closely tied to processes of maturation—both in terms of physical ageing and how maturity is socially recognised. Echoing the "age–crime curve" (Crowther et al., 2013; Gormally, 2015; Smeaton, 2009), older participants frequently described engaging less in violence as they grew older, linking this to shifting priorities, greater self-awareness, and an increased sense of responsibility.

One study participant reflected:

> ***I'm older now, man, and need to think about what I'm doing. I've got a woman who's got a kid and I need to show that kid what's right and what's wrong … I work for these bigger boys now and they won't take me seriously if they hear I've been getting into fights over silly stuff*** (Smeaton, 2009, p.21).

Similarly, a young woman explained how her awareness of long-term consequences shaped her choices:

> ***… after this you could go to prison and 'aving a record … it can mess up your life … I don't want the fun I'm 'aving on the streets to affect me in the long run cause I ain't gonna be on the streets forever*** (female in Young et al., 2007, p.151).

Adolescence was often described as a period of impulsivity and freedom from family oversight, with peer groups exerting a powerful influence.

> ***When you maybe reach fourteen or thirteen or fifteen, you just feel, 'I'm free!'… It's only when you start growing up you realise what you've done when you're young"*** (Mark in Young, 2013, p.36).

Bannister (2012) found that young people around ages 15–16 were most heavily involved in violence, with scars and injuries sometimes valued as visible markers of credibility. Yet this same recognition of the costs of violence often prompted a desire for change expressed here by Alexander:

> ***Drug dealing and fighting are a young person's game. The longer you are on road the less respect you are given unless you are 'seriously flossing.*** (Young et al., 2009).

For many, becoming a young adult brought increasing expectations of responsibility. Some participants described negotiating a balance between family obligations and street identities. Rhys explained: *… I'm a man now; I'll stand on my own two feet … but when I go outside, that's my time. When I'm inside, it's their time* (Rhys in Young, 2013, p.40).

Others described how the physical and emotional toll of violence, combined with the stress of living in fear, pushed them towards desistance: *If you look at fings and realise how stupid you are. I don't get myself into trouble with the police now. Next month I've finished with YOT and I'd be leaving. I don't intend to come back* (Young woman in Young et al., 2007, p.151).

Across multiple studies, the growing capacity for reflection emerged as a central factor in desistance (Gormally, 2015; Harris, 2011; Young, 2013; Holligan & McLean, 2018). With maturity, participants increasingly expressed regret for past actions and considered their consequences for themselves and others. For some, this involved reflecting on lost opportunities: *I would go back to school tomorrow just to get my qualifications … I ended up in jail* (Hesketh, 2018, p.134).

Others recognised the harm to family members: *I 'hink ah was selfish an aw when ah 'hink back. Sae fur me, ah don't 'hink it hurts as much as whit it did fur mah ma an' mah aunties* (Alexander in Young, 2013, p.50).

At times, reflection was ambivalent or incomplete. Some struggled to express remorse for victims yet still questioned the meaning of their actions: *I don't feel sorry for the people I hurt 'cos what's the point in that but I do wonder what it was all about?* (Smeaton, 2009, p.109). Others highlighted the dissonance between their street identity and family life: *So it's*

like you're two different people… Mum might not even know they call you that name … and then you get to find out one day it's your son (Bailey in Young, 2013, p.45).

Evans et al. (2007) found that when prompted to reflect, young people often expressed guilt, shame, and even shock at their own capacity for violence: *It hurts … I'm ashamed of myself for what I've done … I didn't think I was … capable of being part of that sort of damage"* (p.194).

Others began to challenge the very legitimacy of violence: *… no other person deserves to take your life, that's your life* (Bakkali, 2019, p.7). Taken together, these accounts highlight how growing maturity, reflection, and a reworking of identity can serve as important stepping stones in the process of desistance.

5.6.3 Turning points and desistance

Alongside gradual maturation, key life transitions often acted as turning points that accelerated desistance. Parenthood, romantic relationships, education, and employment were all identified as critical shifts away from violent lifestyles (Gormally, 2015; Harris, 2011). For some, these transitions were abrupt and decisive: Last November I stopped fighting (John in Gormally, 2015, p.160). Others linked desistance to a fear of incarceration or death: *… I couldn't take the risk of like either going back to jail or ending up dead* (Jorell in Young, 2009, p.52). Relationships were also powerful catalysts, with one participant reflecting: *Gettin' myself a bird an' jist bein' wi' 'er, it's jist stopped me thinkin' aboot th' streets* (Christopher in Young, 2009, p.52).

Imagined, symbolic life transitions carried particular weight. For example, Aidan imagined becoming a father as the decisive point at which he would leave violence behind: *Then I'll have to stop; I'll have to stop everything* (Smeaton, 2009, p.65). Yet not all young people found it easy to take advantage of such opportunities. Structural and emotional barriers often limited access to support networks, while expectations around masculinity made it difficult for young men to seek help or show vulnerability (Traynor, 2019).

Recognition of the emotional and physical costs of violence was another recurring turning point. Participants described the exhaustion, fear, and pain associated with fighting: *It's not fun … some of them can really hurt* (Gormally, 2015) *and It was scary … they were charging up the street … tones and bottles and everything* (Hansson, 2006, p.24). Some reflected on the harm they had caused, fearing the weight of responsibility if it happened again: *I don't want someone's fucking death on my conscience, never* (Lenny in Traynor, 2019, p.207). Others spoke of disillusionment with group dynamics and concern for loved ones: *… what they're protecting ain't really protecting them … my little brother … I'm so scared …* (Charlie, 17, in Traynor, 2019, p.247).

For many, turning points were less about single transformative moments than the gradual accumulation of realisations: that association to violence offered little genuine loyalty, that opportunities had been lost, or that life could take a different path. As Shelley described: *… this isn't me … I needed to improve my life, and I needed to make a step forward* (Factor, 2015, p.27).

5.6.4 Get out before you're murdered

As young people matured the feeling of perpetually living under threat and always having to be on 'point' began to impact on mental health and well-being and could act as a push factor towards desistance. Rory decided he needed to change when a friend of his got stabbed. He's trying to ensure that he does not get into any more fights, aiming to get fighting out of his head by ignoring peers and staying at home. He recalls how a year ago:

> ***I was being a little shit … going out every day, fighting, disruptive, running away from the police, getting arrested near enough every day … I didn't think I had a future until I found this job so it's all working out for me now.*** (Rory in Smeaton 2009 p. 64)

Others simply find they can no longer cope with the terror associated with violent lifestyles:

> ***I can't go back to a life of crime anymore … it's scary, I have had guns pointed at me.*** (John in Hesketh 2018 p.142)

> ***I took an opportunity to get out before I was murdered. … It was well heavy: talk about guns, shooting people and that and one day I got handed a machine gun and asked to jump in the front end and just take them all out … this was at a football match, as soon as the doors (of the van) got opened I was to just start shooting. There was bullet-proof vests, guns, grenades, petrol bombs in the van and I just did a runner.*** (Bob in Smeaton. 2009 p.45)

5.6.5 The role of external support

Support is needed to overcome what often seems to be immovable barriers; yet for many, this can be hard to access. Positive relationships, being listened to by someone who they see as 'fair', have been shown to be key to desistance (e.g., Barry 2013, McNeil 2006, Factor 2015). Here, Adam explains the influence a positive relationship with his mother had on his motivation to turn his life around.

> ***I want to do well for my mum to kind of thank her for sticking by me when they banged me up and with all the bad things I've done.*** (Adam, in Young 2009 p.60)

Young men report that they seldom speak to adults, finding it difficult to ask for emotional support and have a deep fear of being shamed (Harland 2010). Whilst many voice the ambition to move on, they can be held back by historical experiences and a deep lack of confidence and self-esteem:

> ***I want to be working. I would like my own house and my own mortgage. Stuff like that. I want to have my kid living with me. Haven't got a plan for that really, am still working that out at the minute … am fucked at the minute, cos am in a hostel, fucked cos I got no money, fucked cos am not seeing my kid … It's just fucked 'init'? My whole life is fucked at the minute.*** (Ian, 22 years in Hesketh 2018 p.126)

> ***I want to join the army, but I have to postpone for five years now I have all my convictions and fines sorted. So, I have to spend a couple of hundred quid, once that's done, I will be able to join the army.*** (John in Hesketh 2018 p.127)

Turning points and critical moments of change (Maruna & Mann, 2019) came about in a number of ways. The influence of new acquaintances was noted as being significant particularly in helping to access new pro-social lifestyles. At other times change could be encouraged through trusted relationships (normally adults in authority or family) who did or said something to influence the course of action.

> ***I had an incident with a girl, someone said I was seeing her and her boyfriend wanted to fight me. They came knocking at my door at 10 o'clock … I was thinking, I'm going to go out there and do something to this boy. I remember my dad saying, "no". I was so angry … because he (the boy) had come to my school, he was threatening me, he was telling people he was going to do things to me. … My dad said, "You can't go out" and I had to stay in.'*** (Bradley in Young 2009, p.35)

At other times the absence of authoritative guidance was lamented.

> ***I dunno, Ah jist needed somebody tae listen tae us. Tae see whit I've got tae say an' fin' a solution.*** (Suzie in Young 2013 p.53)

Young people just out of prison, trying to forge pathways away from violence, found it hard to carve out new social circles away from the peers they used to mix with:

> ***After I finished probation … I didn't have anywhere to sleep in. I went to the housing association, as soon as I got to the housing door I see the person who was my partner, who used to be. His little brother just got rushed, he got beaten up, he is bleeding and that. He said 'I got beaten up by people. There's a war going on'. I am thinking, 'I didn't want to meet you or your brother, any of those people in that area. And people are going to know that I am out.*** (Factor 2015 p.64)

Here, young people who have been sentenced for violent crimes, describe the financial and structural challenges of carving out new pathways in legitimate employment.

> ***… tomorrow I go to a job interview. You're not expecting the person at a job interview to give you back your money, but little does anybody know, [support worker] had to give me another form so I could go and get toilet roll from a food bank. People wouldn't think a little thing like toilet roll would be big news, but we're living in poverty and we live in England. People don't understand that.*** (Male, 24 years in Factor 2015 p.62)

> ***… as soon as you put in {on a job application} you've got a criminal conviction, you can't even finish the application … and then go back, you refresh it, and you [click] … you say, 'no I haven't got one', and then it lets you carry on … you can't even get past that one initial stage … sometimes it's a bit hard. You feel like it's hard to progress.*** (Young woman in Factor 2015 p.62)

Jimmy, who has moved away from his immediate locality to escape the threat of gang violence, discusses the pros and cons of living in protected housing:

> ***… Every time I go out, I have to think that something could happen, take that into consideration and carry my knife in case something does happen. It is safer living here (supported housing project) but everybody knows where I live 'cos they talk and that and I still have to watch my back. There's a negative of living here as my boys (others in his gang) aren't around me here but there's a positive 'cos anybody who comes looking for me ain't gonna get through reception.*** (Jimmy in Smeaton 2009 p.63)

6 Themes emerging from meta-ethnography (third order constructs)

6 Themes emerging from meta-ethnography (third order constructs)

This review has examined a rich body of research involving CYP's accounts of involvement in SYV. The aim was to explore how CYP (aged 10-24 years) narrate their experiences of both becoming involved in SYV and choosing pathways enabling them to leave violence behind (desistance). Through the analysis of both first-order constructs (i.e., the voices of young people themselves) and second-order constructs (i.e., the interpretations and conclusions of primary study authors), we developed three distinct broader, theoretically informed, narratives to characterise involvement in SYV (Figure 3, below). Importantly, association with a given set of characteristics is fluid, with some individuals exhibiting traits that span more than one group. A fourth narrative focuses on themes relating to CYP at risk of future perpetration of SYV and a final, fifth narrative, considers perspectives in the move towards desistance. However, these last two narratives are discussed separately as pathways before entry into and exiting from SYV.

Figure 3: Broad thematic narratives of CYP involvement in violence

Facilitators of involvement in SYV run through all thematic narratives:

- Discrimination by class/race/gender. Impact of age – younger perpetrators less able to recognise consequences
- Mental health (often left undiagnosed and untreated)
- Individual characteristics & behaviour patterns – particularly self-esteem; aspiration; anger management.; need for respect and status; fatalism
- Immediate environment access to disenfranchised/disengaged social groups seen to afford protection/status or with 'beef' or criminal intent. Possibility of coercion
- Access to weapons and normalisation of their use
- Poverty/deprivation
- Life is mundane, boring
- School exclusion
- Sense of attachment to place and the need to defend/protect often exacerbated through passing on of historic animosities
- Use and misuse of drugs and alcohol

Three broad, interconnecting narratives

1. Difficult lives; injustice, inequity and trauma

"It is as it is"

Characterised by extreme childhood trauma, poverty and social exclusion. Let down by families, services, school, authorities. Hardship becomes normalized and aspirations are low. Low self-esteem and vulnerable to social slights. **Violence is a response to a mixture of anger, apathy, desire for social justice and lack of control. Violence provides agency to assert themselves.**

2. The armour of toughness; hypermasculinity

Characterised by a focus on: status, identity, edgework, excitement, myth making, violence both real and symbolic. Violence is performative, situational, reactive and often used to counter vulnerability.

Violence is used as a means to primarily achieve status rather than to cause harm.

Gangs, football firms and sectarian groups – act as a vehicle – providing both a motivational pull and a sense of safety in numbers. Group violence provides potential for moral disengagement. While violence in this narrative is primarily performed and discussed by men, women too are drawn into and impacted by its enactment.

3. Money as a route to status and livelihood

Characterised by little potential to acquire legitimate routes to employment and where money is in short supply.

Many turn instead to other ways to acquire 'easy' money to achieve status and self-respect. Money may be acquired both for self and others.

Violence is causal – i.e., it is central to the ultimate purpose of making money. Violence is a rational response to the situation.

Protective factors against involvement in SYV:

Bonding (social capital), positive, healthy networks, pro-social relationships with peers or those in authority (teachers, youth workers, social workers, police), School engagement, greater maturity, changing responsibilities (particularly intimate partnerships and parenthood), understanding and ability to relate actions to consequences, sense of agency relating to pro-social life choices.

6.1 Narrative 1: difficult lives; injustice, inequity and trauma

Many of the young people in this review had endured significant childhood trauma, poverty, and social exclusion. They faced multiple and compounding disadvantages—including disrupted family lives, school exclusion, overlooked by mental health services, and failures within wider social support systems. In response, many CYP developed coping mechanisms that normalized hardship and instability.

Growing up in environments shaped by low expectations, many young people developed limited aspirations and saw few viable life opportunities. Cultural, environmental, and social conditions contributed to their increased exposure to violence, heightening the risk that such experiences would become internalised and normalised. At times, the dominant White middle-class perspectives embedded within organisational systems felt misaligned or culturally out of touch with the realities of their lives.

Lacking self-esteem and consistent support, many struggled to identify or access viable pathways to legitimate employment, leaving them more vulnerable to exploitation. A sense of resignation was common; the phrase "it is what it is" echoed throughout their narratives, reflecting a deep sense of fatalism.

In this context, violence often surfaced as a complex response to anger, apathy, and a desire for justice or recognition. With little to lose—and the perception that prison might at least offer food, routine, and protection—punitive measures often lost their intended deterrent effect.

6.2 Narrative 2: the armour of toughness; hypermasculinity

Hyper-masculinity is an exaggerated form of traditional male gender norms and roles, emphasizing traits such as physical strength, aggression, dominance, emotional suppression, and sexual prowess. Typically, masculine traits taken on include toughness, stoicism, competitiveness, risk-taking, and a rejection of anything perceived as feminine or vulnerable. Risk-taking presents an opportunity for excitement and feeling alive in an environment often devoid of pleasure. The performance of masculinity offers the opportunity to create almost mythical, fantasy worlds, where actors are elevated as celebrity hard men and have the unusual opportunity to be revered. Yet despite the hard veneer, underlying tensions are often evident, with violence being used to mask extreme fear and vulnerability – impacting on the precarious and unpredictable nature of violent group encounters.

Narratives supporting this construct run through the majority of papers included in the review. Often fuelled by national and social-media, hyper-masculine identities are constructed as part of the purposeful performance of finding one's place in what is often perceived as a precarious and unjust social system. Group violence through street gangs, football firms or sectarianism is a vehicle for masculine performance. The group provides both collective motivation as well as a sense of 'safety in numbers', with the individual feeling both the protection of and loyalty to other members and a sense of anonymity in the larger crowd. Successful demonstration of 'toughness' is seen to secure friendship, respect and position within the group. The activity of violence is not only a way to address hopelessness, frustration and injustice but also a means of securing status (Hansson 2006).

Toughness can emerge as an adaptive response to feelings of rejection by family and society, experiences of inequity and marginalisation, and a lack of connection to civic networks—especially in environments where violence is considered normal. Adopting hyper-masculine behaviours that reflect those of peers can serve as a means of self-protection and a way to navigate peer relationships.

While it is men who are predominantly caught up in the performance of masculinity, women and girls (whose accounts are under-reported) are implicated and affected by its manifestations. Gang associated sexual violence and exploitation which simmers below the surface of many narratives is closely connected to wider patterns of patriarchy, violence and exploitation that typify many gang environments. (Beckett et al., 2013; Harding, 2014).

6.3 Narrative 3: the pursuit of meaning and livelihood through money

For many young people, finding ways to access money, seen as a route to both independence and status was a priority. Yet, for those emerging into adulthood, who may be excluded from school with few qualifications, and without the buffer of pro-social networks, opportunities for legitimate employment with room for advancement and growth are scarce. Failures of the education system to provide a safe and supportive environment where marginalised young people can access and engage with the curriculum and build achievements to secure decent employment was frequently referenced. Feelings of marginalisation and disconnection – and the drive to acquire finances – are further exacerbated by the pervasive presence of social and national media that glorify designer brands and extravagant lifestyles.

Intertwined with the imperative to acquire money is a growing dependence on the use of violence as a means to keep control of (drug) markets, or to rob goods from others. Violence escalates as group or individual ambitions focus more on securing wealth, largely through trading drugs.

6.4 Narrative 4: pathways from 'at risk' to 'involved in' SYV

In this review we defined CYP considered to be at risk of serious violence, as those who have a history of aggression or substance use; carrying weapons; involvement in non-violent crime; engagement in violent protests/riots; disengagement from school (including poor attenders or those permanently excluded from school); or lack of social support.

The concept of 'at risk' encompassed experiences and behaviours that increase the likelihood of eventual involvement in more serious forms of violence. Identifying factors that place CYP 'at risk' can help target early interventions aimed at preventing engagement in SYV.

Although these definitions guided the selection of literature included in this review, it became evident that the boundary between being 'at risk' and becoming a perpetrator was often unclear. CYP in 'at risk' groups often described their entry into violence as haphazard, involving a strong element of happenstance; being in the 'wrong place'. While some authors explicitly used the term 'at risk', it was often defined by contextual factors such as the young person's locality—typically characterised by high levels of deprivation and violent crime—and was frequently used to inform participant recruitment strategies (Bannister 2012, Barker 2025, Barry 2013, Beckett 2013, Deuchar 2009, Firmin 2011). The term 'risk-taking behaviours' was referenced less frequently. Nevertheless, although CYP did not always use the language of risk, they often described processes of weighing potential harm against perceived benefits—for instance, when deciding which peer groups to associate with or whether to carry weapons (Harding 2020, Gormally 2010, Gunter 2008, Hansson 2005, Harris 2011, Hesketh 2018, Holligan 2015b, Palasinski and Riggs 2012). Notably, young people recognised that carrying weapons could escalate situations more quickly, thereby increasing their exposure to risk (Smeaton 2009, Crowther 2013, Deuchar 2011, Harding 2020, Holligan 2015, King 2013, Palasinski and Riggs 2012). Additionally, many attributed their descent into violence to behaviours such as associating with disreputable peers (Barker 2025, Hesketh 2018).

For some of the CYP featured in this review gang involvement was part of the transition from childhood to adolescence and adulthood; a phase which involves asserting independence from family, gaining peer acceptance, and shaping personal identity. Economic independence is often a key part of this process; the desire to earn money without relying on family may increase vulnerability to entry into gang affiliation. Demonstrating loyalty to a gang may involve tasks such as carrying weapons or drugs for senior members, often under the assumption they are less likely to attract suspicion. The autonomy to 'do what they want, with whom they want' can provide a sense of excitement and purpose absent from other aspects of their lives. Indeed, some CYP described becoming immersed in gang life due to boredom, social disconnection, and emotional apathy—conditions that heighten vulnerability to violence as a means of achieving excitement, status, and financial gain. A lack of opportunity and direction further contributes to a perceived absence of alternatives.

Young males, in particular, may be susceptible to these dynamics due to societal expectations around masculinity. During adolescence, the pressure to appear tough and avoid being perceived as weak or feminine is often strong, while opportunities to express vulnerability or seek help are limited, especially when contrasted with stereotypical expectations of young females. This drive to demonstrate toughness can act as a powerful motivator for engaging in violent behaviour.

Additionally, undiagnosed or unmanaged mental health conditions—such as issues with substance use or emotional regulation (e.g., anger management)—can contribute to the rapid escalation of violence, transitioning CYP from being 'at risk' to active involvement. The lure of 'quick money' from lower-level gang activities can also facilitate access to substances and further entrench risky behaviours.

CYP are significantly influenced by their immediate social environments. Peer pressure to join gangs is intensified by broader familial and environmental factors. Many CYP included in this review reported multiple adverse childhood experiences, most of which were either unaddressed or ineffectively addressed, limiting their ability to make healthier life choices. This includes performances at school due to learning difficulties that were often unaddressed. Some CYP described only becoming aware of this following diagnosis in prison, much later into adult life.

Race was a key factor that could influence young people's experiences of support, safety, and belonging. Interactions with authority figures featured prominently in many narratives: young people from minority ethnic backgrounds often reported being unfairly targeted, surveilled, or stereotyped by teachers, police, and other authority figures, leading to deep mistrust of systems intended to protect them. These experiences of racialisation and exclusion were compounded by systemic inequalities that limited access to resources and opportunities, further reinforcing feelings of marginalisation.

Family and care experiences were also central in shaping trajectories into violence. Many young men described absent or difficult relationships with fathers, while others grew up in homes marked by instability, neglect, or involvement in criminal activity. For those taken into care, placements were frequently described as unsafe or even violent, with some young people reporting aggression from peers or staff in environments meant to offer protection. Such experiences fostered a sense of abandonment and a perception that formal systems could not be trusted to keep them safe.

In this context, peer groups and gangs often offered an alternative source of belonging, support, and control. For some, gangs substituted for absent family connections and provided a means to assert status and autonomy, though this frequently became a pathway into more serious violence.

Many CYP described living in unsafe environments, which contributed to the perceived necessity of carrying weapons—not to use, but for protection. This behaviour, a key indicator of risk for SYV, was common even among those involved in low-level gang activity, where weapons were viewed as essential for defending territory or asserting dominance. Once involved—even at a low level—coercive practices and the condemnation of peers meant it was often hard for them to see a way out.

6.5 Narrative 5: towards desistance

Similar to the processes of entry into SYV, desistance from it appears to be a complex, relational, and context-dependent process. Rather than viewing CYP through a deficit lens, desistance approaches may be more effective if they focus on building the asset base, reshaping the social environments that have contributed to their offending (Maruna & Mann, 2019). Reinforcing prosocial bonds—through positive school environments or trusted community ties—proved vital. Initiatives that enabled young people to 'leave gang identities at the gate' (Irwin-Rogers et al., 2020) helped shift loyalties away from violence toward education and positive belonging. Yet the transition is rarely linear. Desistance often involved navigating tensions between maintaining valuable social ties and exiting harmful routines or environments (Harris, 2011), complicated by the fluidity of identity across school, street, and family contexts (Holligan, 2015). Crucially, messaging around desistance must come from trusted sources, as police-led campaigns often lacked legitimacy (Traynor, 2016). Overall, sustained desistance was most likely when structural support aligned with young people's agency—acknowledging that change in individuals must be matched by change in the environments around them (Barry, 2013).

6.6 Theoretical summary

A key objective of the review was to examine how the findings align with existing theoretical models. Our starting point was a social ecological model that integrates structural (macro-level), cultural and social (meso-level), and individual psychological (micro-level) factors alongside a logic model developed at the beginning of the review (see Section 3.7).

The narratives in this review provide compelling evidence for the importance of adopting an intersectional lens—one that considers the range of factors young people identify as influencing their behaviour. These include (but are not limited to): structural inequities, family background, age, race/ethnicity, class, gender, peer influence, local environment, individual characteristics and psychology, relationship quality, and connection to wider networks.

Several theoretical models that enhance our understanding of the mechanisms at play are referenced throughout this report. These models vary in their emphasis on the contributory factors discussed in the review. Examples include Social Field Theory (Bourdieu (1997); Irwin-Rogers and Harding 2018; Actor-Network Theory (Holligan, 2015), Signalling theory Social Strain Theory (Merton 1937) and Holligan, 2015), Street Capital Theory, (Harding 2014); Rational Choice Theory (Barry, 2013; Clarke & Cornish, 2001), Edgework (Hesketh, 2018; Lyng, 2008); Signalling theory (Densley, 2012) and Doing Masculinity (Messerschmidt 1990; Holligan, 2015). Many additional theories were cited in the included papers, though space constraints preclude detailed discussion of each.

The key takeaway is that each conceptual lens offers a distinct perspective on how and why violence has become a pervasive issue in modern Britain. No single theory offers a definitive explanation—rather, each provides a different way of seeing the world.

7
Discussion

7 Discussion

This review has examined how CYP experience and reflect on their involvement in, or proximity to, SYV. The included papers represent a range of qualitative study designs and span various settings—both institutional and community-based—across different geographic locations in the UK.

The studies encompassed a broad spectrum of engagement with SYV, from weapon carrying and participation in gang-related activities (among 'at risk' CYP) to incidents involving grievous bodily harm, attempted murder, and murder. The accounts presented reveal significant variation in the form and ferocity of violent activity across the UK, both between individuals and among opposing groups. Forms of violence vary considerably by geography. In urban centres street gang activity or urban street gangs activity relates to multiple homicides, machete attacks and zombie knives with robbery, kidnap and moped crime. In other areas the violence enacted (by gangs, other peer groups or individuals) may follow other patterns, in some cases being more akin to anti-social behaviour. Yet patterns of violent behaviour do not remain fixed and are likely to evolve and shift across time and place. The structural and social context in which violence is enacted forms part of a constantly moving landscape and studies suggest that normative behaviours and understandings differ with geography, age, gender and ethnicity as well as changes in the social and political landscape. There is no one truth of why young people resort to serious violence but this review presents pieces of a jigsaw to offer a more complete understanding.

While the intensity and scale of violence may be influenced by individual psychology, group culture, weapon availability, and the immediate environment, common underlying themes—such as identity, hypermasculinity, trauma, poverty, and exclusion—were strongly interwoven throughout the vast majority of the included papers.

The complex and often contradictory experiences of involvement in violence are vividly depicted through the narratives presented and range from excitement, assertion of status, fear, anxiety, enactment of honour, protection. Street culture and the violence that can emerge from it are the result of *"complex and conflictual webs of belief, symbols, modes of interaction, values, and ideologies that have emerged in opposition to exclusion from mainstream society"* (Bourgois, 2003, p. 8). The findings of this review support these ideas, providing strong evidence of the disadvantage, social and structural inequalities that many young people who engage in violence have faced. Structural failures to support CYP, particularly in deprived neighbourhoods, interplay with adverse childhood experiences, meaning that opportunities to demonstrate personal agency and control are limited. The punitive governance framework hanging over those young people who feel failed and emasculated, creates a situation of extreme futility, injustice and banality where violence is seen as one of the few routes to assert control and feel alive.

Framing the findings through an ecological lens reveals the dynamic interplay between individual agency and wider social structures that shape young people's involvement in violence.

Individual-Level Influences

At the individual level, CYP's narratives reflect a complex mix of motivations and emotional responses to SYV, including excitement, fear, anxiety, the desire for protection, the drive to secure financial reward, the assertion of status, and adherence to codes of honour. Further, a large portion of the included studies also discussed the role violence play as a form of retaliation or to address social injustices, whether actual or perceived. These have also been widely documented by key gang scholars, see for example Pitts (2013), Densley (2013), Maitra (2016), Deuchar et al (2021). These contradictory experiences highlight how involvement in violence can be both empowering and deeply distressing. Age appears to play a significant role, with older adolescents showing greater capacity for reflection and foresight regarding the consequences of violence. Gendered patterns also emerge: while hypermasculinity—used to gain power, respect, and status—is pervasive, females are often cast in victim roles, with limited insight available into their involvement as perpetrators due to a lack of representation in the literature. Ethnic distinctions remain under-explored, although racist treatment from both within the community and authority figures are seen to create dissent. In institutional settings, where behaviours are more heavily monitored and constrained, young people described violence as an outlet for frustration and anger—suggesting that emotional regulation and expression are also key individual-level dynamics.

While previous literature highlights connections between vulnerability, coercion, and involvement in group or gang-related behaviours (Harding, 2023), these themes—though present in many accounts—did not feature as strongly in this review. One possible explanation is that in contexts where hypermasculinity and narratives of 'toughness as armour' prevail, young people may feel pressure to present themselves as resilient and in control. Acknowledging experiences of vulnerability or victimisation may conflict with this dominant image, leading such accounts to be downplayed or left unspoken.

The importance of belonging and connection to individuals and social systems is echoed in Billingham and Irwin-Rogers (2021) concept of 'mattering' – or the perception that 'we are a significant part of the world around us' (Elliott et al., 2004, p. 339). 'Mattering' is proposed as a useful lens through which to understand why a small minority of people commit violent acts. Mattering, experienced at the level of the individual, is a state of being shaped by complex social, economic, political and cultural factors. The expression of 'not mattering' or having no sense of worth or value can provide the psychosocial motivation to harm the self or other (Billingham and Irwin-Jones 2021 p.1225).

Interpersonal Relationships: Peers and Family

Interpersonal relationships—particularly with peers and family—play a powerful and sometimes contradictory role in many studies, CYP spoke of loss, disappointment, and feeling let down by family members, while simultaneously acknowledging the enduring importance and emotional pull of these relationships. Peer influence, especially through involvement in tightly-knit groups such as gangs, football firms, or sectarian collectives, often provides a sense of identity, protection, and belonging that may be absent in other areas of life. These relationships serve as critical social bonds but can also reinforce violent norms and behaviours, especially in contexts where young people feel isolated or unsupported. There is a need to deepen our understanding of how young people interpret gangs (or other groups participating in violent acts) and the diverse roles they play in their lives—including the positive meanings and benefits some associate with gang involvement—particularly among groups who are over-represented in criminal justice statistics (Youth Endowment Fund, 2025).

Community-Level Influences

At the community-level, young people's accounts highlight environments marked by deprivation, under-resourcing, and limited opportunities. Despite these conditions, there is often a deep attachment to one's neighbourhood and peer group, underscoring the importance of place and social rootedness. However, early adverse childhood experiences and constrained life chances contribute to a widespread sense of resignation. The lack of legitimate economic opportunities, compounded by negative schooling experiences and early disengagement from education, pushes many young people further to the margins. In such contexts, some CYP develop forms of street capital (Harding, 2014) —grounded in status, access to weapons, and involvement in illicit economies such as drug sales—as alternative pathways to power and survival. The adoption of certain behaviours in a group situation—such as displaying weapons, adopting hyper-masculine personas, or producing violent music—as a way to "signal" status, toughness, or affiliation within their social environment (Densley, 2012). The likelihood of engaging in violent behaviours was linked to prevalent culture, particularly relating to the adoption of exaggerated aggressive forms of masculinity (protest masculinities (Connell, 1987).

In some studies, young people who carried weapons, claimed to have no intention of using them beyond self-protection. However, studies have shown that carrying weapons increases the risks of actually using them, resulting in more serious negative outcomes (Youth Endowment Fund, 2023). A national survey commissioned by YEF in 2023 suggests that children who carry weapons were almost 4.7 times more likely to have perpetrated violence themselves (Popham, 2024).

Structural- and Systemic-Level Influences

Accounts presented in this review support the findings of other reports that austerity and income differentials have led to marginalisation (Pickett et al., 2024). Street culture and the violence that can emerge from it are the result of *"complex and conflictual webs of belief, symbols, modes of interaction, values, and ideologies that have emerged in opposition to exclusion from mainstream society"* (Bourgois 2003, p. 8). The gap between aspirations and ability for them to be realised is wide. Within the context of austerity, deprivation and lack of opportunity, violence may emerge as a reaction to neighbourhood conditions. Commentators have employed Merton's (1968) idea of innovative behaviours adopted within Strain Theory to explain how, when there is strain on the system, marginalised people whose legitimate opportunities for success may be blocked, instead may follow illegal pathways to earn a living. A state of anomie develops (Huff, 1975)

resulting in a sense of frustration and dislocation from mainstream society – meaning that deviant modes of behaviour become more appealing.

The findings of this review support these ideas, with several authors arguing that it is exclusion by mainstream society that pushes young people to develop their own codes, rules, and narratives (Holligan 2017; Barker 2025; Harding 2020; Bakkali 2019, etc.) The lack of legitimate opportunities exacerbated by growing structural inequities has seen young people grow increasingly detached from civic structures and grow less confident that actions they take will impact positively on outcomes (Bakkali 2019). In line with this the term 'deviant entrepreneurs' is used to describe the application of business skills and entrepreneurial knowledge to illicit activities employed by gangs for financial gain (Hesketh 2018). Violence is integral to the success of this model.

At the structural-level, the findings reveal a profound sense of abandonment by societal institutions. Structural inequalities—including poverty, systemic racism, and the failure of health, social care, education, and criminal justice systems to nurture and support CYP —ultimately shape the trajectories of CYP. The punitive, 'law and order' criminal justice approach to youth offending often exacerbates feelings of futility and injustice, particularly among those who already feel marginalised and emasculated. In such a landscape, violence becomes one of the few remaining avenues through which young people can assert agency, reclaim control, or feel visible. Among CYP who do not choose to become involved in SYV, there are few alternatives to support and protect them. This sense of systemic failure is deepened by negative portrayals in the mass media, where CYP are often depicted as violent and problematic, contributing to a feedback loop of distrust, alienation, and resistance to mainstream norms. Multiple studies documented CYP experiences of being stereotyped and labelled by authoritative figures. Efforts should be made to treat CYP as individuals and avoid stereotypes that may lead to moral panic.

The public engagement we carried out for this study (Appendix 6) offers some useful insights, particularly regarding structural and systemic influences. The Youth Advisory Board we consulted shared a broad understanding of violence, emphasising that it includes not only physical acts but also structural violence—such as the impact of systemic inequalities on their lives. However, it appears that individual respondents in the studies tended to express these issues more in terms of their personal or community-level experiences, rather than explicitly identifying them as structural.

Professionals consulted also highlighted the challenges of capturing structural or environmental influences in qualitative research, which often focuses more naturally on individual or interpersonal dynamics (e.g., family or peer relationships). While structural inequalities clearly emerged as a strong theme across the review, they were most often articulated through locally grounded experiences, rather than framed in terms of broader institutional or systemic factors.

Figure 4 on the next page shows the complex interplay of factors which either increase young people's risk of entering into violent behaviours or protect them from it.

Figure 4: Risk and protective pathways into or away from violence

Factors reported in this review that amplify, trigger or shield against serious youth violence

Interpersonal level

- Adverse childhood experiences
- Influence of criminally involved peers
- Weak family ties

Influences from each level overlap and interact – creating fluid and moving context for involvement in SYV.

Community Level

- Immediate environment
- Strength of social connections and engagement
- Access to youth services, leisure facilities, sport
- Gangs, organised crime, football firms, sectarian groups
- Access to weapons
- Achieving status within group
- Cultural and media representation of masculinity

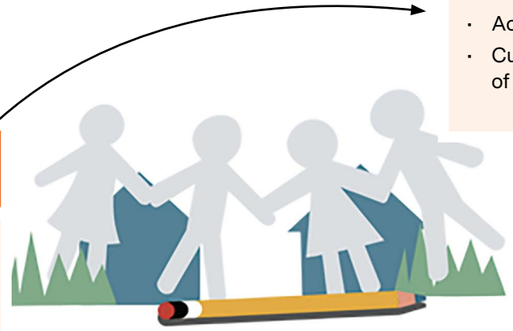
Desistance

- Creating constructive opportunities for change
- Growing up
- Finding a stable identity
- Building confidence, self-esteem
- Recognising importance of pro-social bonds
- Punitive disincentives can be effective if accompanied by constructive support
- Relational support from family or authority figures

Individual level

Influences by age, maturity, gender, race, identity, psychological and behavioural factors (particularly hyper masculinity).

- Mental health
- Drug and alcohol use
- Lack of opportunity to earn legitimate income
- Insecurity
- Vulnerability
- Fear
- Protective instinct



Societal/structural level

Influences by age, maturity, gender, race, identity, psychological and behavioural factors (particularly hyper masculinity).

- Structural inequities (economic, race, gender, age)
- Structural and symbolic violence
- Negative experiences with police and criminal justice
- Negative education and school experiences
- Lack of support from social services
- Influence of mass media

7.1 Discussion on desistance

Effectiveness of desistance programmes may hinge on their ability to reinforce social bonds and engagement with pro-social, positive networks—requiring close attention to the complex assemblages of people, places, and objects that shape young people's behaviour. Helping CYP to change mindsets must be done alongside structural changes to infrastructures that have contributed to them engaging in violence in the first place. The observation from one prison inmate that: *'I've changed but the world hasn't'* (Barry 2013) is salutary.

The community spirit and friendship offered by membership of the gang may facilitate transition away from certain behaviours whilst maintaining the bonding social capital gained from the sense of belonging (Gormally 2010). Attention should also be paid to helping individuals avoid reconnecting to previous gang networks – supporting them to move away from dangerous routines or geographical areas, without cutting off important relational ties (Harris 2011).

Given the number of respondents reflecting on poor school experiences it is worth reflecting on what can be done at policy-level to find ways to help marginalised students build positive attachment both to the school community (students and staff) as well as to school activities.

Work to resolve rival gang antagonism in Alternative Provisions (Irwin Rogers et al 2020) has shown that, even in contexts where rival gang affiliations existed among students, staff were able to ensure that gang dynamics remained outside the school environment. A pro-social and pro-education internal logic was actively promoted to replace the influence of gang culture. Once inside the school, gang identities were effectively left at the gate (Irwin-Rogers et al., 2020). The greater flexibility of Alternative Provision in terms of curriculum design, along with the strategic use of engaging activities such as sports, music, and vocational training, may further support this process of re-engagement. Much depends on how well schools are able to build and maintain positive, pro-education environments that can temporarily replace the influence of gangs outside school. The more students were helped to feel safe at school and to leave the gang connection behind, the more likely they were to leave weapons at home. Problems with educating gang-involved pupils arise only when the values and incentives of the gang environment start to influence the school setting (Irwin-Rogers 2018).

A key aspect of some community initiatives aimed at reducing violence has been challenging dominant ideas of masculinity, which are particularly influential among certain groups of CYP and in shaping social interactions and social media. However, these interventions have been critiqued for not consistently offering alternative models of non-violent masculinity that could help replace entrenched, harmful norms (Holligan & McLean, 2018). Also important in terms of credibility of messaging around desistance is the medium through which campaigns are delivered. Study participants were deeply mistrustful of the criminal justice system and many had struggled to engage at school. Knife awareness, for example, particularly delivered through the police, may have little legitimacy for young people who offend (Traynor 2016).

7.2 Reflections on the research process

This systematic review offers substantial depth, drawing together literature from a wide range of settings, geographic contexts, and demographic groups to improve our understanding of CYP involvement in SYV in the UK. The included studies present evidence gathered through in-depth qualitative methods and contribute fresh syntheses of ideas viewed through diverse conceptual and theoretical lenses.

7.2.1 Limitations

Scope of review

Our aim in this review has been to bring together a holistic picture of CYP's narratives of their own experiences of involvement in SYV across different contexts and settings in the UK. Most empirical studies are focussed on specific research questions such as 'why CYP join street gangs?' or 'what are the social processes that help CYP makes sense of violent behaviour?' which provides a partial picture of factors that impact SYV. Our synthesis was ultimately based on what study authors report, as they relate to our review objectives.

Conceptual definitions

Two of the key concepts we sought to include in this review proved to be particularly challenging: SYV and 'at risk' of involvement. Despite having defined all the key terms with the wider project team, including both LSHTM and YEF, the practicalities of the screening process required revisiting those definitions multiple times. They were also either inconsistently or not defined at all by the primary study authors. We addressed uncertainties by holding a series of meetings to review and discuss inclusion and exclusion criteria of identified papers to ensure 90% agreement was reached between the three main members of the team undertaking screening (RB, JM and HB).

Additionally, our definition of 'at risk' included a range of behaviours and experiences that are thought to put CYP at risk of involvement in SYV. These definitions and terminologies were also built through our PPIE consultations of both CYPs and professional stakeholders. Despite this, it is likely that our search strategies would not have included all the subgroups that may contribute to putting CYP at risk of SYV involvement. For example, while acts such as weapon carrying or joining gangs are likely to have been captured, CYP with a history of exclusion from schools may not have been.

Gaps in representation of CYP voices

The included studies captured the experiences of CYP from diverse ethnic and gender backgrounds. However, in studies where both genders were eligible, few successfully represented both voices equally. Instead, male participants predominated, making up as much as three-quarters of the sample in mixed-gender studies. In one case, this imbalance was attributed to youth workers' heightened protection concerns for female participants compared to males (Shaw, 2014). The prevailing focus on male involvement has obscured the female perspective, often downplaying or marginalising their roles (Deuchar et al., 2020; Miller, 2002). Deuchar et al. (2020), in their investigation of female gang involvement, argue that young women possess a highly developed awareness of the gendered dynamics of street gangs. While it is not possible to say how the themes emerging from the meta-ethnography may have shifted if more female CYP voices were reflected in the included studies, it may have contrasted the hypermasculinity theme with a female counter narrative – thus potentially reducing the emphasis on this theme. There is a pressing need to better understand and highlight the experiences of girls and young women, as their trajectories may differ significantly from those of their male peers. Better representation of female voices may also deepen our understanding of how young women navigate hyper-masculine environments, which in turn, would help inform more nuanced and gender-responsive desistance practices.

In relation to ethnicity, whilst a significant number of studies included the voice of ethnic minority CYP, it was difficult to meaningfully compare experiences across different ethnic groups. A significant number of studies did not report any ethnic details of their sample, while others (often reflecting the demography of the local environment) focused primarily on White participants. Even in studies with a more ethnically diverse profile, White CYP often constituted the majority of the sample. In some cases, authors noted that the study setting was ethnically diverse but failed to provide specific data on the ethnic makeup of participants. Findings were rarely presented with details of ethnicity. Two studies described their CYP sample based on their migration status (one on immigrants and one on refugees). Wider experiences of CYP from diverse migrant status have not been captured. Many migrant populations, including asylum-seekers and refugees, are likely to have similar negative experiences identified in this review, alongside those related to the UK's increasingly hostile response to migrants. These experiences may put CYP at risk of involvement in SYV, given the similarities in risk factors at different levels noted in this review. A lack of data on ethnicity and migration status prevents any meaningful understand and interpretation of potential pathways into SYV.

Additionally, certain types of violence, such as that related to sectarianism, were studied exclusively in specific settings – in this case in Northern Ireland. Inevitably this means they are context specific and findings about their causes and consequences may not be generalisable.

As a result of this under-representation of key groups the findings of this review cannot claim proportional representation across all demographics. Nonetheless, the findings do reflect the current state of UK-based qualitative research on serious youth violence, which remains the central focus of this review. Gaps in representation are addressed further in the recommendations (Section 8).

Findings on desistance

Studies on desistance did not feature as prominently in this review. While some accounts of desistance appeared within studies of violent perpetration, this was not usually their primary focus. Several evaluations of specific interventions were also excluded because they did not include direct accounts from CYP or did not include details of any form of SVY which were core inclusion criteria for this review. Although we were able to draw out some issues described by CYP and study authors as key for desistance, to fully examine the issue and potential pathways, a study dedicated specifically to desistance would offer deeper insight into the mechanisms involved. Having a broader inclusion criteria, and potentially removing the emphasis on specific forms of violence may enable the capture of more diverse desistance approaches across a wider range of CYP.

Influence of Established Research Groups in the Field

A number of studies included in this review were produced by a relatively small group of well-established researchers or research teams. While the continued contribution of these experts undoubtedly advances the field and fosters methodological consistency, particularly in the context of conducting rigorous qualitative research that requires long-term relationship building. Indeed, some study authors have credited their ability to access and interview CYP involved in SYV to their own long-term presence in the community, connecting, volunteering and working locally, before they began their fieldwork. However, it is also possible that their dominance of research groups may shape the prevailing narrative, theoretical or disciplinary orientations or research questions asked in the field. This highlights the value of promoting diverse disciplines, perspectives and encouraging broader participation in future SYV research including involvement of CYP as peer researchers and co-produce relevant and appropriate research questions and methodologies that are rooted in their lived realities.

Challenges with research on young people and serious youth violence

The CYP whose accounts featured within the papers included in this review were reflecting on what were often traumatic times or moments in their lives. There was a tendency in some of the narratives to use the third person, interchanging 'I' with 'they' as a means of distancing themselves from painful experiences.

For example, when asked about how past experience had influenced his future, one boy said:

> ***Don't know boy . . . some people maybe it might affect them, some people then again it won't*** (Leroy in Young 2009 p. 58)

This passive style appears to be a protective mechanism, but makes it hard for the purposes of analysis to assume whether the accounts are genuinely personal experiences or speculative. In some cases, however, those telling the stories had been convicted for violent crimes or were considered to be at risk of becoming perpetrators – and in the main it is assumed that the accounts generally lean heavily on first hand experiences.

7.2.2 Author reflexivity

The review team from LSHTM included information specialists, social scientists, experts in systematic reviews and those with experience of working with young people engaged in SYV. The broader team at YEF included youth and engagement specialists as well as research leads. The team regularly met to discuss and navigate procedural and interpretive challenges. Engagement with YEF's YAB, with whom we met twice during the review as part of the PPI engagement, was instrumental in shaping a shared understanding of key concepts and enhancing the transparency of our analytic framework. Anticipating regular input from the YAB also encouraged the team to continuously question our assumptions, critically reflect on our positions, and deepen reflexivity throughout the course of the work.

The commissioner for this review, YEF, had no role in deciding the methodology including the use of meta-ethnographic synthesis. However, they played a key role in the conceptual discussions of the definitions of the concept of SYV and the population of interest. They also offered guidance in the best way to connect with the YAB and facilitated the engagement. Through this process, the review team was able to access and gather feedback from members of the YAB.

Additionally, YEF ensured this review went through an anonymous peer review process, both for the protocol and this final report which improved the final output of the review.

7.2.3 Assessing confidence in review findings

GRADE-CERQual was used to assess confidence in review findings (Lewin et al., 2018) (see Section 3.6)

Given the overlapping nature of the five main narratives arrived at in this review we have provided one overall assessment of confidence for the review findings against these narratives– these are presented in Appendix 9. We have only minor concerns against coherence and relevance and moderate concerns about methodological limitations and relevance.

Moderate concerns were noted for methodological limitations and adequacy. On methodological limitations, based on our CASP assessment conducted for each included study, the main contributing factor to study weakness is the lack of reflexivity, including ethical reflections and potential bias in reporting. In some publications, insufficient reporting was provided on the analytical methods used which affected the quality assessment of the paper, leading to moderate concerns overall.

On adequacy, while data were rich for themes related to group violence, there was a gap for certain key groups such as ethnic minorities and female CYP, as well as limited geographical representation. Although, many study authors included both males and females, few females were actually part of the final sample, making their voices under-represented. A large proportion of the included studies did not describe the ethnic make-up of their sample nor present or discuss findings within these subgroups. There also appears to be some geographic saturation with many studies focused on Glasgow in Scotland, London and the Midlands for England and only areas known for secular conflicts in Northern Ireland. However, despite these inadequacies, we reached thematic saturation using data, the wider literature and drawing on our logic model to ensure no key areas were missed.

Minor concerns on coherence and relevance were noted. Coherence concerns were based on the team's confidence in using the ecological framework to build our analysis and through patterns identified in the data and the wider literature and theories. Through this process, we developed a strong coherence within and between overlapping narratives to generate new knowledge through the meta-synthesis.

Minor relevance concerns were due to few studies focused on examining the mechanisms of violence. It would not be expected that all primary included studies in the review would be focused on the same research questions we sought to answer. However, all included studies were focused on ensuring the voice of CYP are prioritised.

Additionally, to reduce the potential for bias, where RB was the author of a primary study included in the review, the quality assessment was conducted by another member of the team (JM).

8

Recommendations and evidence gaps

8 Recommendations and evidence gaps

Based on our findings in this review, we propose a series of research recommendations to further improve our understanding of SVY perpetrated by CYP in the UK. Specifically, we propose to close the gaps identified to be lacking in the current body of literature.

Recommendations for further research

Gender

Studies suggest that there is poor understanding of the concepts of coercion and consent (Beckett 2023 and Firmin 2011), and how these might impact upon the perceived legality or illegality of sexual activities, particularly amongst males. This is an area demanding greater interrogation and is particularly important in relation to the education of young people in negotiating and discussing relationship, sex and consent.

More research is needed to explore female CYPs' experiences as accomplices/perpetrators of SYV to understand whether and how their experiences, pathways into and potential desistance options differ from those of male CYP. In our consultations with professionals, discussions on gender differences in involvement in SYV or in joining gangs was mentioned.

Primary study authors have reported challenges to access and meaningfully engage female CYP. Research is needed to consider innovative, sensitive methods which are both ethically and procedurally sound and can illicit more 'authentic' and meaningful data from this group. Working more closely with key stakeholders and groups, including community-based organisations to access female CYP should be explored to coproduce relevant and appropriate ways to safely involve and include female voices.

Whilst there are many accounts from girls of being victims of sexual violence and assault from men, male accounts were notable in their focus on physical rather than sexual violence. Sexual violence remains harder to broach and appears to have more stigma attached, meaning that insight into the mechanisms that lead to its perpetration is difficult to glean.

Ethnicity

The scope of this review echoes the focus of the selected papers and does not necessarily reflect balanced representation across different ethnic groups. Although many studies did include a range of CYP from different ethnic backgrounds, greater understanding by ethnicity could be improved by disaggregating findings by ethnicity where relevant. Some of the included literature notes that CYP from Caribbean and mixed-Black backgrounds identified social and cultural value in engaging with gangs—for purposes such as socializing and community ("chilling") (Gunter 2010). However, these reported social benefits were not exclusive to any single ethnic group. For example, Section 5.3.4 highlights the importance of social bonds across various populations: studies by Deuchar (2019) and Fraser (2013) emphasize how White working-class youth in Scotland also value such social connections. There is a need for further research to disentangle the dual nature of gangs as both supportive social structures that foster a sense of identity and belonging, and as entities susceptible to the escalation of violence. More research into refugees and those with diverse migration status may also be of value, given their unique sense of marginalization as well as potential experience of prior trauma.

Class

Other areas where concerns have been raised about the disproportionate involvement of particular groups in SYV relate to class. One such group is White working-class boys (Holligan and McLean, 2018). In their study of Glasgow housing estates, Holligan and McLean (2018) argue that variations in levels of violence across different areas can be linked to localised cultural factors, where violence is used to construct and reinforce a celebrated male identity and status, shaped in ways unique to each community. The dominance of hypermasculinity in particular areas warrants more insight into ways to address and counter harms done by related behaviours (Gunter 2010, Palasinski and Riggs 2012).

Social media

Links between aspiration, civic engagement, socio-economic group, constructions of hypermasculinity and the way this is influenced by social and national media was often present within accounts – and is perhaps an area deserving closer interrogation. Social media can function as structural accelerants, intensifying gendered expectations and embedding violence more deeply within the social identities and peer dynamics of young people. In particular the dominance of hypermasculinity in some areas and its promotion in areas of social media warrants more insight into ways to address and counter harms done by related behaviours (Gunter 2010, Palasinski and Riggs 2012).

Risk groups for involvement of SYV

This review has highlighted the challenges of distinguishing between 'at risk' groups and perpetrators. Given the fluidity and complexity of social contexts, we suggest that such distinctions can sometimes be artificial. Since intervention and policy work in SYV commonly relies on this separation, further research examining the value and limitations of these definitional categories would be beneficial.

It is also important for research on SYV to distinguish between a single act of violence to repeated and sustained involvement in SYV as pathways and mechanisms may be different which would call for different prevention, interventions and desistance strategies.

Influence of types of violent grouping and geographical area

This review identified several similarities and differences in the experiences of various groups involved in youth violence, including football firms, sectarian gangs, street gangs, and peer groups. While there were many commonalities in how violence was experienced and enacted, there were also clear distinctions across different group types and geographical contexts. For instance, a young person living in a diverse area of London or Liverpool may engage in markedly different patterns of violent behaviour compared to someone residing in a children's residential centre in Bournemouth or a sectarian community in Belfast. A deeper understanding of how to tailor prevention and desistance programmes to these varied settings and groups—along with greater insight into the role of place in shaping behaviour—could inform the development of more effective interventions and future research.

Research methods

Attitudes to violence and disclosures of violent behaviour are often difficult to uncover. Evans et al. (2007), in research with young people, found that asking about the content and meaning of intrusive memories could be a useful tool for risk assessment. Many participants noted that they had never been asked about the qualities of their memories of violent behaviour, and that this more focused line of questioning was more engaging than the usual focus on reasons for their violence.

Further research exploring creative methods of eliciting sensitive information may help develop the depth of the evidence base. Similarly, developmental work on research methods to elicit more information on women/girls involved in SYV. This could involve greater engagement with diverse CYP to co-design appropriate research questions and methodologies that are appropriate and relevant to their realities. Where feasible, engaging CYP as peer researchers to co-produce relevant research may help to address some of the limitations noted in this review.

9 Conclusion

9 Conclusion

This review, incorporating the voice of young people involved in the perpetration of serious violence, highlights the multifaceted and deeply contextual nature of these acts and the pathways that lead to them . It demonstrates how individual experiences are inseparably linked to family dynamics, peer networks, neighbourhood environments, and structural inequalities. The ecological framing adopted here illustrates how violence is not a fixed phenomenon but one that evolves across time and place, shaped by shifting social, political, and cultural contexts. For many young people, violence emerges as a response to structural failures, lack of opportunity, and punitive systems that reinforce marginalisation, rather than alleviate it.

The qualitative synthesis identified five overarching narratives shaping CYP's involvement in SYV. The first three consider mechanisms of entry into SYV: i) 'Difficult Lives', where violence is expressive and reactive, emerging from trauma, poverty, exclusion, and a desire for justice; ii) 'The armour of toughness and Hypermasculinity', in which marginalised young men adopt rigid gender norms and use violence to gain respect, identity, and belonging; iii) 'money as a route to status and livelihood', where violence serves instrumental purposes in achieving power, money, or security. The fourth considers 'Definitions of At Risk', highlighting the fluid boundaries between risk and involvement, shaped by shifting environments. The final narrative focuses on the move towards desistance and emphasises the need for supportive relationships, safe spaces, and structural change to sustain positive transitions. These narratives reflect the interplay of individual agency and structural constraints, illustrating that SYV is not fixed but evolves across time and place. Efforts to reduce SYV must therefore focus not only on individual-level interventions but also tackle systemic inequalities, challenge harmful norms, and build environments that support belonging and opportunity.

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10 References

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Research sub-questions

1 **What is the scope of UK qualitative research conducted with CYP at risk of or involved in violence?** This will include the following sub-questions: Who are the research participants? How are they involved in the research?

- What geographical, regional and social contexts are covered in the research?
- What specific serious youth violence are addressed in the research?
- What types of data collection methods are used and to what extent are they participatory?
- What is the quality of the research?

2 **How do CYPs' perceive the pathways to their involvement, including both online and offline forms, in violence and whether there were key points of intervention that may have prevented their involvement?**

3 **What are the potential and actual pathways to desistence and what are the key influences (including individuals, time points, environmental, services and interventions) that can support CYP to do so?**

4 **How do these experiences differ for CYPs from different social and geographical context, including regional variations of county line violence, demographic backgrounds and differences in involvement in violence?**

5 **What are the gaps in the existing UK qualitative research on CYP at risk of or involved in violence?**

Appendix 2: EmergE Guidance

No.	Criteria Headings	Reporting Criteria
Phase 1—*Selecting meta-ethnography and getting started*		
1	**Rationale and context for the meta-ethnography**	Describe the gap in research or knowledge to be filled by the meta-ethnography, and the wider context of the meta-ethnography
2	**Aim(s) of the meta-ethnography**	Describe the meta-ethnography aim(s)
3	**Focus of the meta-ethnography**	Describe the meta-ethnography review question(s) (or objectives)
4	**Rationale for using meta-ethnography**	Explain why meta-ethnography was considered the most appropriate qualitative synthesis methodology
Phase 2—*Deciding what is relevant*		
5	**Search strategy**	Describe the rationale for the literature search strategy
6	**Search processes**	Describe how the literature searching was carried out and by whom
7	**Selecting primary studies**	Describe the process of study screening and selection, and who was involved
8	**Outcome of study selection**	Describe the results of study searches and screening
Phase 3—*Reading included studies*		
9	**Reading and data extraction approach**	Describe the reading and data extraction method and processes
10	**Presenting characteristics of included studies**	Describe characteristics of the included studies
Phase 4—*Determining how studies are related*		
11	**Process for determining how studies are related**	Describe the methods and processes for determining how the included studies are related: – Which aspects of studies were compared AND – How the studies were compared Describe how studies relate to each other
12	**Outcome of relating studies**	Describe how studies relate to each other
Phase 5—*Translating studies into one another*		
13	**Process of translating studies**	Describe the methods of translation: Describe steps taken to preserve the context and meaning of the relationships between concepts within and across studies – Describe how the reciprocal and refutational translations were conducted – Describe how potential alternative interpretations or explanations were considered in the translations
14	**Outcome of translation**	Describe the interpretive findings of the translation
Phase 6—*Synthesizing translations*		
15	**Synthesis process**	Describe the methods used to develop overarching concepts (“synthesised translations”) Describe how potential alternative interpretations or explanations were considered in the synthesis
16	**Outcome of synthesis process**	Describe the new theory, conceptual framework, model, configuration, or interpretation of data developed from the synthesis
Phase 7—*Expressing the synthesis*		
17	**Summary of findings**	Summarize the main interpretive findings of the translation and synthesis and compare them to existing literature
18	**Strengths, limitations, and reflexivity**	Reflect on and describe the strengths and limitations of the synthesis: – Methodological aspects—for example, describe how the synthesis findings were influenced by the nature of the included studies and how the meta-ethnography was conducted. – Reflexivity—for example, the impact of the research team on the synthesis findings
19	**Recommendations and conclusions**	Describe the implications of the synthesis

Taken from France et al (2019)

Appendix 3: Logic model – Young people and involvement in SYV

Problem statement: Evidence from quantitative research suggests that involvement of young people (YP) in serious violence may be attributed to a range of individual, social, environmental factors. However qualitative insights from young people are largely absent.

Aim: Employing a systematic review of qualitative research to consider: How CYP get involved in violent behaviours?; what are their experiences of violence?; what are effective facilitators to desistance?; where are the gaps in research?

Contributory inputs

School: low school commitment, bullying, exclusion.

Peer group: marginalisation, involvement with peers who have prior contact with gangs and criminal justice system. Normalisation of violence.

Individual characteristics: mental health and wellbeing issues (e.g., ADHD, ASPD, ODD, psychological distress, self-esteem, self-control & self-regulation, impulsivity (anger and rage with no pre-meditation), risk taking, externalizing, moral disengagement, learning difficulties, substance use, low self-esteem, low empathy, poor relationships (peers, family, professionals).

Experience of local authority care.

Early perceived failure (sports, academic, school, difficulties with friendships). Involvement in non-violent crime, anti-social behaviour. Use of alcohol/drugs.

Environment and family: Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) including: poverty, domestic violence, maltreatment/abuse, parental substance use, absent parent (partic. lack of male role model, siblings involved in gangs). Neighbourhood poverty.

Lack of employment opportunity.

Victim of crime. High crime levels.

Systemic: lack of access to support and prevention services e.g., CAMHs. Lack of daily structure. NEETs.

Experience with criminal justice including racial disproportionality.

Outputs

Activities

- Young vulnerable people – particularly those excluded from school congregate in areas where they are more likely to encounter others (YP and adults) involved in illicit activities and violence
- Grooming by 'gang' leaders. Criminal exploitation
- Gangs identify 'territory' which engenders feelings of shared identity – protecting ownership of area (physical and metaphorical)
- Conflict promoted as mechanism for survival – YP adopt values dissonant to those of prevailing social order
- Cultural transmission of 'criminality'
- MH issues unrecognised or treated punitively

Participation

YP describe the following routes to involvement in violence:

- Exciting/life affirming
- Linked to illicit means of earning money
- For protection
- Reaction to mistrust of police/wider systems
- Reduces sense of isolation
- Those who are most vulnerable have a reduced sense of control over their environment
- Violence appears inevitable – no other options are available
- Violence normalized
- Moral disengagement and angry rumination
- Gender based violence reflects contextual norms where women are objectified. Sex sought as symbol of status
- Notion of 'munpain' – chronic pain of broader structural (iniquitous) forces expressed as violence
- Reaction to 'cruel optimism' of aspiration
- Carrying weapons for protection and/or a signifier of street authenticity, masculinity, identity
- Hurt people hurt people
- Mistrust of police and wider systems

Outcomes/Impact

Short

Perceived short term benefits of violence:

- Self-protection
- Protecting others
- Membership of gangs may provide both a sense of belonging, excitement and protection.
- Coercive control ➡ growing fear and stress
- Acquisition of power and status
- YP recognise similar characteristics in others and feel less isolated
- Access to financial and material resources
- Self protection

Harms:

- Internalise feelings of failure
- YP labelled as failing – pushed out and marginalised
- Increased anger and distrust that social support structures are dependable
- Increased dysfunctional and antisocial relationships.
- Growing anger, distrust, isolation and marginalisation
- Normalisation of violent behaviour
- Deteriorating mental health, poor self-esteem, moral disengagement
- Physical and mental harm to self and others
- Family and community unable to support YP due to combination of environmental, economic, social constraints

Medium

Lack of access to activities and work opportunities.

Growing tensions between normalising violence and mainstream societal norms (moral conflict).

Unequal opportunities breed tensions and adoption of 'anti-social' norms and values.

Status-frustration and loss of self-esteem or anger against society.

Poor academic qualifications and vocational skills .

Long

Rise in serious mental health conditions.

Rise in violent and criminal behaviours .

Poor physical and mental health (both perpetrators and victims).

Increased spending from state on health, social care and criminal justice.

Increased family breakdown.

Global impact on social fabric, social capital, economy.

Assumptions and external factors

Violent behaviours in YP are influenced by complex interplay of social, psychological, economic and cultural factors. Whilst the majority of YP, who have experienced multiple ACEs, do not get involved in the violence, evidence suggests that experiences such as: family break down; poor mental health; childhood trauma; involvement with peers with experience of criminal justice system; poverty; learning difficulties; exposure to drugs; experience of racism work in a cumulative fashion to increase the chances that YP will resort to violent behaviours.

Appendix 4: Richness score guidance for ethnography

Richness score guidance for ethnography (adapted from France 2023)

Richness criteria for inclusion:

Thick or very thick qualitative data (findings) that relate to the meta-ethnographic synthesis objectives. Fairly detailed or detailed/fairly large or large amount of context and setting descriptions.

Example:

A typical qualitative research article in a journal with a smaller word limit and often using simple thematic analysis. Data drawn from a detailed ethnography or a published qualitative article with the same objectives as the synthesis that includes more in-depth context and setting descriptions and a more in-depth presentation of the findings – often using theoretical perspective.

Limited richness (studies assessed as having limited richness were excluded):

Thin or fairly thin qualitative data (findings) presented that relate to the meta-ethnographic synthesis objectives. Little or no context and setting descriptions.

Example:

A mixed methods study using open-ended survey questions, a more detailed qualitative study where only part of the data relates to the synthesis objectives, or a limited number of qualitative findings from a quant-qual mixed methods or qualitative study. An evaluation of a violence reduction programme with focus on impact rather than mechanisms.

Appendix 5: CASP scores assessing methodological quality of included studies

Author, publication year	Study aim	Methodology	Design	Recruitment	Data collection	Researcher participant relationship	Ethics	Analysis	Statement of findings	Research of value	CASP Score	Validity of response*	Total Quality Score (0 - 22)
Bakkali, 2019	1	2	2	2	2	2	0	2	2	2	17	2	19
Bannister, 2012	2	2	2	1	1	1	2	1	2	2	16	1	17
Barker, 2025	2	1	2	2	2	1	2	2	2	2	18	1	19
Barry, 2013	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	1	2	2	19	2	21
Barter, 2004	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	20	1	21
Beckett, 2013	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	20	2	22
Crowther 2013	2	2	2	2	2	1	1	2	2	2	18	1	19
Deuchar, 2009	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	1	2	2	19	2	21
Deuchar, 2011	2	1	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	19	2	21
Evans, 2007	2	2	2	2	2	0	2	2	2	1	17	2	19
Factor, 2015	2	2	2	2	2	0	1	0	2	1	14	1	15
Firmin, 2011	2	2	1	1	1	1	2	0	2	2	14	1	15
Forsyth, 2011	2	2	2	2	2	0	1	2	2	2	17	0	17
Fraser, 2013	2	2	2	0	2	2	1	0	2	2	15	2	17
Gormally, 2015	2	2	2	2	1	2	1	1	2	2	17	2	19
Gunter, 2010	2	2	1	1	1	0	0	0	2	2	11	2	13
Hansson, 2005	2	2	2	2	2	2	1	2	2	2	19	2	21
Harding, 2014	2	2	2	2	2	1	0	0	2	2	15	1	16
Harding, 2020	2	2	2	2	2	0	1	0	2	2	15	1	16
Harland, 2011	2	2	2	2	2	2	0	2	2	2	18	1	19
Harris, 2011	2	2	2	2	2	1	1	2	2	2	18	2	20
Hesketh, 2018	2	2	2	2	2	1	2	2	2	2	19	2	21
Heskieth, 2019	2	2	2	1	2	1	2	2	2	2	18	2	20
Holligan, 2015	2	2	2	0	2	0	1	2	2	2	15	1	16
Holligan & Deuchar, 2015	2	2	2	1	1	0	0	1	2	2	13	1	14
Holligan, 2017	1	2	2	2	2	1	0	1	2	2	15	2	17

Author, publication year	Study aim	Methodology	Design	Recruitment	Data collection	Researcher participant relationship	Ethics	Analysis	Statement of findings	Research of value	CASP Score	Validity of response*	Total Quality Score (0 - 22)
Holligan & McLean, 2018	2	2	2	2	2	1	0	2	2	2	17	2	19
Irwin-Jones, 2018	2	2	2	1	2	1	0	2	2	2	16	1	17
King, 2023	2	2	2	1	2	2	0	2	2	2	17	2	19
Liddle & Harding 2022	2	2	2	1	2	1	1	2	2	2	17	1	18
Palasinski 2012	2	2	2	1	2	2	2	2	2	2	19	2	21
Shaw, 2014	2	2	2	2	2	1	2	1	2	2	18	1	19
Smeaton, 2009	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	20	1	21
Taylor, 2015	2	2	2	2	2	0	1	2	2	2	17	0	17
Thurston, 2024	2	2	2	2	2	1	2	2	2	2	19	1	20
Traynor, 2016	2	2	2	2	2	1	2	2	2	2	19	1	20
Trickett, 2016	2	2	2	2	1	2	0	0	1	2	14	1	15
User's Voice, 2011	2	2	2	2	2	2	0	0	1	2	15	2	17
User Voice, 2023	2	2	2	2	2	2	0	0	2	2	16	2	18
Young, 2007	2	2	2	2	1	1	0	1	2	2	15	1	16
Young, 2009	2	2	2	2	1	1	0	1	1	1	13	1	14
Young, 2013	2	2	2	2	2	1	0	1	1	2	15	2	17

*Additional indicator added. Examines whether participants were constrained in their response and engagement of participants.

Low scores do not necessarily represent poor quality – it may be that authors did not report certain categories due to space constraints or organisational expectations/guidance

Appendix 6: Summary of engagement sessions and feedback with the YEF youth advisory board and professional stakeholders

Session 1. September 2024. Online consultation with 6 young people from Youth Advisory Board

i. **Session 1:** The aim of the first session was to share the aims and objectives of the review, to consult on the key concepts and definitions for the search and get feedback on the aims and objectives of the study. The session took place online with 8 participants located across the UK involving interactive ice-breakers, presentations and discussion.

Session 2. June 2025. Online consultation with 5 young people from YAB

ii. **Session 2:** The aim of the second session with young people was to present an overview of the findings, ask for their views on the way data was being categorised and presented, with reference to the ecological framework; explore how the findings resonated with their own experience; and identify potential gaps in the synthesis and literature.

Summary of feedback from YAB

Across two sessions with the Youth Advisory Board, young people provided valuable insights that deepened the research's relevance and sensitivity. In the first session, YAB members shared their understanding of violence, emphasizing that it extends beyond physical acts to include structural violence—such as the effects of systemic inequities on their lives. They also spoke candidly about the difficulties of self-reporting mental health struggles, particularly how trauma and PTSD can affect emotional reflection and potentially be misinterpreted as a lack of empathy. In the second session, the group underscored the importance of cultural identity in shaping how violence is experienced and interpreted, urging the research team to consider whether the findings truly represent the diversity of cultural and ethnic backgrounds. They strongly supported the use of personal narratives alongside quantitative data to enrich understanding and impact. Finally, the YAB encouraged presenting findings in formats that are visually engaging and accessible—especially for use in settings like youth clubs—advocating for low-text, user-friendly materials that young people can easily relate to and engage with.

Professional Consultation

8 professionals were consulted at the onset of the review constituting a mix of specialists in SYV from youth practice, academia, national policy and voluntary organisations. The aim was to present an overview of the planned work both as a form of knowledge sharing and to seek views on gaps or ways in which the work could be strengthened.

Summary of feedback from professionals

Professional experts consulted expressed strong support for the research aims, while also raising a number of important challenges and considerations. A key concern was how the review would address gaps in the literature, particularly where qualitative data may not offer a complete picture. Experts questioned how non-peer-reviewed sources—such as organisational evaluations and strategy documents—would be assessed and incorporated. They highlighted the need for the Youth Endowment Fund (YEF) to challenge an overreliance on quantitative, easily measurable data, advocating for more reflexive and responsive approaches that can act on promising, but less formally evidenced, interventions. Discussions also pointed to the difficulty of capturing environmental or structural influences, as qualitative research may more readily reflect individual or interpersonal dynamics (e.g., family relationships or empathy). The use of a logic model was suggested as a helpful tool for identifying and addressing evidence gaps, especially where important factors may not be reflected in young people's accounts. Public engagement, including working with the YEF Youth Advisory Board, was seen as vital for surfacing and addressing these omissions. Concerns about gender were also raised, particularly the invisibility of girls and young women in current data and the influence of fear and gender dynamics in youth violence. Experts noted the risk of a "male gaze" shaping the narrative and highlighted the importance of asking the right

questions, in the right way, to better understand the experiences of all young people. Lastly, experts stressed that the review must account for the distinct experiences of minoritised populations and be sensitive to the nuances between gang involvement and engagement in violence.

Appendix 7: Results from research databases

Details of results from each database are shown in table 3. The grey literature search retrieved 326 items.

Table 3: Search results retrieved from each database. The number of results are for the final search run in January 2025.

Database	Number of results	Total number of deduplicated results put forward for screening
ASSIA	324	63
British Education Index	117	75
Child Development & Adolescent Studies	2162	1903
Criminal Justice Database	246	37
Education Abstracts (H.W. Wilson)	1659	834
Embase Classic+Embase	2205	1246
ERIC	271	98
Global Health	265	100
International Bibliography of the Social Sciences (IBSS)	305	46
Medline ALL	1366	1810
APA PsycInfo	1886	1323
Social Policy & Practice	1453	1057
Social Science Database	260	22
Sociological Abstracts	573	47
Sociology Database	135	2
Teacher Reference Center	95	45
Web of Science	1826	532

Appendix 8: Table of characteristics of included papers

Author and publication year	Aim of study	Setting	Type of Violence	Data collection method	Sample description	Sampling strategy	Sample size	Gender	Age-groups	Ethnicity
Bakkali, 2019	Explores everyday experiences of young adults living in London who have been involved with road life (street culture).	South London; council estate	Gang activity and involvement in violent crime	Ethnographic interviews of biographical narrative	YP who had spent part of their live on the road	Purposeful intensity sampling through existing contacts	2	Males	Early 20s	Children of migrant parents: 1 from Colombia & 1 from Nigeria
Bannister, 2012	Study of territoriality among young people	Bradford, Glasgow, Peterborough and London (Tower Hamlets) (Phase 2); linked to community projects designed to challenge YP territorial identities	Territorial (inter-group) conflicts including street crime (assault, county lines, burglary)	FGDs	YP in contact with community-based agencies	Through community projects in the study settings designed to address territorial violence	15 FGDs with 4-13 participants each	Both but vast majority males (numbers not reported)	Ages: 8 - 21, majority 13 - 17	Glasgow and Peterborough – exclusively white; Bradford and London Tower Hamlets mixture of white and Asians.
Barker, 2025	Explores experiences and mechanisms underlying gang related behaviours and incentives of gang membership.	South East, North West, West Country, England; Alternative provision, youth justice settings, voluntary organisations	Gang involved (or at risk of involvement) or criminal involvement	In-depth interviews	Most were school excluded and had record of criminal involvement. 1/3 of sample reported to be linked to criminal gang; nearly 1/2 had mental health diagnosis.	Purposive, with gatekeepers	29	Males	14-24 yrs (mean age 16)	White British (n=18); dual heritage (n=5); Caribbean (n=3); Black African, Armenian and Pakistani (n=1 each)
Barry, 2013	Explores the views of young people in care and contrasts their evidence with that from Rational Choice Theory, elements of which are increasingly influencing youth justice policy.	Scotland; residential units, residential schools, secure units and young offender institutions	Involved in youth justice system; type of violence not specified	FGDs	Young people involved in youth justice system.	Residential units, residential schools, secure units and young offender institutions.	103 (includes those who completed only quantitative surveys only)	Both (73 M; 30F, includes both FGD and survey respondents)	11 - 21	Unspecified
Barter, 2004	Understanding young people's violence towards peers within residential settings	England, 14 residential units	A continuum of violence from sporadic to chronic including non-physical, physical, sexual, emotional and verbal	Interviews, vignettes,participant observations	"Children and staff in 14 children's residential units constituting a mix of local authority homes (41 participants), private homes (n=19), and voluntary homes (n=11)."	Information shared with CYPs across homes who consented to participate.	74 (including victims, witnesses and perpetrators of violence)	Both: 44 males. 27 females	6 - 17; majority 13 - 16	White (n=55); mixed parentage (n=6); North African (n=5); African Caribbean (n=4); East European (n=1)
Beckett 2013	"The scale and nature of gang-associated sexual violence and exploitation in the specific areas of England: · The main pathways into gang-related sexual violence and exploitation for young people · Potential models for an effective multi-agency response."	Community setting. Geography not disclosed for confidentiality. 6 locations across the UK. All in localities with pockets of acute deprivation.	Gang associated sexual violence	Mixed methods. Interviews with CYP and professionals.	"Gang involved (59%) or gang associated (32%) or had friends or family in gangs (35%) or had romantic relationship with gang member 13% grew up in gang-affected neighbourhood but did not identify as gang affiliated"	Accessed through agencies that could advise on potential risks.	"150 individual interviews Eight single sex focus groups with 38 young people"	Both: equal split of males and females	13-25 years	32% Black British. 28% white. 21% dual heritage. 18% Asian
Crowther, 2013	Explores adolescents who attend EBD schools understanding of their own aggressive behaviour	Northwest England, special school for emotional and behavioural difficulties	Street fighting, aggressive behaviour in domestic and institutional settings	Interview	The participants had previously been involved in incidents of aggression at a school for children with emotional and behavioral difficulties.	Identified by head teachers	11	Males	Age 12 - 16	White British (n=6); Mixed race British (n=3); Afro Caribbean British (n=2)
Deuchar, 2009	Explores the impact of gangs in YP living in deprived areas with a focus on influence of social capital.	4 Glasgow sites: North, East, West, South; Community and voluntary organisations, housing schemes	Gangs; knife attacks and other forms of serious violence	Interviews	Young people living in deprived communities (including some refugees) many of whom described themselves as gang-involved	Through gate keepers in voluntary and community organisations	50	Majority males	Majority aged 16-18	By site: North (refugees); East (white); West (deprived areas, ethnicity not stated); South (deprived area with higher ethnic minorities but specifics not mentioned)

Author and publication year	Aim of study	Setting	Type of Violence	Data collection method	Sample description	Sampling strategy	Sample size	Gender	Age-groups	Ethnicity
Deuchar, 2011	Explores how young refugees in Glasgow experience bonding social capital, development of social bridges and their involvement in gangs	Same as above	"Street fighting/gangs. No explicit focus on violence though mentioned in quotes."	Semi-structured interviews	Refugees with a range of duration of stay in Glasgow (<1 year to majority of childhood)	Visits to local youth organisations and schools to 'hang out' with YP.	22	Both (18 males; 4 females)	16 - 18	Refugees from South Africa, Iran, Somalia, Sri Lanka, Turkey, the Congo and Kosovo.
Evans, 2007	Explores the extent to which violent offenders report distressing memories of the offence, and the phenomenology and content of these memories in unselected populations of violent offenders.	England & Wales, 2 Young Offender's Institutions	Grievous bodily harm, attempted murder, manslaughter or murder	Semi-structured interview	Violent young offenders for grievous bodily harm, incarcerated within the Young Offender's Institution	Unclear but sampled from young offenders incarcerated in England and Wales Young Offender's Institution	105 (mixed methods, sample size includes quantitative respondents)	Males	Mean age 19.8	Caucasian (n=78); non-caucasian (n=27)
Factor, 2015	Explores desistance from gang crime; the rehabilitation of gang-involved young people and how their period of incarceration and return from custody might best be managed.	6 Geographic sites (exact sites unspecified); custodial or probation settings	Gang-related offences	Semi-structured interviews	YP in custody or had recently served custodial sentences	Recruited via resettlement projects YP were involved in.	19 (YP group)	Both (16 males; 3 females)	16 - 25	Unspecified
Firmin, 2011	Explores motivations for and impact of gang involvement between men and women	4 English cities: Birmingham, Liverpool, London (males only), Manchester. Setting: Schools: (Mixed comprehensives, all girls, academies, pupil referral units); Youth Offending Services; Secure Estate (YOI and HMP); Violence against women's services, Women's Violence against women services/refuge provision; Mental Health and addiction services; Youth Service; Faith groups; BAME and youth voluntary sector; Outreach.	Largely explores female 'collusion' with male gang related behaviours.	Focus groups and interviews	Recruited on basis of probable gang links.	Unspecified	350 includes all groups	Both (Females n=218 (187 FGD; 30 Interviews); Males n=132 (127 FGD; 5 Interviews))	13 - 60 (87% of females and 82% of males in the 13 - 25 age groups)	Females: White n=90; Black/Caribbean n=47; Mixed n=20; African n=16; Asian n=13; Irish n=5. Males: White n=40; Black + Black Caribbean n=37; Asian n=27; Mixed race n=11; African n=3; Irish n=2.
Forsyth, 2011	Examines the hypothesis that diazepam use is problematic among violent non-problem drug users youths in Scotland.	Scotland; Youth custody institution	YP in custody (53% for serious violent crime). Isolated violent incidents – unclear if they were individual acts or gang related.	Interviews (supplement part of a larger survey study)	"Young offenders (n=24, 80% convicted of serious violent crimes)"	Recruited by prison staff during induction to the YOI	30	Males	16 - 20 (prison age limit); mean age for this sample 18.3	Unspecified
Fraser, 2013	Explores the relationship between youth gangs and territory.	Glasgow; Langview housing estate	Street gangs and territory	Ethnography: group discussions, participant observations, field notes. Observations from Langivew Youth Project; field notes of observations with street-based youth project; interviews from Langview Youth Project _ Langview Academy	CYP in Langview including those on the streets, in a youth project and in local schools	Unclear – mentions living in the area for 18-months while the author worked as a volunteer youth works, street outreach worker and secondary school tutor. Mentions knowing most of the participants for 1 year prior to data collection but no mention of how the participants were recruited.	20	Males	12 - 16	White
Gormally, 2015	Explores mechanisms for desistance from youth gangs and ways in which some YP are able to stop identifying as gang members	Glasgow; 2 urban areas considered to be some of the most deprived in income, employment, health, crime and housing.	Street gangs, fighting and desistance	Interviews	Males all identified as gang members while the females did not but stated they were friends with gang members.	Through detached street work, football coaching and participation in youth and community events – to build rapport prior to engagement with potential participants. Initial access to participants was through community and youth services.	15 (YP only)	Both (males n=13; females n=2)	14 - 26	Unspecified
Gunter, 2010	Explores the role and importance of badness within the youth subculture ('Road' Life) of young black Caribbean males growing up in an East London neighbourhood. Road life is how many YP describe gang-involvement.	East London; multi-ethnic neighbourhood with a significant black Caribbean population	Gang involvement	Semi-structured interviews	Young black Caribbean males involved in 'Road Life'	Not specified for the interviews but broader study involved author's personal contacts and engagement in neighbourhood through observations in youth club, on the streets, in pubs, clubs, day trips and residential out of town.	22 (interview sample with CYP only)	Both (males n=14; females n=8)	13 - 21	Black Caribbean

Author and publication year	Aim of study	Setting	Type of Violence	Data collection method	Sample description	Sampling strategy	Sample size	Gender	Age-groups	Ethnicity
Hansson, 2006	"Explores issues of community order that related to violence, anti-social behaviour and policing."	Northern Ireland, North Belfast (6 FGD) and Derry Londonderry (4 FGD); within each city a number of smaller areas were targeted. Community backgrounds were described as Protestant or Catholic	Sectarian violence	Participant observation, focus groups (n=10)	Some CYP had been involved in and convicted of crime as well as those involved in antisocial or criminally motivated behaviour or have the potential to become involved. One group involved young men excluded from their communities.	Attending /observing community events and meeting YP where they hang out. Unclear if any strategy used to recruit participants.	10 FGD (n=132)	Both (males n=67; females n=65)	Most aged 14 - 17	Unspecified
Harding, 2014	"Explains both endemic and increasing gang related violence in London, SW9. To conceptualise the differentiated spaces where gang activities and behaviours take place To tease out tactics used by gangs across space and time"	London-based through community charities and youth organisations.	Street gangs	Interviews with young people. This components was part of a broader study including interviewing professionals, residents and observing community activities. CYP component included in-depth interviews (n=20) plus one focus group of new arrivals (n=4) (immigrants).	Gang affiliated or 'at risk' of including some newly arrived immigrants.	Recruited through gatekeepers in local youth charities	24	The sample appeared to have included some females – numbers weren't stated	16-25	Mixed. Not clearly specified.
Harding, 2020	Explores the lived experience of gang members and motivations for weapon-carrying. The central research focus was drug supply, but wider issues of gang life and weapon-carrying were also central to personal narratives.	London-based street gangs.	Street gangs; knife carrying	Interviews	Gang affiliated YP and actively running/managing county lines; embedded in street crime. Each interviewee was a weapon-carrier. All are gang-active young males operating country lines or involved in gang line	Recruited through youth workers and gang consultants to access gang active young males .	18	Males	16 - 25	Unspecified
Harland, 2011	Explores young men experiences of violence, conflict and safety in post-conflict, including how peace-building is defined in Northern Ireland	Northern Ireland, 20 different disadvantaged communities	Violent youth culture	Focus group discussions	Young men living in urban and rural areas with low academic achievement and other deprivation indicators. Among the total sample of 130, 75 are Catholic; 45 Protestant; and 10 foreign.	Recruited via youth workers by indicators of deprivation rather than knowledge of violence. ~20% of sample were 'drawn to violence' and actively involved in rioting and other forms of antisocial behaviour'. Key criteria include: age, location, gender and ethnicity.	130 from 20 FGD	Males	13 - 16	Unspecified. Sample divided more by religious affliations although 10 were described as 'foreign'
Harris, 2011	Explores violence carried out by prisoners identified as street-gang members	Geography not reported; prisons	Gang violence and one case of sexual violence	Individual interviews following interpretative phenomenological analysis	YP in prison with substantiated evidence of gang membership.	Two steps : first identify those with substantiated evidence of gang membership using Hallsworth & Young's definition of gang membership; 2nd by violence history through prior violent offending or possession of a weapon. This resulted in a sampling frame of 150. Purposive sampling.	44: Phase 1: 6 (out of 14 approached); Phase 2: 38 (out of 77 approached)	Males	"Phase 1: Age at time of interview 18-22. Mean 19.8. Phase 2: Sample aged 20-56, mean 26.4 and 2/3 aged 20-25 "	Black/Black British African (n=34); White n=3; Asian n=2; Mixed n=1; unknown n=1
Hesketh, 2018	Explores why some individuals with similar backgrounds do or do not become involved in deviant street groups	Merseyside; marginalised areas	Gang violence	Hybrid approach consisting of Biographical Narrative Interpretive Method for data collection with Grounded Theory as analytical approach	Three groups: gang involved participants (Deviant Street Group Members); 11 non-gang participants and 7 'ExDeviant Street Group participants'.	Two sources: 1. third section charity and training organisations; 2. researchers' own networks.	44 (26 gang involved Deviant Street Group members); 11 non-gang youth; 7 ex-gang members)	Males	18-25	Unspecified
Hesketh & Robinson, 2019	Same as above	Same as above	Same as above	Same as above	Same as above	Drawn from marginalised areas of Merseyside	Same as above	Same as above	Same as above	Same as above
Holligan 2015	Explores social strains, constructions and practices of masculinity and the prevalence of violence experienced by young male offenders and potential links between hegemonic of masculinity, psychosocial dynamics and the propensity towards violence.	Scotland; largest young offenders' institution	Serious violent assault	Life history interviews	Incarcerated young male offenders convicted of violent crimes, most from socially deprived communities.	Through advertising issued to prison personnel.	40	Males	16 - 18	White, UK-born

Author and publication year	Aim of study	Setting	Type of Violence	Data collection method	Sample description	Sampling strategy	Sample size	Gender	Age-groups	Ethnicity
Holligan & Deuchar 2015	Attempts to foreground the ways in which violence is affiliated with historical experiences in family and neighbourhood settings which impact upon an offender's orientation towards society and its institutions	Scotland, high security prison	Street violence	Life history interviews	Offenders convicted of knife crime assault, and serving prison sentences of up to 18 years	Unspecified	37	Males	16 - 18	White
Holligan, 2017	Explores constructions of perceptions of risks (danger, fear, conflict) that led YP into violent or other offending behaviour and weapon-carrying	Glasgow, community outreach	Weapon carrying young men who may be involved in gang, street violence or other forms of offending behaviour	Interviews	Young men who had lived in Glasgow for most of their lives, with 20% living in the city's most socially deprived areas.	Youth and street workers attached to outreach initiatives in Glasgow connected researchers with potential participants. Conducted initial 6 interviews then used chain referral sampling.	20	Males	16+	White
Holligan & McLean, 2018	Explores subcultural values and contexts of violent assault and collateral damage caused by gangs to peers (class, age, and gender)	Glasgow	Involved with gang and/or street violence, or other forms of offending	Semi-structured interviews	White, working class teenage boys who previously resided in former council housing estates.	Snowball initially via gatekeepers and local Christian-operated organizations	34	Males	16+; most mid-adolescents to early 20s	White
Irwin-Rogers & Harding, 2018	Explores how gang-involved young people navigate their way between two distinct social fields, namely that of the street gang and that of the school	England, 5 alternative provision schools in three large cities	Gang violence	Participant observation; interviews.	20 pupils interviewed, 7 were gang-involved (self & teacher identified)	Alternative Schools identified through convenience and snowball sampling. Each school had a proportion of students involved in urban street gangs.	20	Both (males n=16); girls n=4)	Age range in schools 14 - 16	Unspecified
King, 2023	Explores patterns of masculinity exhibited in young men involved in knife crime	London; inner-city housing estate	Street gangs, knife crime	Observations, interviews, informal conversations	Young black men,	Working with former youth worker colleagues to access uncharted spaces and inhabitants.	2	Males	18 - 19	Black; mixed black and European
Liddle & Harding 2022	Explores attitudes to SYV (both gangs and groups). Asks whether these features have changed over the last few years and explores trends and challenges.	London. Youth outreach settings, youth clubs, Youth Offending Teams (YOTs)	Street violence	Multi-method. Quantitative and qualitative with a range of stakeholders including a group of CYP. This component involved in-depth and group interviews.	Gang linked or gang involved CYP	Through a series of local authority and voluntary youth organisations	"25 participants from Youth Council 6 from outreach gym 15 one to one interviews in local YOTs 6 substance users in treatment."	Not specified in qualitative sample.	Not clear in all cases. Probably 14-25 years	Mixed. Not clearly specified.
Palanski & Riggs, 2012	Explores why young men carry knives and the relationship between control, power and young men's behaviours.	5 different inner city youth centres	Street fighting, Interviews with YP (white) who carry knives	Interview	Young people who knew someone who carried a knife in public.	Approached informally to participate via five different inner city youth centres – criteria for participation was having carried a knife in public.	16	Males	16-17 years	White
Shaw, 2014	Explores how experiences and perceptions of young people in residential children's homes impact upon subsequent outcomes, including involvement with the youth justice system.	England, homes/care homes/ social services or youth offending institutions	Violence – inclusion criteria is having been convicted of an offence while in care. Quotes suggest include street violence, stabbing of family members.	In-depth, semi-structured interviews	Current and former looked after young people who had been convicted of an offence while they were resident in a local authority or private children's home in Coalton. YP who had carried a knife and a larger proportion who had not carried a knife but who lived in or near areas of deprivation and/or high levels of violence	Purposive sampling based on being convicted of an office for which they wee were convicted of an offence while they were resident in a local authority or a private children's home. A second CSO also supporting YP recruitment. Access was negotiated through care workers or social services.	12	Both (males b=9)l females (n=3)	15 - 22	Unspecified

Author and publication year	Aim of study	Setting	Type of Violence	Data collection method	Sample description	Sampling strategy	Sample size	Gender	Age-groups	Ethnicity
Smeaton, 2009	Explores the experiences of homeless young people looking at: street-living; homelessness and gang involvement; effect of gang membership on access to homeless services; difficulties withdrawing from street life.	6 urban areas in England. Sites: many from streets (places where food was supplied to the homeless or where children and young people were likely to be, e.g., cafés, parks, train stations, on the streets, drop-in centres and soup kitchens and voluntary sector projects	Destroying/damaging property; perpetrators of violence on the street. Considers organised violence by football supporters	Ethnographic approach based upon 'hanging out' with children and young people in their spaces. Semi-structured interviews, participant observations and field notes.	Children and young people who are away from home or care for 4 weeks or more; experienced detach who live outside of key societal institutions; who do not receive any formal sources of support; and are self-reliant and/or dependent upon informal support networks.	Many CYP accessed on the streets such as places where food was supplied to the homeless or cafés, parks, train stations, drop-in centres and soup kitchens. Some were accessed via voluntary sector projects. CYP also connected other CYP to researcher.	103	Both (male n=50 and females n-53	Most <16 at the time of being 'detached'. Some over 16 at time of interview.	White British (n=89); White British/Black Caribbean (n=6). Black Caribbean (n=4); Bangladeshi, Hungarian, Indian, Romanian Roma, (n=1 each)
Taylor, 2015	Examines perceptions of young people involved in street orientated youth culture.	Glasgow, Scotland; socio-economically depressed housing scheme	Gang violence	Semi structured interviews	Glasgow youth gang	Gatekeepers (alternative high school principals, voluntary youth organizations and social workers introduced to youth then snowball recruitment used.	20	Males	16 - 19	Unspecified
Thurston, 2024	Explores life stories of young adult men in prison with a history of dual harm.	Glasgow, Prisons	Dual harm – roughly defined as harm/aggression externally (fire setting, disorder, property damage in prison) and self-harm.	Life story interviews	In prison, with a confirmed history in dual harm (in community/prison and self harm)	Prison selected as it housed young adults and the researcher had previously worked there. The director of one	5	Males	18 - 21	4 British. Unclear if that means white. One dual ethnicity
Traynor, 2016	"Explores social meanings applied and motivations to carry and use knives by young people living in areas with high rates of knife crime and violence."	London (2 inner city boroughs and one outer London) and urban Yorkshire	Knife carrying	Interviews and focus group	CYP who had and who hadn't carried knives and live in or near areas of deprivation and/or high levels of violence	Work with YOT and youth groups. The selection of the research sites, research sample and the recruitment of participants was determined by 'pragmatic' imperatives and empirical or methodological reasons	87	Both (weapon carrying: males n=21, females n=2; n=64 who had not carried weapons (males n=34; females n=30))	9 - 19 (knife carrying); 12 - 18 (non carrying)	White British (n= 1/3); Black African/ Caribbean (n=1/3); Dual heritage (n=1/3)
Trickett, 2016	Explores use of violence and attitudes towards young women and reasons for 'normalisation' of such abuse.	Birmingham; predominantly social housing areas	Sexual exploitation of young women	Interviews	10 self identified as being in gangs based on friendship ties, geographic location and shared experiences, including of criminality (with criminal records for assault occasioning grievous bodily harm, assault occasioning actual bodily harm, criminal damage, arson, joy-riding, burglaries, thefts and fraud).	The research was advertised and quota sampling was used but there was a possible snow-balling effect as the young men concerned discussed the fact that they had taken part with their peers.	45	Males	16 - 25	White
User Voice, 2011	"Explores reasons CYP identify that triggered their offending behaviour and entry into the youth justice system; the impact and experience of such experiences and ways to prevent such issues."	Unspecified	Violence type not defined for the qualitative component of the study. Quantitative findings reported that 45% of participants were involved in serious violence (GBH, ABH, assault)	Interviews	YP with criminal conviction and experience of youth justice system currently using services commissioned by the Youth Justice Board (England & Wales)	Unclear	175 (from 36 FGDs)	Not provided for qualitative but quantitative shows 83% males	10 - 24	Not provided for qualitative but quantitative shows 65% white; 17% black; 7% dual heritage; 6% Asian; 5% other
User Voice, 2023	Explores lived experience of those who have committed, and been on the receiving end, of serious youth violence	UK-wide; custody or probation	YP perpetrating and/or being on the receiving end of the crimes in the Serious Violence Strategy, including homicide, knife crime, gun crime and areas of criminality where serious violence or its threat is inherent, such as in gangs and county lines drug dealing.	Semi-structured interviews	YP who have both committed and been on the receiving end of SYV.	Snowball and purposive sampling approaches. We gained access to three prisons and young offender institutions and handed out leaflets and information sheets on the wings.	13 (11 in custody and 2 on probation)	Both (male n=10; females n=3)	18 - 24	White British (n=4); Black African/ Caribbean/British (n=7); Asian (n=2)
Young, 2007	Explores gang related offending and weapon use by young people	England, five case study areas (varied geography, crime rates, deprivation, and age structure and ethnic mix of local populations)	Not really defined but talks about gang related offending and the use of weapons as key questions of the study.	Interviews with 49 YP and ethnographic study with 8 gang involved men	CYP identified by YOT as having been involved in group offending	Identified by Youth Offending Team	57 (49 interviews and 8 for ethnography)	Both (males n=24; females n=25)	Unspecified	Unspecified but the five included sites were described as having different ethnic mix. Some groups were described as 'ethnically mixed but male dominated'.

Author and publication year	Aim of study	Setting	Type of Violence	Data collection method	Sample description	Sampling strategy	Sample size	Gender	Age-groups	Ethnicity
Young, 2009	Explores relationship of offending and ADHD	Secure residential unit	Convictions for sexual offences (n=2), criminal damage (n=2), theft / common assault (n=1), unconvicted (n=1)	Interpretive phenomenological analysis.	Boys residing in a secure residential unit for adolescents 10–17 years who display difficult/challenging behaviours	Unspecified	5	Males	14 - 16	Unspecified
Young, 2013	Examines the role of the family in gang formation criminality and exit	London & West Midlands (Wolverhampton and Birmingham) and Scotland (Glasgow)	List of offences by participants include: drug dealing; common assault; criminal damage; street robbery; handling and distributing stolen goods; possession of an offensive weapon; serious violent crime involving firearms and other weapons (e.g., knives); shoplifting.	Interviews	Former and current gang involved youth	Catch22 provided lists of community organisations and practitioners to identify potential interviewees. Most participants were recruited this way and some also via snowball sampling.	53 (YP but includes a large number of females that do not appear to be part of this study). N=36 for this study	Both (males 66%; females n=34%)	70% of sample age 24 years or under	Overall composition* includes African Caribbean 51%; white 32%; mixed heritage 13%, Asian 4%

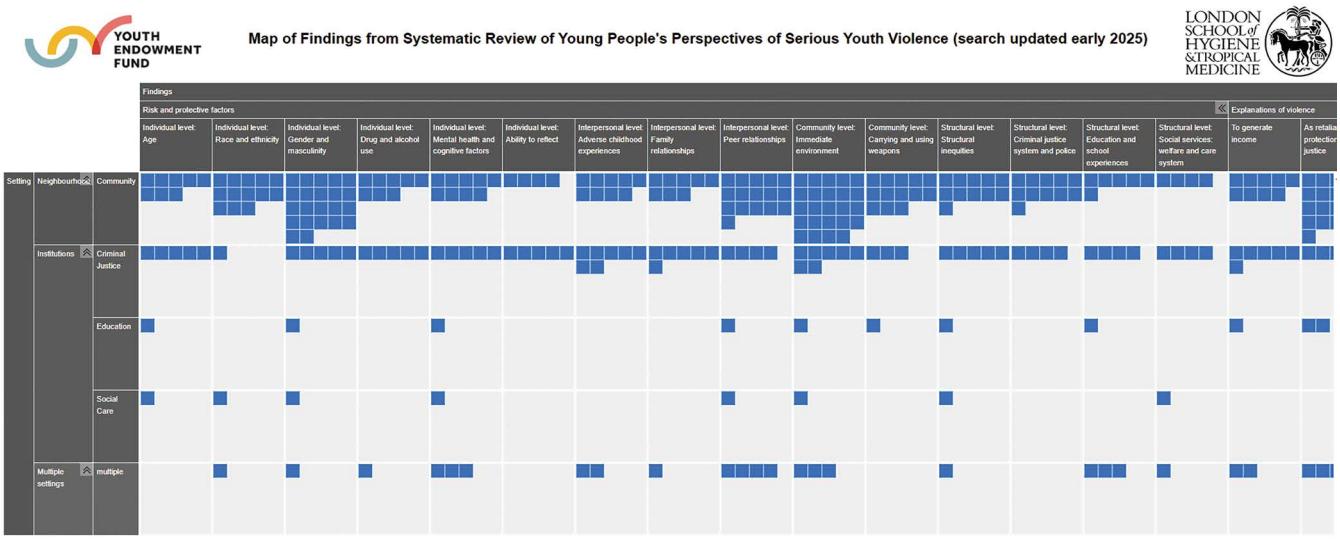
Appendix 9: CERQual assessment of confidence in review findings

Narratives against which CERQual is being used	Methodological limitations	Coherence	Adequacy	Relevance
Hypermasculinity and the armour of toughness **Money as a route to status and livelihood** **Difficult lives; injustice, inequity and trauma** **Identifying 'at risk groups'** **Narratives of desistance**	CASP was used to assess methodological limitations which overlaps with aspects of CERQual – particularly in relation to method and relevance. Most studies had only limited or moderate methodological limitations. The most significant area of weakness related to concerns over lack of reflexivity from researchers, potential bias in reporting and concerns over authenticity of reported accounts – i.e., how participative was the process and how empowered were respondents to provide authentic accounts? There was notable difference in reporting standards between academic articles and organisational reports – with the latter sometimes failing to note details of analysis, recruitment and ethics. It was hard to discern whether this reflected the quality of the research or simply reporting method. **Summary: moderate concerns**	When assessing coherence, it is important to consider the difference between more descriptive review findings and more explanatory review findings. There was significant thematic overlap in the 42 reviewed papers and high level of confidence in thematic saturation. Theories considered in this review are well established theories from previous literature. Our analysis has used analytic themes, derived from the ecological framework, to suggest explanations of patterns in the data in the form of narratives which may be of value when targeting interventions. We are confident that there is strong coherence within and between these overlapping narratives. Narratives are built on and around existing theories – with emphasis on different factors. The way they have been combined in the meta-ethnography contributes new knowledge. **Summary: minor concerns**	· Data was rich for group violence (sectarian, street gang, football firms) · Data was inadequate for a more granular insight into specific minority groups. It wasn't necessarily the case that minority groups were under-represented. Simply that ethnic breakdown provided within reports was insufficient · Although girls were included to varying degrees in 11 of the 42 papers, data on them lacked the comprehensive richness of the male sample · Some geographical areas were over-represented (e.g., data from Glasgow) · Our search found a higher number of papers than anticipated and provided rich data at the broad population level · Checking findings against the logic model, constructed at the outset of the review to help monitor gaps, suggests no major thematic areas have been omitted **Summary: moderate concerns (though not consistent across demographic groups).**	Although a number of studies were not explicitly looking at mechanisms of violence – rather were focussed on mechanisms known to impact on violence (for example social capital, identity, drugs and alcohol, street habitus, life course etc) – in all selected papers, violence and young people's perception of it was a dominant theme. We are confident that the papers included in the review present rich data to answer the review questions. **Summary: minor concerns**

Appendix 10: Map of Findings

View the Map of findings at:

https://youthendowmentfund.org.uk/reports/systematic-review-serious-youth-violence-and-meta-ethnography/



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