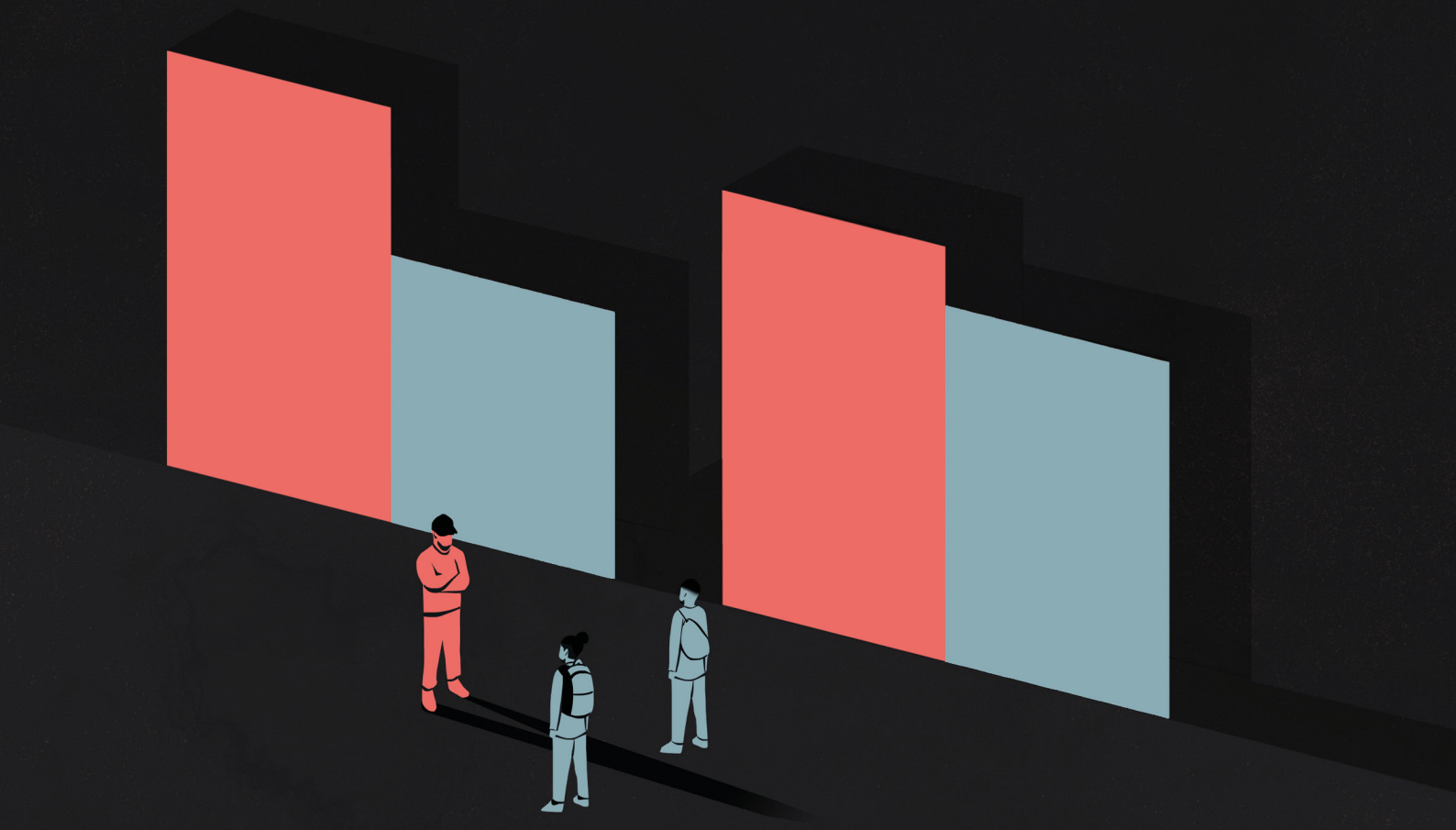
YOUTH ENDOWMENT FUND

Report 4

Children, violence and vulnerability 2025

Exploitation and gangs



Contents

Acknowledgements

Acknowledgements

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Lead contributors from the Youth Endowment Fund include Hashim Ahmed, Dr Cassandra Popham, Matt Shaw, William Teager and Ciaran Thapar.

All views expressed in this report are those of the Youth Endowment Fund.

Main findings and summary

Executive summary

The Youth Endowment Fund asked nearly 11,000 children aged 13–17 across England and Wales to share their experiences of violence.

The findings are set out in separate reports, each exploring a different theme. This one focuses on teenage children's experiences of exploitation and 'gangs'.

When we asked teenage children whether they had been in a 'gang', we defined a 'gang' as:

> **"A group of young people who think of themselves as a 'gang', probably with a name, who are involved in violence or other crime."**

We used the word 'gang' because it is one that many young people recognise and use themselves, more than phrases such as group-based criminality. But we also recognise its limitations: the term oversimplifies a complex issue and can reinforce harmful stereotypes. To reflect these sensitivities, we use inverted commas when referring to 'gangs'.

At several points in this report, we share the words of James (whose name has been changed to protect his identity), who, from ages 12 to 18, was criminally exploited. His story lays bare the reality behind the data, showing how exploitation can trap children in a cycle of fear, manipulation and violence.

Here's what we found.

Exploitation puts thousands of teenage children at risk.

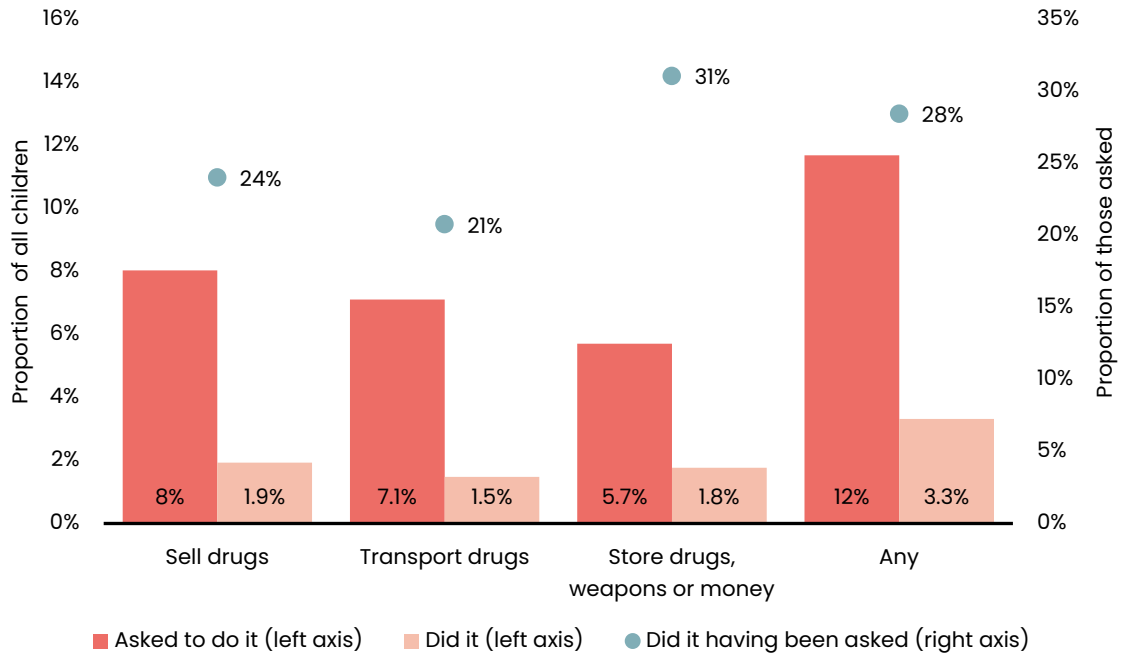
Teenage years should be when young people explore their identity and independence while developing the skills needed for adult life – not when they're drawn into criminal activity or situations that put them at serious risk of harm.

Yet one in eight teenagers (12%) said that in the past 12 months they'd been asked to either sell drugs; transport drugs; or store drugs, weapons or money. Around a quarter of those who were approached to do one of these things went through with it — the equivalent of 120,000 13-17-year-olds in England and Wales.[1]

[1] Estimates derived using Office for National Statistics mid-2024 population estimates.

A quarter of teenage children approached to sell drugs; transport drugs; or store drugs, weapons or money go through with it.

PROPORTION OF 13-17-YEAR-OLDS IN ENGLAND AND WALES WHO WERE APPROACHED TO SELL DRUGS; TRANSPORT DRUGS; OR STORE DRUGS, WEAPONS OR MONEY



Going missing and being exploited are closely connected — missing periods can put children at greater risk of being targeted or coerced and can also be a sign that exploitation is already taking place. To identify this, we asked teenage children:

> *"Have you stayed overnight somewhere that wasn't yours, a friend's or a family member's house without your parent(s)' or guardian(s)' permission?"*

In the past year, 11% of teenage children reported having stayed overnight somewhere without permission. Most did so rarely, but 3.7% of 13-17-year-olds said they went missing once or twice a month, and 0.9% said it happened as often as once a week.

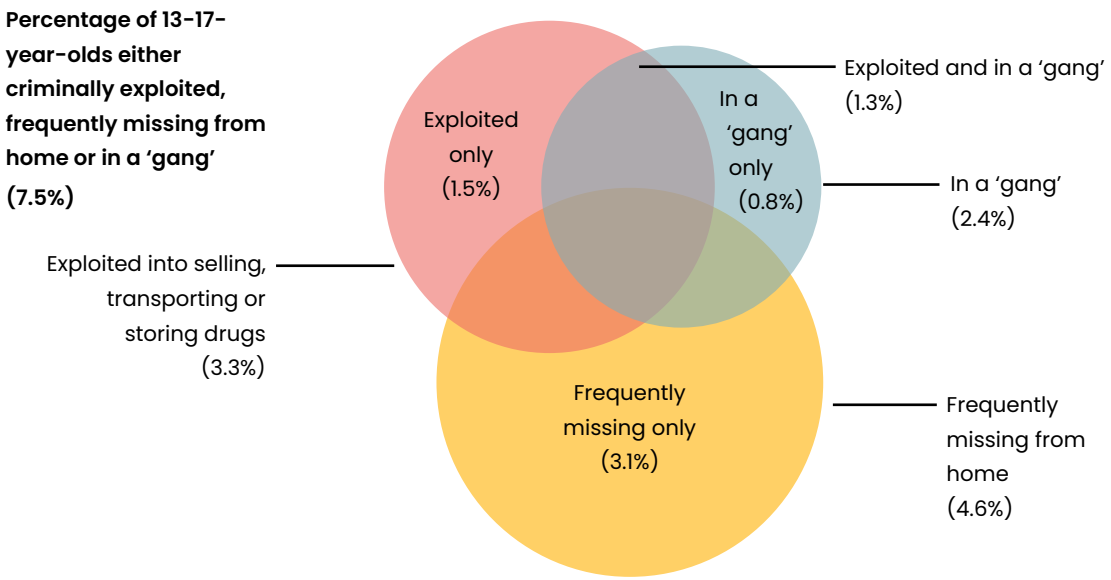
Another sign of exploitation can be involvement in 'gangs'. In our survey, 2.4% of all 13-17-year-olds self-identified as having been in a 'gang' in the past 12 months – equivalent to around 90,000 13-17-year-olds across England and Wales.[2]

Of those who said they were in a 'gang', 55% had also transported or stored drugs, weapons or money when approached – around 1.3% of all 13-17-year-olds. Of those who said they were in a 'gang', 39% also said they'd been missing at least monthly in the past year.

[2] Estimates derived using Office for National Statistics mid-2024 population estimates.

There's a significant overlap between teenage children experiencing exploitation, going missing from home and being in a 'gang'.

PROPORTION OF 13-17-YEAR-OLDS CRIMINALLY EXPLOITED*, FREQUENTLY** MISSING FROM HOME AND IN A 'GANG'



** 13-17-year-olds who sold drugs; transported drugs; or stored drugs, weapons or money when approached.*

*** Missing at least once a month.*

Bribery is the main tactic used to exploit children into crime. Among those approached to sell drugs; transport drugs; or store drugs, weapons or money, 42% were offered money or something else in return, and 27% were offered drugs. Threats of physical or sexual violence were also common – reported by 21%.

> **"I remember being 13 years old, joining my high school and straight away all of the Year 11 and the sixth formers … took a real liking to me. And I was loving that. I've got all these great peers. I'm becoming kind of cool. I've got people watching my back. Then they're offering me drugs, cannabis. I'm starting to get into a routine of drinking on the weekends, taking drugs before school [and] after school. And I remember one day, particularly, and I'll never ever forget it, they said to me, 'You smoke all our weed, you drink our alcohol on the weekends, we let you hang around with us, but you've never, ever paid for any of this stuff ever before'. And I remember my heart just dropping.**
>
> James' story of exploitation

Being exploited, going missing and being in a 'gang' dramatically increase the risk of serious violence.

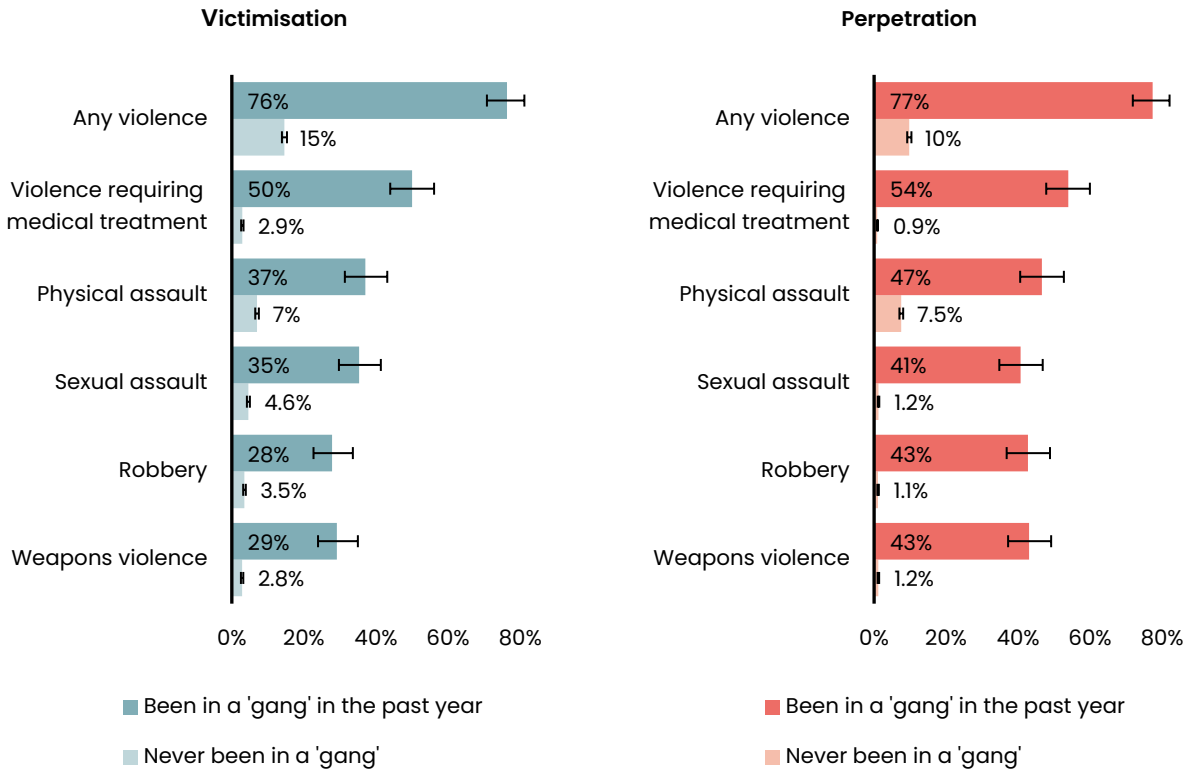
Teenage children who went missing monthly or more were around 18 times more likely to be victims of serious violence requiring medical treatment (28%) and 30 times more likely to have perpetrated serious violence (25%) than those who never went missing (1.5% and 0.8%, respectively).

Those who were approached to sell drugs; transport drugs; or store weapons, drugs or money — regardless of whether they went through with it — were also more likely to have experienced violence. Among those who did go through with it, the risks were stark: they were 18 times more likely to be victims of (48%) and over 50 times more likely to have perpetrated (51%) serious violence that required treatment by a doctor or at a hospital than their peers who had never been approached (2.6% and 1%, respectively).

For those who said they'd been in a 'gang' in the past year, the risks were even higher: 50% had been victims of serious violence requiring medical treatment, and 54% had perpetrated serious violence – 17 and 62 times higher than their peers who'd never been in a 'gang'.

Teenage children who identify as being in a 'gang' are 17 times more likely to be victims of serious violence.

VIOLENCE VICTIMISATION AND PERPETRATION RATES FOR 13-17-YEAR-OLDS BY WHETHER THEY IDENTIFIED AS BEING IN A 'GANG' IN THE PAST 12 MONTHS



Note. The error bars represent 95% confidence intervals — this reflects the range we expect the true value to fall within.

Although only 2.4% of teenage children said they'd been in a 'gang' in the past year, this small group accounted for more than a third (39%) of all those who had committed serious violence that resulted in their victims requiring medical treatment.

> **Now I hate seeing people get hurt. My whole life, I've been anti-violence. So, watching somebody get beaten up because of me was a wake-up call.**
>
> James' story of exploitation

Risky behaviours can be a signal and symptom of exploitation.

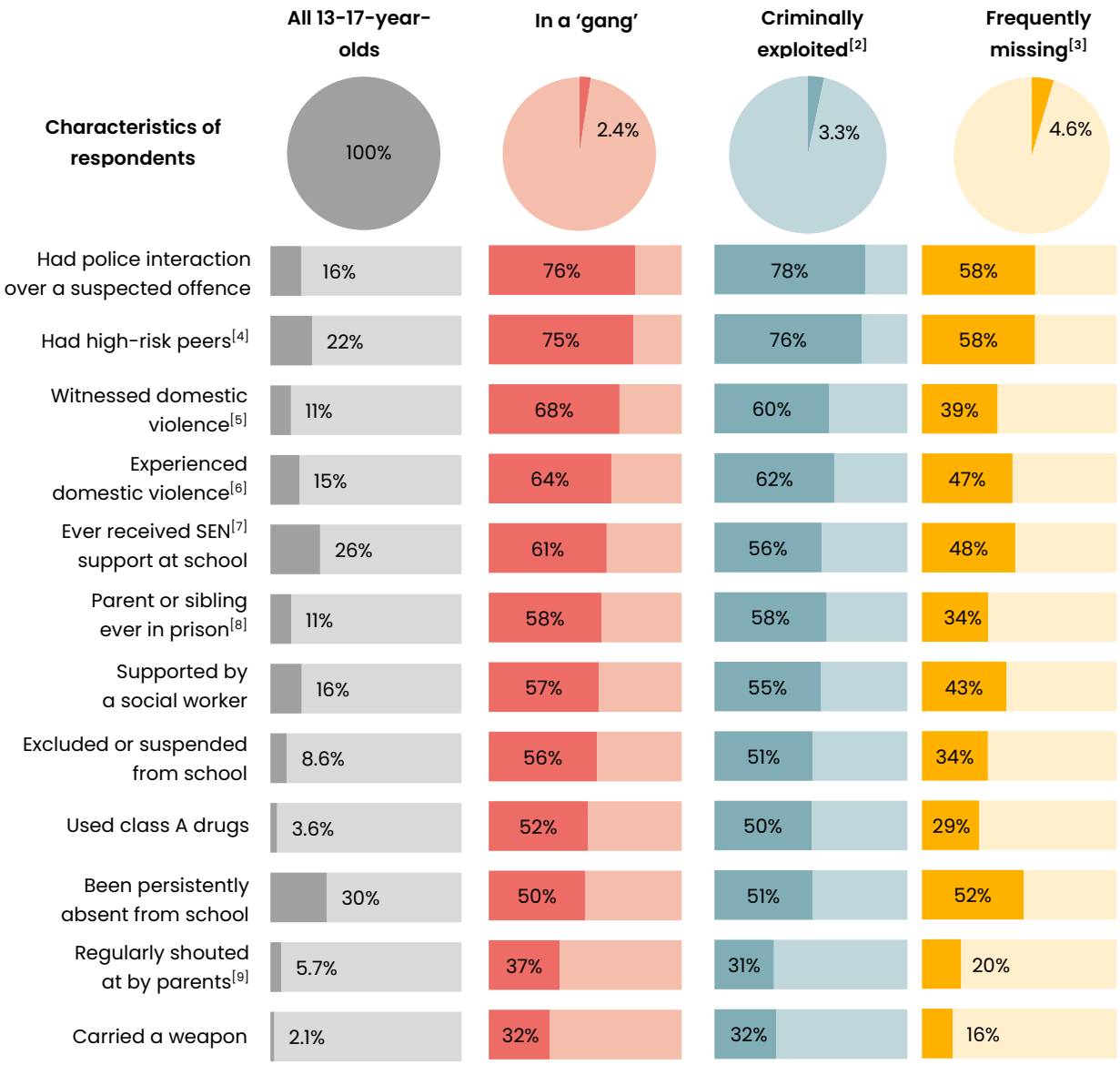
Certain behaviours — such as carrying a weapon or using class A drugs — can be both a signal that a child is vulnerable and a symptom of existing exploitation or involvement in 'gangs'. These behaviours often coincide with family instability, trauma, or social and educational disadvantage, highlighting teenagers who face multiple overlapping risks.

Teenage children who identified as being in a 'gang' or being exploited were 15 times more likely to have carried a weapon compared to all 13-17-year-olds (32% compared to 2.1%). The use of class A drugs was reported by 3.6% of all 13-17-year-olds in the past year, but the proportion was substantially higher among vulnerable groups: 29% of those frequently missing from home, 52% of those in 'gangs' and 50% of those who were criminally exploited.

> **I'd say age 14 was probably the first point in my life that I realised I did not have a choice. I was put into environments that I certainly was not comfortable with. I was in properties where [I was] watching people inject heroin or smoke crack cocaine. And that's when I started to realise, 'OK, maybe this isn't that normal'. [I was] seeing my peers hanging around in parks or building dirt jumps to bike over. And that's when I then started to say stuff like, 'Do I really have to do that? Can someone else do it today?' Or 'I need to go and see my family tonight; I've got [a] family meal.' And that's when I very quickly realised that I did not have a choice in [what was] going on or the decisions being made.**
>
> James' story of exploitation

Teenage children who experience exploitation, go missing from home and are in a 'gang' share multiple overlapping vulnerabilities.

VULNERABILITIES OF 13-17-YEAR-OLDS, BY EXPERIENCES OF 'GANGS', CRIMINAL EXPLOITATION, GOING MISSING FROM HOME[1]



[1] Unless otherwise stated, the vulnerabilities listed relate to experiences over the past 12 months.

[2] Children approached to sell drugs; transport drugs; or store drugs, weapons or money who went through with it.

[3] Children who were missing from home at least once a month.

[4] Children who had friends they regarded as highly likely to take drugs, be in a 'gang' or carry a weapon.

[5] Children who witnessed adults in the household being physically violent to each other.

[6] Children who were ever hit by their parents/guardians.

[7] Special Educational Needs.

[8] The Ministry of Justice have estimated there are 192,912 children in England and Wales with a parent who has been in prison (around 2%). Our figure is notably higher. This could be because we asked about siblings as well as parents. It's also possible that respondents to our survey were thinking about any period in jail or arrest, not just parents who have served a custodial sentence.

[9] Children who were shouted at by parents/guardians daily.

Finding a way out is possible.

Leaving a 'gang' is possible. More teens have left 'gangs' than are currently involved: 3.9% of 13-17-year-olds say they're no longer in a 'gang', compared to 2.4% who say they're currently in one.

Reasons for leaving include growing older (26%), avoiding trouble with the police (22%) and wanting to be a role model (18%). Support also matters: boys more often cited positive activities, such as sports or creative programmes, while girls more often credited teachers, mentors or social workers.

These findings highlight that while the risks are severe, timely and coordinated support can help children break free from cycles of exploitation and 'gang' involvement – giving them a real chance to live a life free from violence.

> **I found Leaders Unlocked at the age of 16. They knew I had some sort of youth justice experience, but they didn't know the extent of it. But they just made me feel like a human. And they exposed me to normal situations and helped me to understand that there are opportunities out there to be successful without going down certain paths.**
>
> James' story of exploitation

What works to prevent violence and exploitation?

These findings underline why effective, coordinated approaches are essential. One such approach is **Focused Deterrence**. This multi-agency strategy identifies people involved in serious violence and helps them stop offending and stay safe. Those taking part are often highly vulnerable, with their involvement frequently driven by exploitation, victimisation or self-protection.

The approach combines enforcement — swift and proportionate consequences for continued violence — with tailored support to address its root causes. Communities also play a vital role, reinforcing that violence is unacceptable and helping young people find positive alternatives.

International evidence shows that Focused Deterrence can cut crime by around a third, with the strongest reductions seen in programmes tackling serious violence driven by conflict between groups.

To test how it works in England, the YEF and Home Office have invested £8 million to deliver and evaluate the approach in Leicester, Manchester, Nottingham, Coventry and Wolverhampton. Results will be published in 2028.

The YEF has also developed **guidance** to help police forces, Violence Reduction Units and local services implement Focused Deterrence approaches effectively and equitably.

Headline findings

	Exploitation puts thousands of teenage children at risk.
Over 1 in 10 teenage children were asked to sell drugs; transport drugs; or store drugs, weapons or money.	In the past year, 8% of 13-17-year-olds were asked to sell drugs; 7.1% were asked to transport them; and 5.7% were asked to store drugs, weapons or money – 12% in total were asked to do one or more of these. 28% of those approached went through with it, equivalent to 120,000 13-17-year-olds. 11% spent a night away from home without parental permission. 6.8% did so rarely (one or twice a year); 4.6% did so at least monthly. 2.4% identified as being in a 'gang', equivalent to 90,000 13-17-year-olds.
More than half of the teenage children in 'gangs' have been criminally exploited.	Combined, 7.5% of 13-17-year-olds were either criminally exploited, frequently missing from home or in a 'gang', equivalent to 280,000 teenage children. 39% of teens in a 'gang' frequently went missing from home (at least monthly). 55% had been criminally exploited in the past year. Of those frequently missing, 20% were in a 'gang' and 26% had been criminally exploited.
Girls make up a notable proportion of those involved.	Boys reported higher rates of 'gang' involvement – 2.8% compared to 1.9% of girls. However, girls still accounted for 39% of all 13-17-year-olds who identified as being in a 'gang'. Whilst more boys said they had sold drugs; transported drugs; or stored drugs, weapons or money (4.2% compared to 2.5% of girls), girls accounted for 37% of all those who said they had done this.
Bribery is the main tactic used to exploit teens into crime.	The most common tactic used to persuade teens to sell drugs; transport drugs; or store drugs, weapons or money was bribery. 42% of those approached were offered money or something else in return; 27% were offered drugs or alcohol; 21% said they were threatened with violence; and 18% were told they were in debt. 18% said they were blackmailed with information about them or explicit images, rising to 22% of girls.
	Being exploited, going missing and being in a 'gang' dramatically increase the risk of serious violence.
1 in 4 teens frequently missing from home are victims of serious violence.	Risks of violence increase with the number of missing episodes per year: 13% of 13-17-year-olds who have never been missing were victims, rising to 35% of teens who have been missing rarely and 58% of those who were missing monthly or more frequently, with 28% of the last group having required medical treatment (vs 1.5% of those who had never been missing).
Criminally exploited teens are 18 times more likely to face serious violence.	Of 13-17-year-olds who have been criminally exploited, 73% were victims of violence (5× higher than those who hadn't been approached) and 48% were victims of serious violence leading to medical treatment (18× higher). 71% had perpetrated violence (8× higher than those who hadn't been approached) and 51% had perpetrated serious violence that led to medical treatment (53× higher).
Over half of teens in 'gangs' commit serious violence.	Teens in 'gangs' were 34× more likely to commit sexual violence (41% vs 1.2%), 39× more likely to commit robbery (43% vs 1.1%) and 62× more likely to commit serious violence that required treatment by a doctor or at a hospital (54% vs 0.9%) than teens who were never involved in 'gangs'. While only 2.4% of 13-17-year-olds said they'd been in a 'gang', they accounted for over a third (39%) of those committing serious violence.

	Risky behaviours can be a signal and symptom of exploitation.
4 in 10 teens in 'gangs' had joined by age 12.	Most 13-17-year-olds who identify as being in a 'gang' joined at a young age. Of those in a 'gang' in the past 12 months, two-thirds (67%) joined by age 13 or younger, nearly half (43%) joined by age 12 or younger, one-quarter (24%) joined by age 11 or younger, and 16% had already joined by age 10. For boys, 71% had joined by age 13, compared to 59% for girls.
Exploited teens are significantly more likely to engage in risky behaviours.	13-17-year-olds in 'gangs' (32%) and those who have been criminally exploited (32%) were 15× more likely to have carried a weapon than all 13-17-year-olds (2.1%), 14× more likely to have tried Class A drugs (52% and 50%, respectively, vs 3.6%) and 3× more likely to have friends they thought were likely to take drugs, steal or carry weapons (75% and 76%, respectively, vs 22%).
Adverse home environments are also associated with increased risk.	Teenage children who said they were in a 'gang' were 6× more likely to have been shouted at daily at home (37% vs 5.7%) or witnessed domestic abuse (68% vs 11%) than all 13-17-year-olds. They were 3× more likely to have been supported by a social worker (57% vs 16%) and twice as likely to have special educational needs (61% vs 26%) than all 13-17-year-olds.
	Finding a way out is possible.
More teens have left a 'gang' than are currently in one.	2.4% of 13-17-year-olds said they'd been in a 'gang' in the past year – equivalent to 90,000 teenage children across England and Wales. 3.9% said they'd been in one at some point in the past, equating to 150,000 teenage children across England and Wales. Therefore, more teens have left a 'gang' than are currently in one.
There are many reasons why teens leave.	Some of the leading reasons teens had left 'gangs' were getting older and realising it wasn't for them (26%), to avoid getting in trouble with the police (22%) and wanting to be a role model (18%). Boys were more likely to say they'd left because they'd got involved in positive activities, such as sports or creative programmes – cited by 20% of boys, compared to 12% of girls.

Methodology

About this year's survey

Question and thematic overview

This is our fourth annual survey of children's experiences of violence. This year, we surveyed nearly 11,000 13-17-year-olds across England and Wales about their experiences over the past 12 months. In this year's survey, we focused on the following themes.

- What's the scale and nature of violence experienced by teenage children, as victims, perpetrators and witnesses, in person and online? What are the characteristics of the teens most impacted?
- How prevalent is relationship violence? How does this impact boys and girls differently? What do teens view as acceptable behaviour?
- How prevalent are mental health difficulties and neurodevelopmental conditions among teenage children? How do these overlap with experiences of violence? Where do teens turn to for support?
- How many teenage children are at risk of or experience criminal exploitation? What are the routes into and out of exploitation?

This is the fourth report in this year's series. It covers the overlaps between teenage children who join 'gangs', are criminally exploited and who go missing from home, the characteristics of those most at risk and the routes into and out of exploitation.

Terminology

The language we use shapes how we understand violence affecting children. It also influences how young people are seen, how their experiences are understood and the support they receive. That's why it's important to be clear about the terms we use in this report, while recognising their limitations.

'Gangs'

This report shares insights into children's experiences of exploitation and self-identified involvement in 'gangs' – two issues that are deeply connected to how children become, and are, affected by violence.

When we asked whether teenage children had been in a gang in the past year or earlier, we defined 'gang' as the following:

> *"A group of young people who think of themselves as a gang, probably with a name, and are involved in violence or other crime."*

We used the word 'gang' because it's one many young people recognise and use themselves – more than phrases like *group-based violence*. But we also recognise its problems. It can evoke strong feelings, be seen as racially biased and risk oversimplifying a complex problem into a single catch-all term. It has also been used in ways that reinforce harmful stereotypes – for example, to unfairly label Black and minoritised young people, even when similar behaviour among White peers might not be described in the same way.

To reflect the sensitivities around this language, we use inverted commas when referring to 'gangs' and, where possible, more neutral terms such as group-based violence.

Exploitation

Children were also asked about experiences that might suggest exploitation – specifically, whether they've been asked to sell drugs, move drugs or money, or hide drugs, weapons or money for someone else. While we used this description as a way of identifying exploitation, we know that some children's involvement in a 'gang' may also be a sign of exploitation, even if they don't see it that way.

What we did

This year, a total of 10,835 13-17-year-olds responded to our survey, compared to 10,387 last year. This slightly larger sample size ensured we heard sufficiently from smaller groups.

As with last year, we used an online survey conducted by our survey partner, Savanta. The average survey completion time was around 14 minutes, and the survey was live between May and July 2025. Questions typically related to children's experiences over the preceding 12 months.

To ensure the results were nationally representative, we did two things:

- Firstly, we set quotas for key groups. These were age, gender, ethnicity, region and socioeconomic status. The quotas were based on each group's share of the population using Census 2021 population estimates for 13-17-year-olds.
- Secondly, we weighted the results to ensure overall representativeness. This year, we worked with survey consultants from University College London (Dr Krisztián Pósch and Ana Cristancho) to refine the methodology for applying weights to ensure the results are as accurate as possible, particularly when looking at findings by subgroup. All results from last year's survey have been updated to reflect the revised weighting methodology to ensure results are as comparable as possible. For more details on this, see the technical report on our website.

How children were kept safe

Children were invited to take part in the survey and were made aware of the types of questions that would be asked. Anyone could refuse to take part. For all children aged 15 or under, a parent or guardian had to consent for them to take part. Participants could drop out of the survey at any time. Participants were asked to complete the survey on their own and in a safe place where their responses could not be seen. It wasn't possible to look back at previous responses once questions had been answered. At the beginning and end and throughout the survey, participants were signposted to relevant support services.

Approach to reporting results

The smaller the number of responses, the less confident we are in the results. For this reason, we generally don't report results where the total number of responses to a particular question was less than 50. All group comparisons mentioned in the report are statistically significant at a 95% confidence level, unless otherwise noted.

What to be aware of

Like all research, our survey has some limitations. We're trying to understand what teenage children across England and Wales have experienced. While our sample of 10,835 13-17-year-olds is comparably large for this type of survey (for context, the Office for National Statistics' Crime Survey of England and Wales reached 1,528 10-15-year-olds in 2023/24 and has consistently reached around 3,000 young people in recent years), it still represents a small proportion of all children in the country. It's important, therefore, to remember these limitations when interpreting the results:

- Weights are applied to ensure that the results are broadly representative of the national populations of England and Wales. This year, we refined the results so we can more accurately speak to certain subgroups (e.g. by race). However, there are limits to the extent to which weights can be applied to cover variations across all interlocking characteristics. There should be particular caution when looking at results by region due to the challenge in applying interlocking weights at this level.
- The sample size is significantly larger than in other surveys of this kind. However, when we look at the results for some smaller subgroups (e.g. by region, ethnicity and age), these individual groups can be small. This makes it hard to draw generalised conclusions for some smaller populations.
- The subject matter (children's experiences of violence) is sensitive. While we ensured the framing of the questions was suitable for children, it's possible that some may have been unwilling to respond openly and honestly, particularly about things they may have done.

Caution should be taken when making comparisons between this year's survey and last year's. Whilst we've updated the results from last year to reflect some observable differences in who was recruited, we cannot fully rule out that any differences in the results between the years reflect unaccounted-for changes in the characteristics of those who responded.

Detailed findings

What we found

Children are exploited by 'gangs' for a range of criminal activities, including county lines drug trafficking – moving and selling drugs across regions. 'Gangs' actively target children and young people, especially those who are already vulnerable or socially marginalised. This includes children who are repeatedly missing from home. Going missing can also be a sign of someone who is being criminally exploited. In this report, we explore how many children are at risk of being criminally exploited, how this increases their risks of involvement in violence, who they are, the reasons they get involved and the things that help some leave.

Exploitation puts thousands of teenage children at risk.

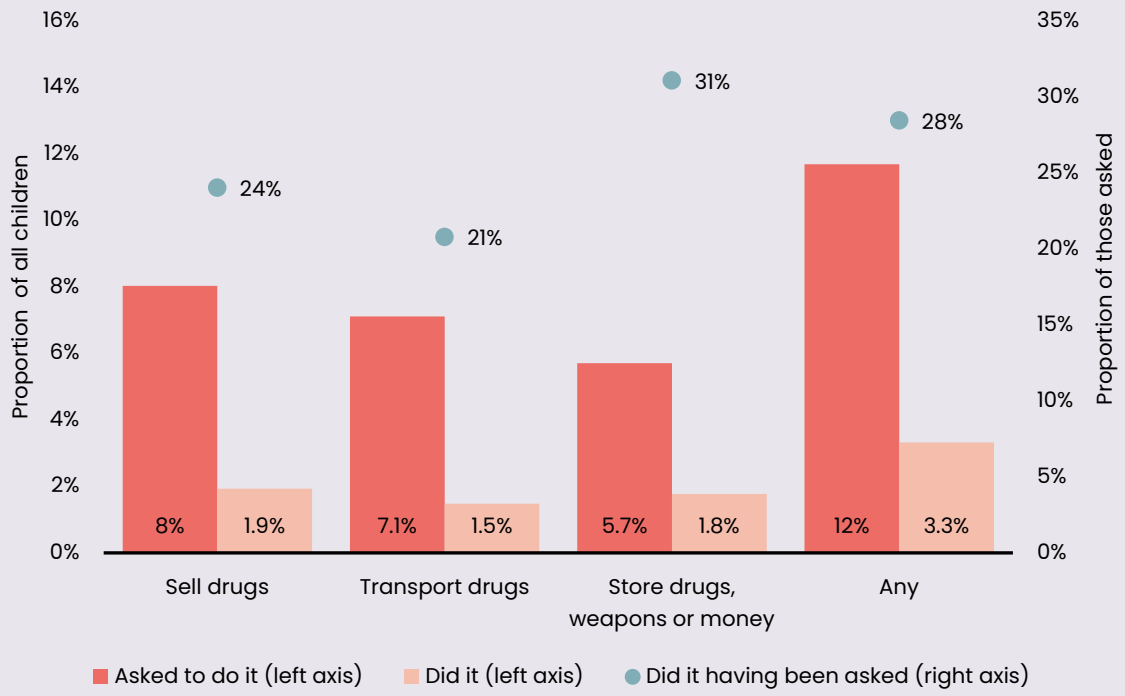
Over one in 10 teenage children were asked to sell drugs; transport drugs; or store drugs, weapons or money.

'Gangs' use a variety of methods to intimidate, manipulate and control children into selling and transporting drugs, as well as storing drugs, weapons and money associated with crime. We wanted to understand not only who's involved in 'gangs' but also who's at risk of being exploited by them. We did this by asking whether children had been approached to sell drugs; transport drugs; or store drugs, weapons or money. We consider these children to be at risk of criminal exploitation. As a new addition to the survey this year, as well as asking whether they were approached to do any of these things, participants were also asked whether they went through with it. We describe the group who said they did go through with it as those who have been criminally exploited.

Overall, 12% of all 13-17-year-olds said they'd been approached to do one of these. Eight per cent were asked to sell drugs, 7.1% to transport them and 5.6% to store drugs, weapons or money. Twenty-eight per cent of those approached went through with it, equating to 3.3% of all 13-17-year-olds (1.9% sold drugs, 1.5% transported them and 1.8% stored drugs, weapons or money). Thirteen-seventeen-year-olds asked to store drugs, weapons or money were more likely to have gone through with it (31%) than to those asked to sell (24%) or transport (21%) drugs. This equates to 440,000 13-17-year-olds being approached to sell drugs; transport drugs; or store drugs, weapons or money and 120,000 going through with it across England and Wales.[3]

[3] Estimates derived using Office for National Statistics mid-2024 population estimates.

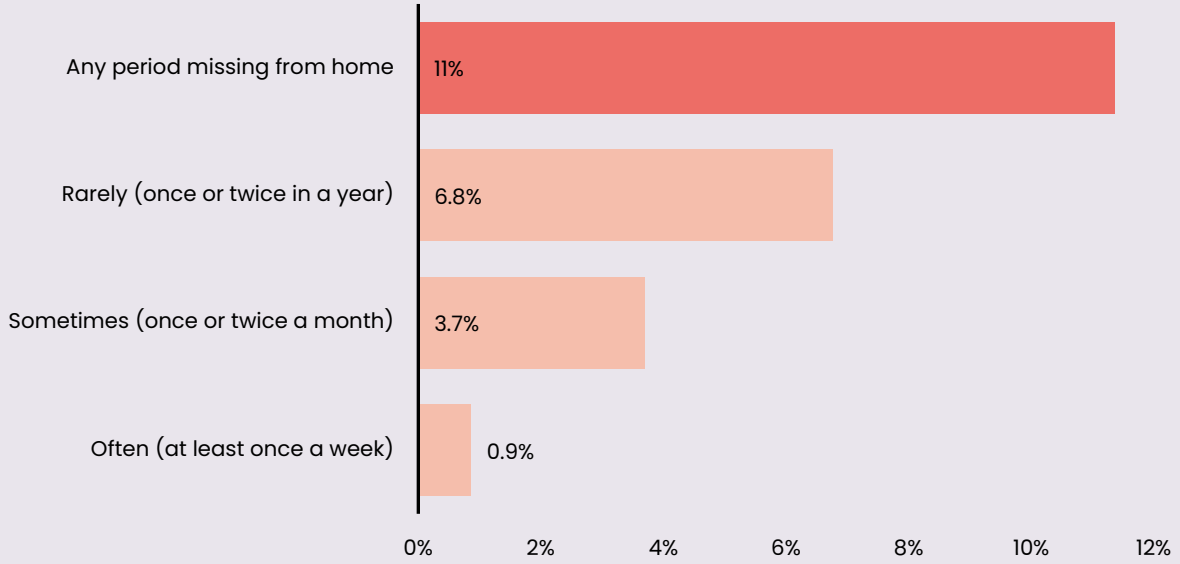
FIGURE 1.1: PROPORTION OF 13-17-YEAR-OLDS WHO WERE APPROACHED TO SELL DRUGS; TRANSPORT DRUGS; OR STORE DRUGS, WEAPONS OR MONEY



Children who go missing from home are at higher risk of being targeted by 'gangs', and frequently going missing can be a sign that a child is at risk of or already being exploited. To find out which children went missing, we asked 13-17-year-olds, *'Have you stayed overnight somewhere that wasn't yours, a friend's or another family member's house without your parent(s)'/guardian(s)' permission?'*. We additionally asked all those who said they'd been missing from home how frequently they did so – rarely (once or twice in a year), sometimes (once or twice a month) or often (at least once a week).

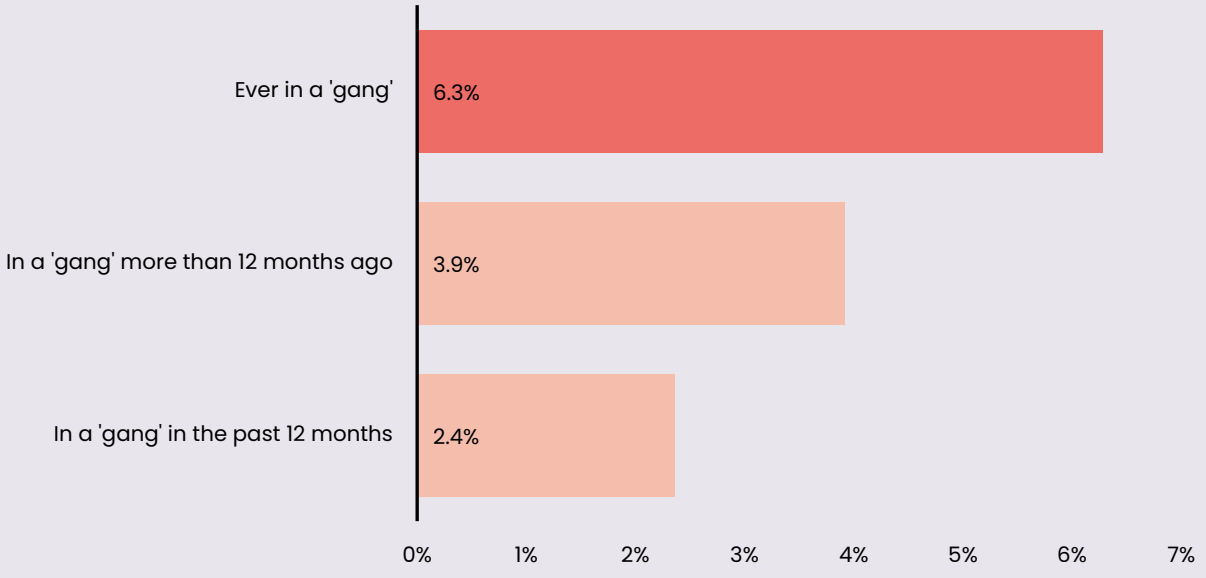
Eleven per cent of 13-17-year-olds said they'd stayed overnight somewhere other than a friend's or family member's house without permission in the past 12 months. The majority (60% of those who had at least one missing episode and 6.8% of all 13-17-year-olds) did so rarely (once or twice in a year). A third (33% of those with at least one missing episode and 3.7% of all 13-17-year-olds) did so sometimes (once or twice a month). A small minority (7.5% of 13-17-year-olds with at least one missing episode and 0.9% of all 13-17-year-olds) did so often (at least once a week).

FIGURE 1.2: PROPORTION OF 13-17-YEAR-OLDS MISSING FROM HOME OVERNIGHT WITHOUT PERMISSION IN THE PAST 12 MONTHS



Children were asked whether they'd been in a 'gang' in the past 12 months or whether they'd been in one more than 12 months ago. We used the following definition: *"By a 'gang', we mean a group of young people who think of themselves as a 'gang', probably with a name, and are involved in violence or other crime."* Of all 13-17-year-olds, 2.4% said they'd been in a 'gang' in the past year, equivalent to 90,000 13-17-year-olds in England and Wales; 3.9% said they hadn't been in a 'gang' in the past year but had been at some point in the past, equivalent to 150,000 13-17-year-olds in England and Wales. Combined, this implies that 6.3% had ever been in a 'gang', equating to 240,000 13-17-year-olds across England and Wales.[4]

FIGURE 1.3: PROPORTION OF 13-17-YEAR-OLDS WHO REPORTED BEING IN A 'GANG'



[4] Estimates derived using Office for National Statistics mid-2024 population estimates.

How does this compare to other estimates?

Our latest 2.4% figure is broadly in line with other surveys. For example, the We Are London Youth Survey 2021–22, conducted by the Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime, found that 1% of 11-16-year-olds in London had been in a 'gang' in the previous year. The Crime Survey of England and Wales, published by the Office for National Statistics, also found that around 1% of 10-15-year-olds reported being in a 'street gang' between 2015/16 and 2017/18.

In last year's Children, violence and vulnerability (2024) survey, we found that 6.8% of 13-17-year-olds had been in a 'gang' in the past 12 months.[5] Our estimate this year is lower and more in line with what other surveys have found. Whilst the overall definition remained the same, the way we asked the question changed – we asked children to more clearly separate whether they were currently or had ever been in a 'gang'. Due to this and changes in the composition of who responded to the survey that may not be fully accounted for by the weighting strategy, we can't say for sure whether the proportion involved in 'gangs' has fallen.

More than half of the teenage children in 'gangs' have been criminally exploited.

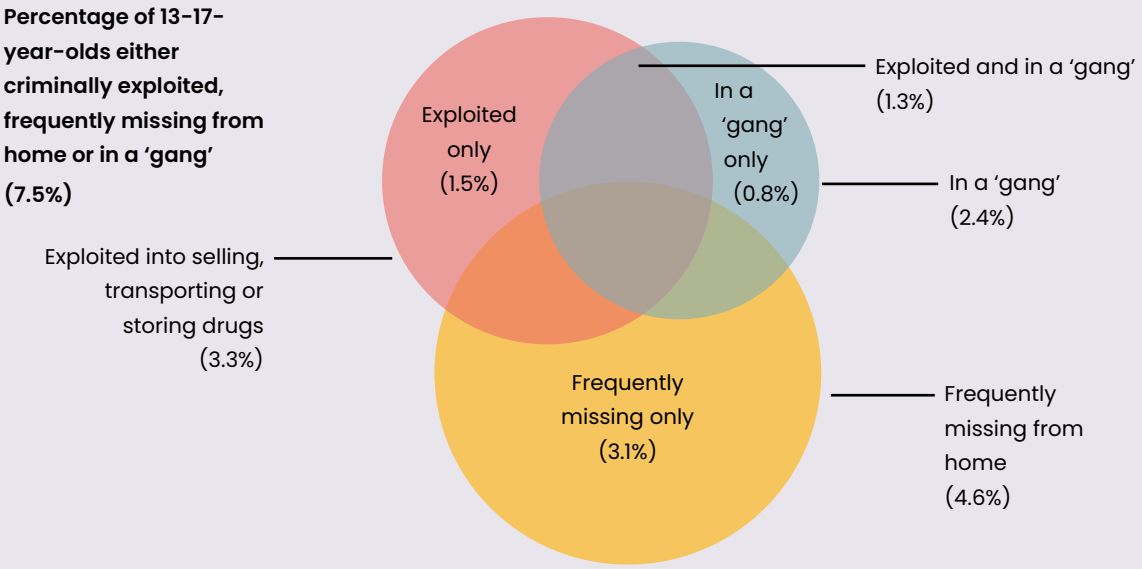
In total, 7.5% of 13-17-year-olds reported either being in a 'gang'; being criminally exploited into selling drugs, transporting drugs, or storing drugs, weapons or money; or frequently going missing (at least once a month) from home in the past 12 months – equivalent to 280,000 13-17-year-olds across England and Wales.[6]

Many teenage children experience more than one of these issues, with a significant overlap between groups:

- Of the 2.4% of all 13-17-year-olds who identified as being in a 'gang' in the past 12 months, 39% had been frequently missing from home without their parents' permission (at least once a month). Over half (55%) had been criminally exploited into transporting drugs; selling drugs; or storing drugs, weapons or money.
- Of the 3.3%% of all 13-17-year-olds who said they'd been criminally exploited in the past 12 months, 39% identified as also being in a 'gang' and 35% said they'd been missing from home frequently.
- Of the 4.6% of all 13-17-year-olds who said they were frequently missing from home, 20% identified as being in a 'gang' in the past 12 months and 26% said they'd been criminally exploited.

[5] Figures for 2024 have been updated from those published last year to reflect the revisions in the weighting methodology – for more details, see the technical report on our website.
[6] Estimates derived using Office for National Statistics mid-2024 population estimates.

FIGURE 1.4: PROPORTION OF 13-17-YEAR-OLDS CRIMINALLY EXPLOITED[1], FREQUENTLY[2] MISSING FROM HOME AND IN A 'GANG'

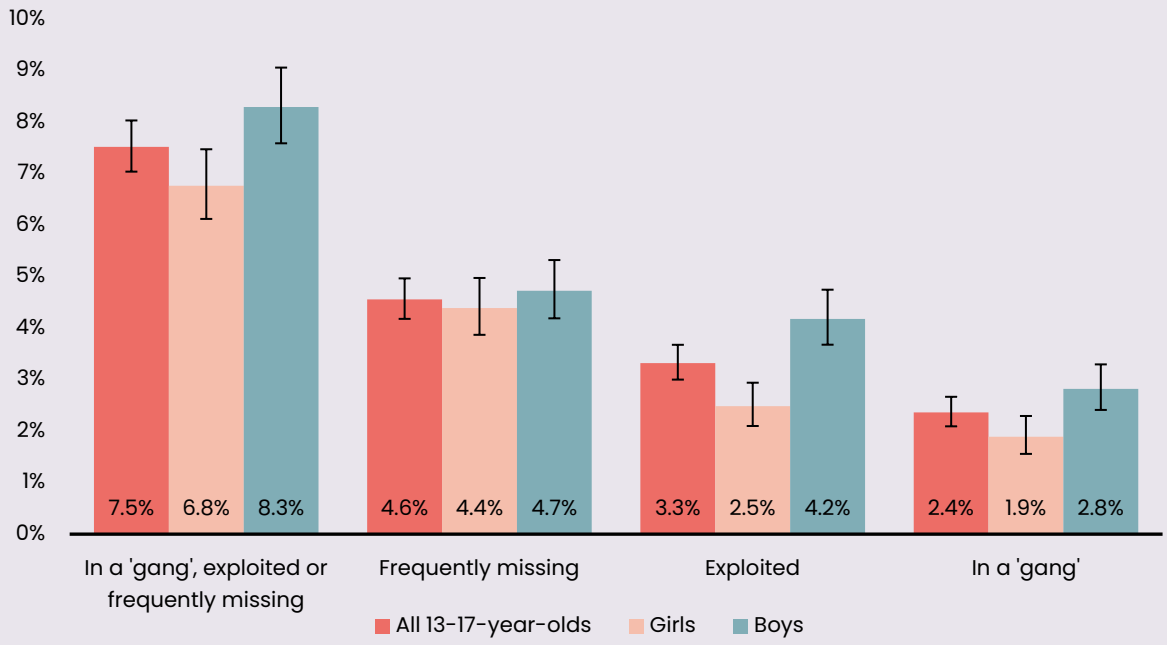


[1] 13-17-year-olds who sold drugs; transported drugs; or stored drugs, weapons or money when approached.
[2] Missing at least once a month.

Girls make up a notable proportion of those involved.

The rate of self-identified 'gang' involvement was higher for boys than girls (2.8% compared to 1.9%), yet girls still accounted for 39% of all 13-17-year-olds who identified as being in a 'gang' in the past 12 months. Similarly, whilst the proportion of boys who sold drugs; transported drugs; or stored drugs, weapons or money was 4.2%, 2.5% of girls said they'd done one of these, accounting for 37% of all those who'd been exploited. There was no statistically significant difference in the proportion of boys and girls who said they were frequently missing from home (at least once a month without a parent's permission), accounting for 4.4% of girls and 4.7% of boys.

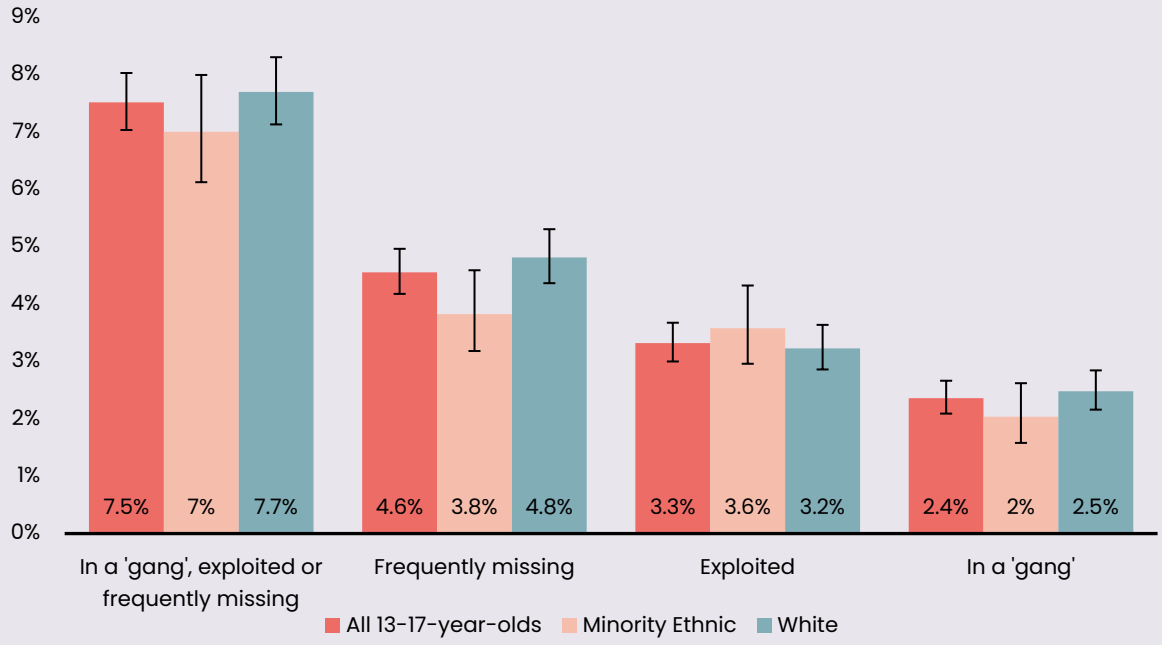
FIGURE 1.5: PROPORTION OF 13-17-YEAR-OLDS WHO'VE BEEN IN A 'GANG', CRIMINALLY EXPLOITED OR FREQUENTLY MISSING FROM HOME, BY GENDER



Note. The error bars represent 95% confidence intervals — this reflects the range we expect the true value to fall within.

There was little difference between teenage children from Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic backgrounds and teens from a White ethnic background. Of those from a White ethnic background, 2.5% identified as being in a 'gang', compared to 2% of teens from any Minority Ethnic background. Four point eight per cent of teens from a White ethnic background said they'd been frequently missing from home, compared to 3.8% of teens from Minority Ethnic backgrounds. Three point six per cent of teens from Minority Ethnic backgrounds said they'd been exploited into selling drugs; transporting drugs; or storing drugs, weapons or money, compared to 3.2% of teens from a White ethnic background. Overall, 13-17-year-olds from a White ethnic background were slightly more likely to say they'd experienced any of these – 7.7% compared to 7% of those from Minority Ethnic backgrounds. None of these differences are statistically significant and the sample size is too small and these experiences too rare to look at differences between more specific racialised groups.

FIGURE 1.6: PROPORTION OF 13-17-YEAR-OLDS WHO'VE BEEN IN A 'GANG', CRIMINALLY EXPLOITED OR FREQUENTLY MISSING FROM HOME, BY RACE



Note. The error bars represent 95% confidence intervals — this reflects the range we expect the true value to fall within.

London was the only significant outlier by region. The proportion of 13-17-year-olds who experienced any of these (being in a 'gang', being criminally exploited or being missing from home frequently) was 12% in London – higher than in all other regions. This is true for the proportion identifying as being in a 'gang' (4.4% in London compared to 2.4% nationally), the proportion criminally exploited (6.9% in London compared to 3.3% nationally) and the proportion of those frequently going missing from home (6.9% in London compared to 4.6% nationally). The differences between the other regions outside of London are not statistically significant. This is true even when we compare the rate for urban areas in Greater London (14%) and urban areas in the rest of England and Wales (9%).

FIGURE 1.7: PROPORTION OF 13-17-YEAR-OLDS WHO'VE BEEN IN A 'GANG', CRIMINALLY EXPLOITED OR FREQUENTLY MISSING, BY REGION

[1] Cell counts are less than 50, so these figures should be interpreted with caution.

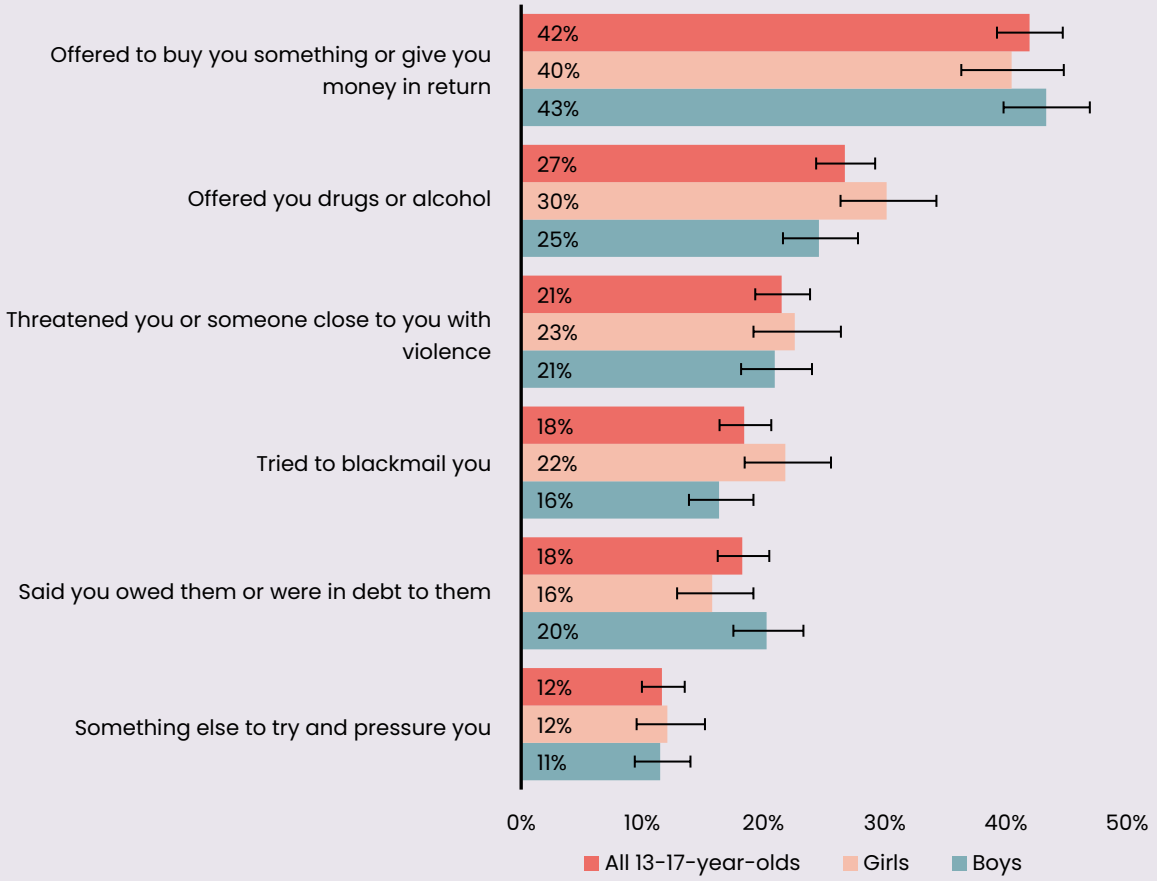
Note. The error bars represent 95% confidence intervals — this reflects the range we expect the true value to fall within.

Bribery is the main tactic used to exploit teens into crime.

A range of tactics is used to groom children into criminal activity. This can look like promises of protection, money or belonging, as well as threats, all of which can trap children in cycles of exploitation and violence. To get children's perspectives on this, we asked new questions this year about what tactics were used by the people who'd asked them to sell drugs; transport drugs; or store drugs, weapons or money.

Amongst the 12% of teens who'd been asked, the most common tactic they reported was bribery – being offered money or something else in return – which was cited by 42% of 13-17-year-olds at risk of exploitation. This was followed by being offered drugs or alcohol (27%), which was even more common for teenage children who'd used drugs in the past 12 months (33%). Twenty-one per cent said they were threatened with physical or sexual violence. Girls were more likely to say that blackmail was used – 22% compared to 16% of boys approached – whilst boys were more likely to say they were told they had a debt they had to work off – 20% compared to 16% of girls approached.

FIGURE 1.8: TACTICS USED TO EXPLOIT 13-17-YEAR-OLDS TO SELL DRUGS; TRANSPORT DRUGS; OR STORE DRUGS, WEAPONS OR MONEY – ALL 13-17-YEAR-OLDS WHO WERE APPROACHED

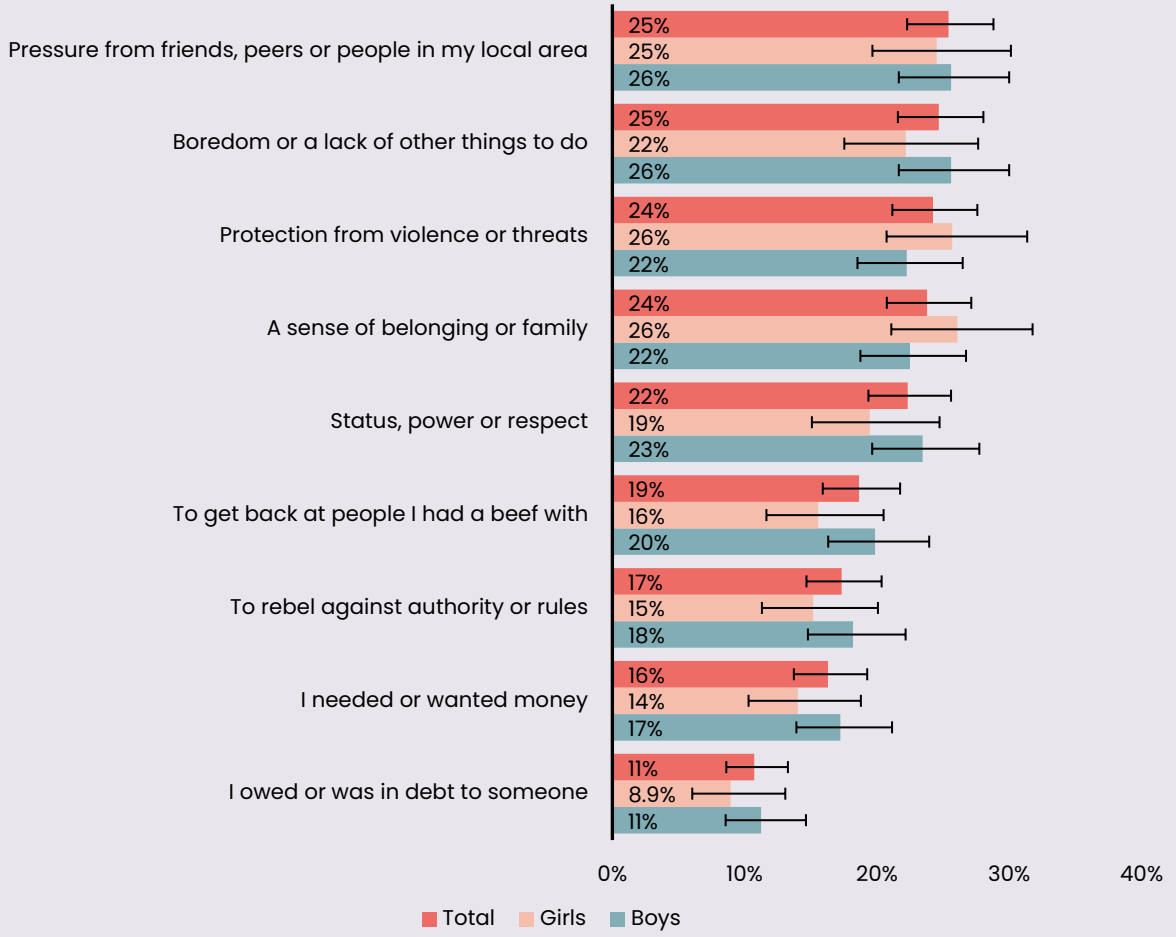


Notes. Numbers do not sum to 100% as more than one response could be selected. The error bars represent 95% confidence intervals — this reflects the range we expect the true value to fall within.

We also asked what the main reasons were that children joined 'gangs'. Peer pressure, boredom, protection and a sense of belonging were among the leading reasons given. Amongst the 13-17-year-olds who said they'd ever been in a 'gang' (in the past 12 months or more than 12 months ago), 25% said they'd joined because of pressure from friends, peers or people in their local area. This was followed closely by boredom or a lack of things to do (25%), protection from violence (24%) and a sense of belonging or family (24%).

For girls who'd been in 'gangs', the most common reasons for joining were protection from violence (26% of girls cited this compared to 22% of boys) and providing a sense of belonging (cited by 26% of girls involved in 'gangs' compared to 22% of boys). Boys were more likely to say it was due to power and respect (23% compared to 19% of girls) or to get back at someone (20% compared to 16% of girls).

FIGURE 1.9: REASONS FOR JOINING A 'GANG' – ALL 13-17-YEAR-OLDS WHO IDENTIFIED AS CURRENTLY OR EVER BEING IN A 'GANG'



Notes. Numbers do not sum to 100% as more than one response could be selected. The error bars represent 95% confidence intervals — this reflects the range we expect the true value to fall within.

Being exploited, going missing and being in a 'gang' dramatically increase the risk of serious violence.

One in four teens frequently missing from home are victims of serious violence.

The risk of violence increases with the frequency of missing episodes. Of the 13-17-year-olds who'd ever been missing in the past 12 months, 13% were victims of violence, increasing to 35% of those who were rarely missing (three times higher) and 58% of those who were missing at least once a month (five times higher). The same is true of the perpetration of violence. Of 13-17-year-olds who had never been missing, 9% said they'd perpetrated violence in the past year, compared to 27% of those who were rarely missing (three times higher) and 50% of those who were missing at least once a month (six times higher). The relative increased risk was even higher for more serious violence requiring medical treatment by a doctor or at a hospital. For example, 0.8% of 13-17-year-olds who were never missing said they'd perpetrated violence that led to medical treatment. This compares to 8.7% of those who were rarely missing (10 times higher) and 25% of those who were missing from home at least once a month (30 times higher).

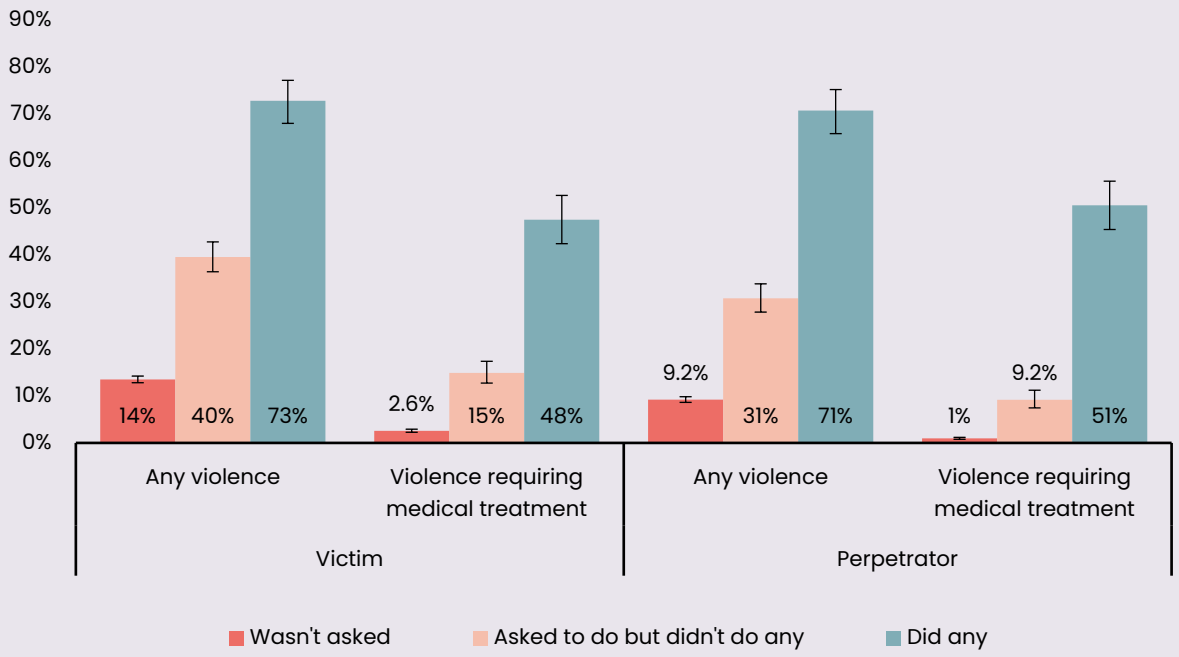
FIGURE 2.1: VIOLENCE VICTIMISATION AND PERPETRATION RATES FOR 13-17-YEAR-OLDS, BY FREQUENCY OF GOING MISSING FROM HOME

Note. The error bars represent 95% confidence intervals — this reflects the range we expect the true value to fall within.

Criminally exploited teens are 18 times more likely to face serious violence.

Forty per cent of 13-17-year-olds who'd been asked sell drugs; transport drugs; or store drugs, weapons or money but didn't go through with it had been victims of violence, rising to 73% of those who did go through with it. This is three times and five times higher, respectively, than those who were never approached (14%). Perpetration of violence showed a similar pattern, with 31% of those approached who hadn't gone through with it and 71% of those who had gone through with it saying they'd perpetrated violence – three times and eight times higher, respectively, than the 9.2% of 13-17-year-olds who said they were never approached.

FIGURE 2.2: VIOLENCE VICTIMISATION AND PERPETRATION RATES FOR 13-17-YEAR-OLDS APPROACHED TO SELL DRUGS; TRANSPORT DRUGS; OR STORE DRUGS, WEAPONS OR MONEY



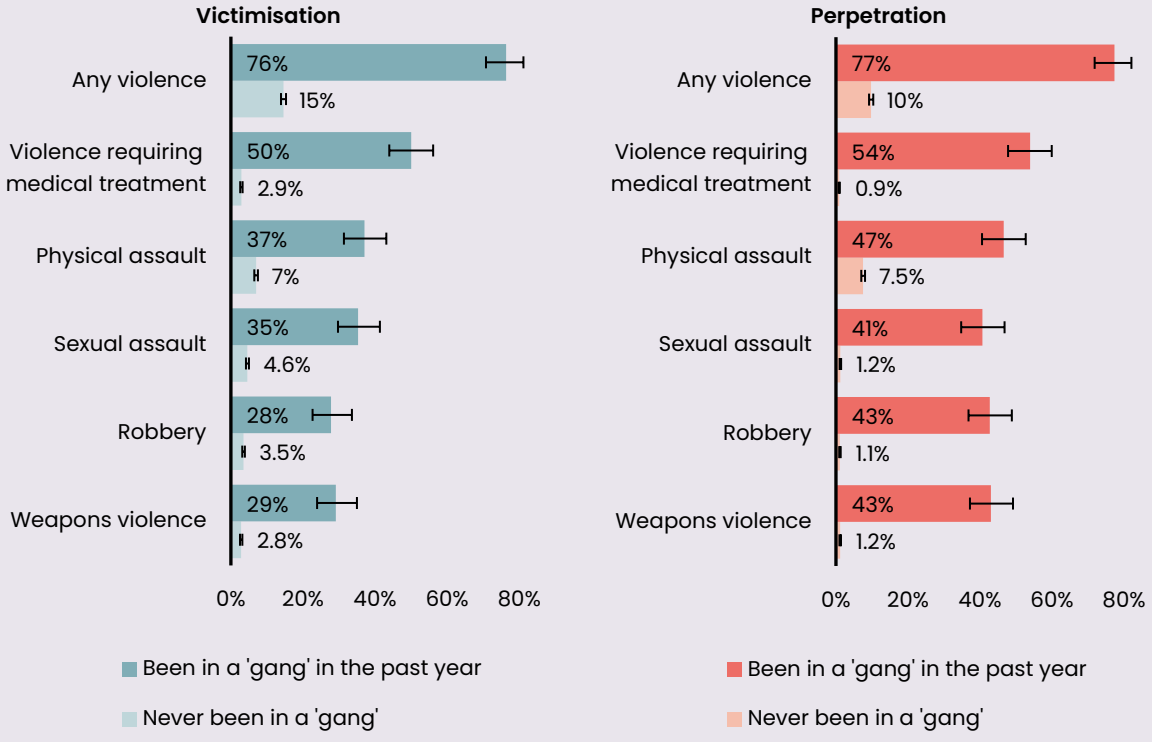
Note. The error bars represent 95% confidence intervals — this reflects the range we expect the true value to fall within.

The relative increase in the risk of violence for children asked to do these things was even higher when it came to serious violence requiring medical treatment. Nearly half (48%) of teenage children exploited into selling drugs; transporting drugs; or storing drugs, weapons or money had been victims of violence requiring treatment by a doctor or at a hospital, compared to 2.6% of teens never approached – 18 times higher. And they were 53 times more likely to have perpetrated violence requiring medical treatment – 51% of those exploited compared to 1% of those not approached.

Over half of teens in 'gangs' commit serious violence.

Teenage children who identified as being in a 'gang' were significantly more likely to be affected by violence: 76% of 13-17-year-olds who said they'd been in a 'gang' in the past 12 months had been a victim of violence. This is five times the rate for those who'd never been in a 'gang' (15%). Seventy-seven per cent had perpetrated violence themselves, compared to 10% who had never been in a 'gang' – 8 times higher. Perpetration of more serious types of violence was particularly high amongst teens identifying as being in 'gangs'. Thirteen-seventeen-year-olds who said they'd been in a 'gang' in the past 12 months were 34 times more likely to report committing sexual assault in the previous year (41% of teens in a 'gang' compared to 1.2% of those who'd never been in a gang). They were 39 times more likely to report committing robbery (43% of those in 'gangs' compared to 1.1% of those not involved), and they were 62 times more likely to commit violence that led to their victim receiving medical treatment by a doctor or at a hospital (54% of those in 'gangs', compared to 0.9% of those not involved). Put another way, whilst 13-17-year-olds in 'gangs' represented 2.4% of all 13-17-year-olds, they represented 39% of those who perpetrated violence that required medical treatment.

FIGURE 2.3: VIOLENCE VICTIMISATION AND PERPETRATION RATES FOR 13-17-YEAR-OLDS, BY WHETHER THEY IDENTIFIED AS BEING IN A 'GANG' IN THE PAST 12 MONTHS



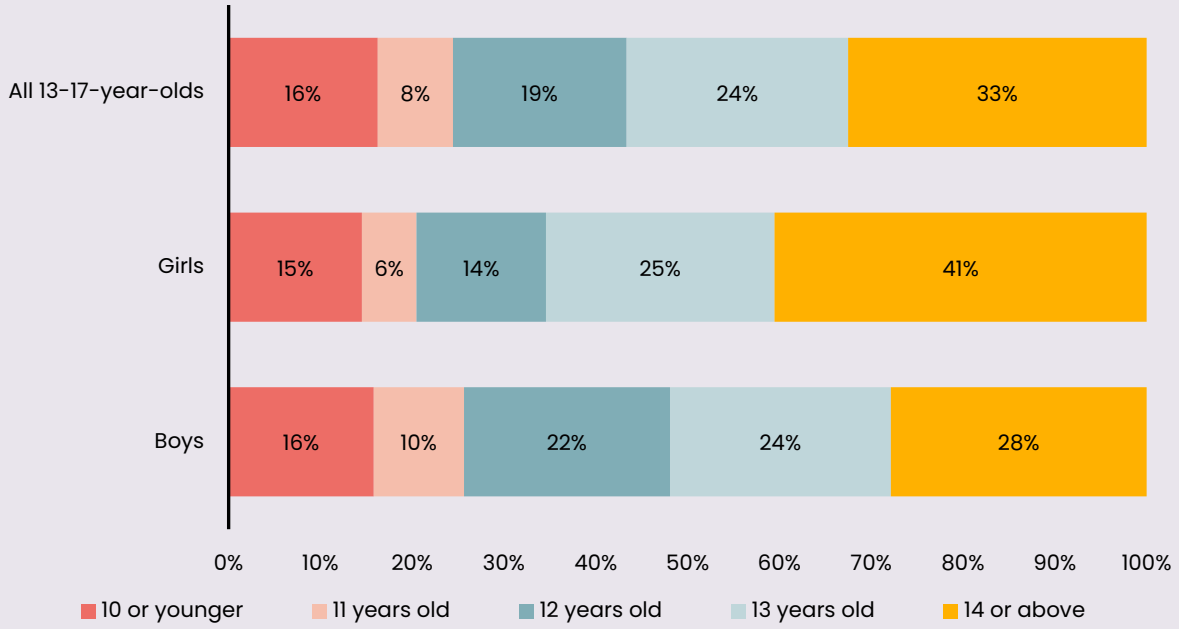
Note. The error bars represent 95% confidence intervals — this reflects the range we expect the true value to fall within.

Risky behaviours can be a signal and symptom of exploitation.

Four in 10 teens in 'gangs' had joined by age 12.

Most 13–17-year-olds in 'gangs' joined at younger ages. Of those in a 'gang' in the past 12 months, two-thirds (67%) had already joined by age 13 or younger. Nearly half (43%) had joined by age 12 or younger, a quarter (24%) at age 11 or younger and 16% had already joined by age 10. For boys (who account for 60% of 13-17-year-olds who reported being in a 'gang' in the past year), a higher proportion reported joining at younger ages: 71% reported joining a 'gang' at age 13 or younger, compared to 59% for girls.

FIGURE 3.1: AGE OF JOINING FOR 13-17-YEAR-OLDS WHO'D BEEN IN A 'GANG' IN THE PAST 12 MONTHS, BY GENDER



Exploited teens are significantly more likely to engage in risky behaviours.

Figure 3.2 below compares the prevalence of vulnerabilities amongst all 13–17-year-olds with those in 'gangs', criminally exploited and frequently missing from home. They illustrate the clear overrepresentation of certain experiences within these groups. Broadly, these can be divided into two categories: risky behaviours and home and school factors.

Category 1: risky behaviours

This category covers behaviours that children engage in, the peers they're surrounded with and their interactions with the justice system. It includes behaviours or experiences that are some of the most associated with the risk of criminal exploitation and involvement in violence.

- **Carrying a weapon:** this is one of the single strongest risk factors when looking at relative risk. Overall, weapon-carrying was very uncommon in the total population of 13-17-year-olds (2.1% had carried one in the past year), but 13-17-year-olds frequently missing from home were seven times more likely to have carried a weapon and those in 'gangs' or being exploited were 15 times more likely to have carried a weapon than all 13-17-year-olds.
- **Using class A drugs:** substance use – particularly of class A drugs – is similarly elevated in these groups of teenage children. Only 3.6% of all 13-17-year-olds had used class A drugs in the past year, but this rose to 29% of those frequently missing from home and half of those in 'gangs' and criminally exploited – eight times and 14 times the rate in the total population, respectively.
- **Excluded or suspended:** exclusion from education has the potential to be a pathway to criminal exploitation, as it can disconnect children from protective school environments while placing them in contexts that could carry higher risks. Rates of being excluded or suspended were nearly seven times higher for 13-17-year-olds in 'gangs', six times higher for those who were criminally exploited and four times higher for those frequently missing from home, compared to all 13-17-year-olds.
- **Interacting with the police:** 13-17-year-olds in 'gangs', those who were criminally exploited and those frequently missing were also significantly more likely to have been stopped, searched, questioned or arrested by the police for a crime they were suspected of. A minority of all 13-17-year-olds had interacted with the police over a suspected crime, but the majority of those in 'gangs', exploited and frequently missing had experienced this – around four to five times the rate for all 13-17-year-olds.
- **High-risk peers:** we asked new questions this year about whether children thought their friends would take drugs, steal, carry weapons or be in a 'gang'. Teenage children with friends who engaged in these types of activities were at an increased risk of being criminally exploited or being in a 'gang' themselves, albeit to a much lesser extent than those using drugs or carrying weapons themselves. Overall, 22% of 13-17-year-olds said they thought it was likely their friends did at least one of these things. In contrast, a majority of 13-17-year-olds in 'gangs', those who were criminally exploited or those who were frequently missing thought their friends were likely to do these things – around three times the rate for all 13-17-year-olds.

Adverse home environments are also associated with increased risk.

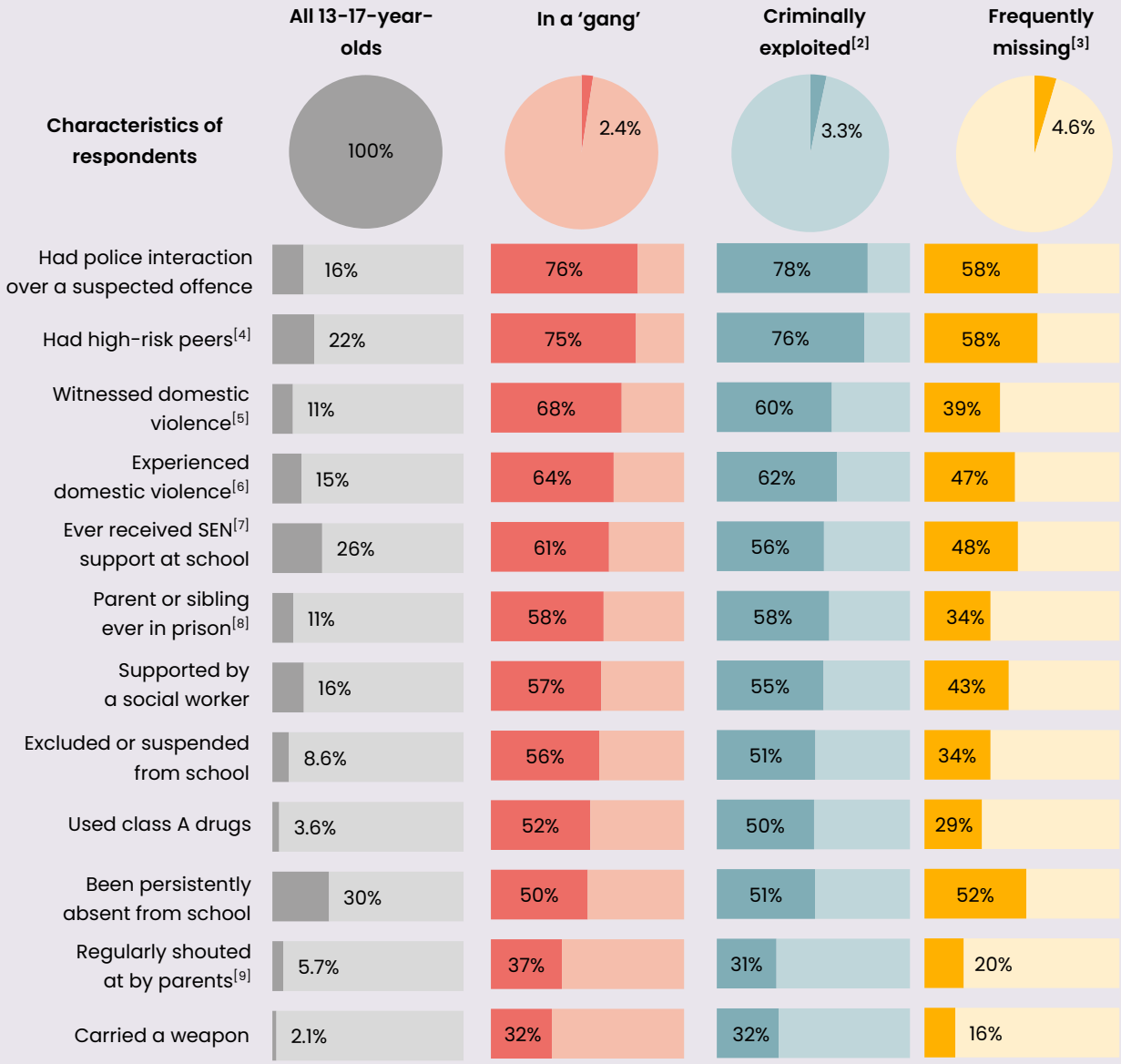
Category 2: home and school factors

This category covers experiences and needs related to children's home and school life. It includes experiences that may be less directly related to the risk of criminal exploitation but that present challenges are associated with an increased risk of being in 'gangs', being exploited and frequently going missing.

- **Being regularly shouted at by parents:** for the first time this year, we asked children how frequently their parents or guardians shouted at them. Five point seven per cent of all 13-17-year-olds said they were shouted at daily or almost every day. Those in 'gangs' were over six times more likely to be shouted at by their parents on a daily basis than all 13-17-year-olds. Those who were criminally exploited were over five times more likely, and those who were frequently missing from home were over three times more likely.

- **Domestic violence:** we also asked for the first time this year about physical domestic violence. Thirteen-seventeen-year-olds in 'gangs', those who were exploited and those who were frequently missing from home were significantly more likely to have ever witnessed their parents be physically violent to one another or to have ever had a parent be physically violent to them – three to six times more likely than all 13-17-year-olds.
- **Parents or siblings in prison:** another new question we added on home and family life was whether a parent or sibling had ever been in prison. Thirteen-seventeen-year-olds in 'gangs' or those who were criminally exploited were around five times more likely to have a parent or sibling who had been in prison than all 13-17-year-olds. Those who were frequently missing from home were three times more likely than all 13-17-year-olds.
- **Supported by a social worker:** we asked children whether they'd been supported by a social worker in the past year. This could include those who'd met with a social worker once or twice, as well as those receiving significant ongoing support. Those in a 'gang', those who were criminally exploited and those frequently missing from home were around 3 times more likely to be supported by a social worker than all 13-17-year-olds.
- **Special educational needs:** having special educational needs (SEN) is fairly common amongst children, and over a quarter of 13-17-year-olds responding to our survey said they received SEN support in school, whilst more may have SEN that they're not receiving recognition and support for. Those who identified as being in a 'gang', those who were criminally exploited and those frequently missing from home were even more likely to report having SEN support, although the difference was less dramatic than for other factors. Half (48%) of 13-17-year-olds frequently missing and the majority of those in 'gangs' (61%) and those who were exploited (56%) said they received SEN support, making them around twice as likely to have SEN than all 13-17-year-olds.
- **Persistent absence from school:** persistent absence from school (missing 10% or more of lessons) is the most common of the factors we looked at, with 30% of all 13-17-year-olds saying they'd missed 10% or more of school in the previous school term. Those in a 'gang', those who were criminally exploited or those frequently missing from home were nearly twice as likely to be persistently absent from school than all 13-17-year-olds.

FIGURE 3.2: VULNERABILITIES OF 13-17-YEAR-OLDS, BY EXPERIENCES OF 'GANGS', CRIMINAL EXPLOITATION AND GOING MISSING FROM HOME[1]



[1] Unless otherwise stated, the vulnerabilities listed relate to experiences over the past 12 months.

[2] Children approached to sell drugs; transport drugs; or store drugs, weapons or money who went through with it.

[3] Children who were missing from home at least once a month.

[4] Children who had friends they regarded as highly likely to take drugs, be in a 'gang' or carry a weapon.

[5] Children who witnessed adults in the household being physically violent to each other.

[6] Children who were ever hit by their parents/guardians.

[7] Special Educational Needs.

[8] The Ministry of Justice have estimated there are 192,912 children in England and Wales with a parent who has been in prison (around 2%). Our figure is notably higher. This could be because we asked about siblings as well as parents. It's also possible that respondents to our survey were thinking about any period in jail or arrest, not just parents who have served a custodial sentence.

[9] Children who were shouted at by parents/guardians daily.

Finding a way out is possible.

More teens have left a 'gang' than are currently in one.

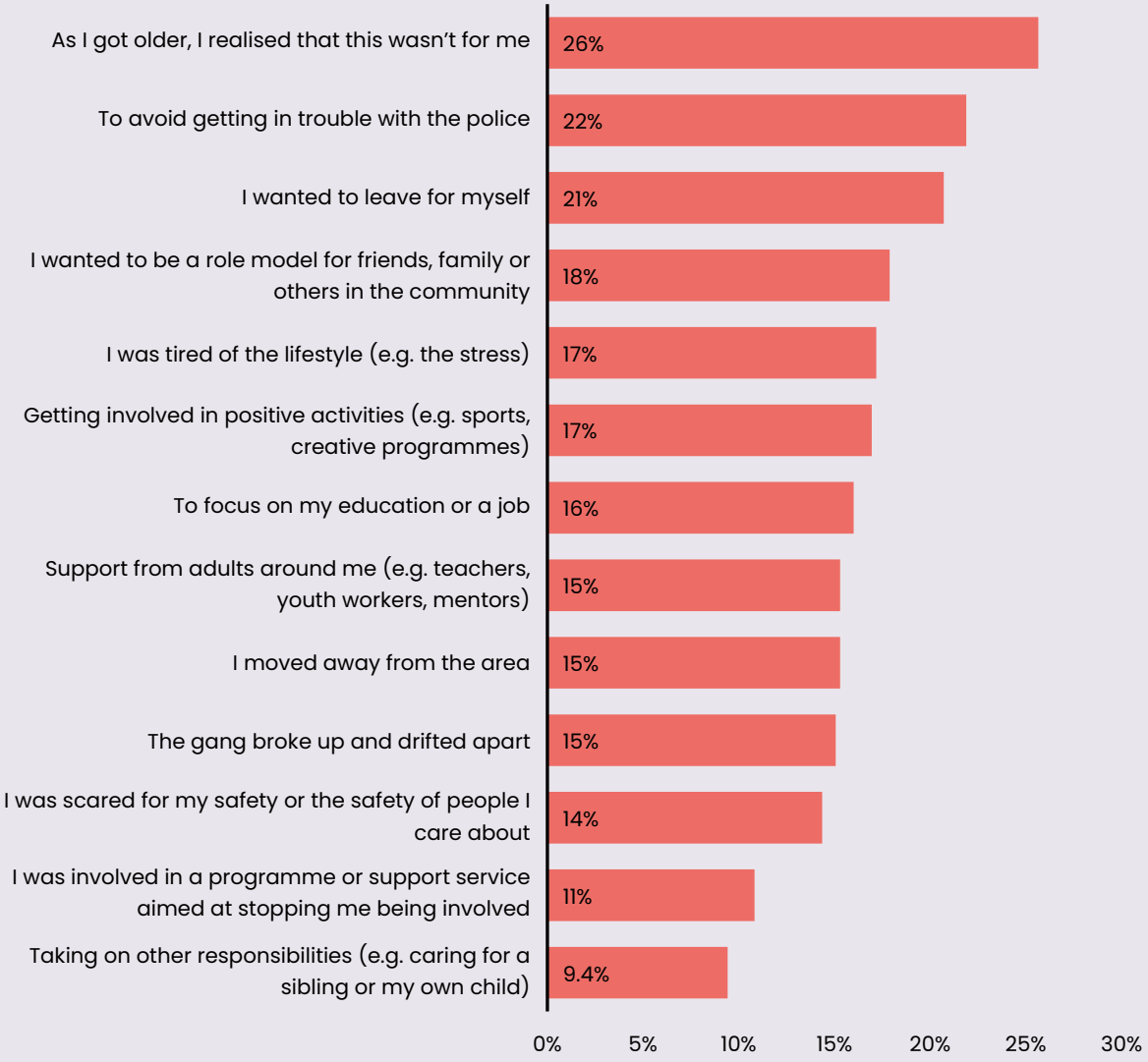
As we've already seen, more teenage children said they'd left a 'gang' than are currently in one. Of 13-17-year-olds, 2.4% said they were in a 'gang' in the past 12 months, compared to 3.9% who had been in one more than 12 months ago but were no longer in one.

There are many reasons why teens leave.

Of those 13-17-year-olds who said they were no longer in a 'gang', we asked for the reasons why they'd left. The most common reason given was getting older and realising it wasn't for them (26%). Twenty-two per cent said it was to avoid getting in trouble with the police. Twenty-one per cent said they wanted to leave for themselves, and 18% said it was because they wanted to be a role model. Only 11% said it was because of a dedicated programme that helped them leave, but 17% cited the influence of getting involved in positive activities, such as sports or creative programmes.

Boys were more likely to say they'd left because they'd got involved in positive activities, such as sports or creative programmes – cited by 20% of boys, compared to 12% of girls who'd previously been in a 'gang'. Girls were more likely to say that support from teachers, support workers or mentors helped them leave – cited by 20% of girls, compared to 13% of boys – but these estimates are based on a small number of responses and may not be reliable.

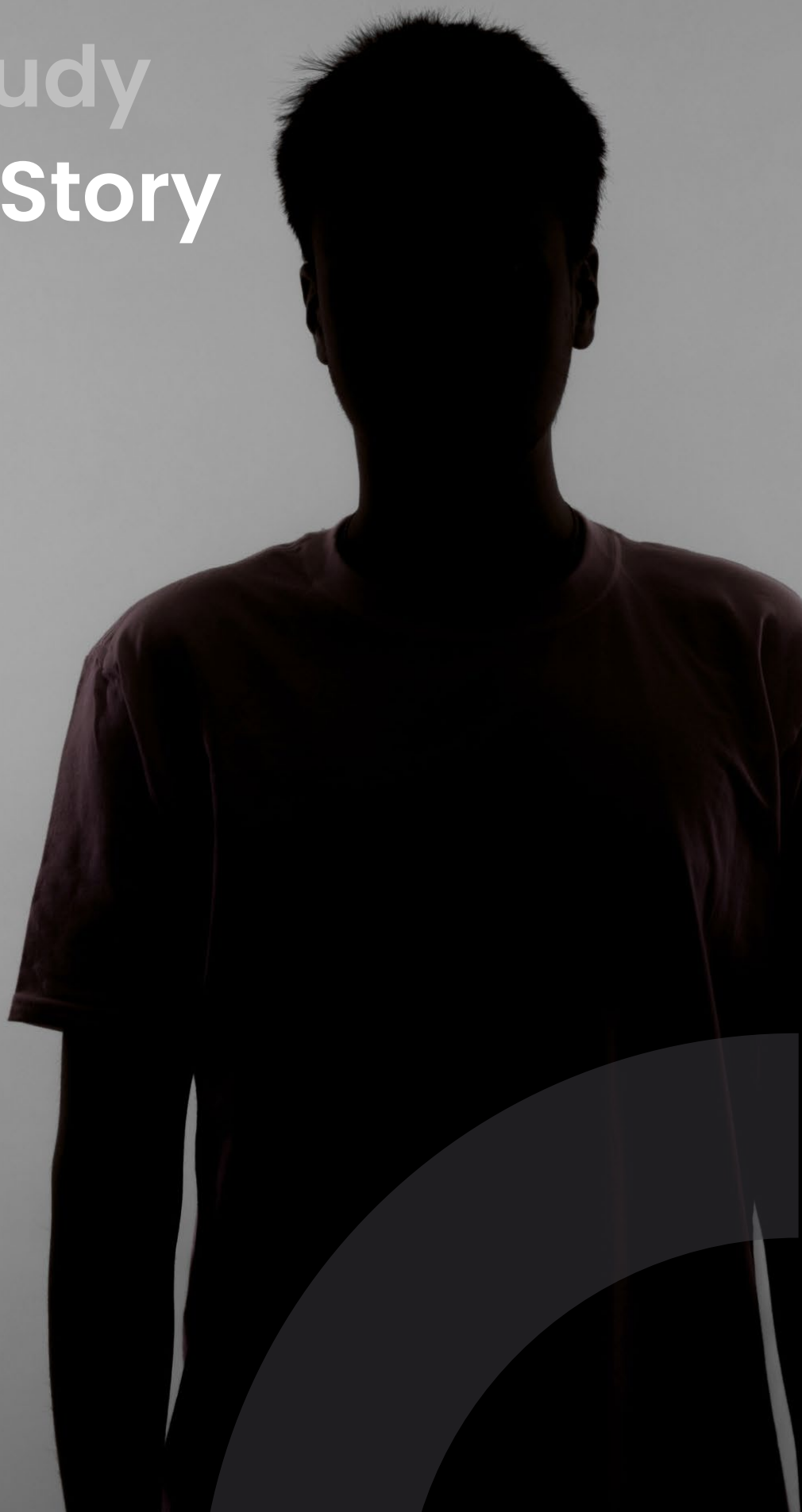
FIGURE 4.1: REASONS FOR LEAVING A 'GANG' – ALL 13-17-YEAR-OLDS WHO'D BEEN IN A 'GANG' MORE THAN 12 MONTHS AGO



Note. Numbers do not sum to 100% as more than one response could be selected

Case Study

James' Story



James' story of being criminally exploited

Warning: this story contains details that some might find distressing.

From the ages of 12 to 18, James* was criminally exploited – trapped in a cycle of fear, manipulation and violence. This is his story, told in his own words.

**Name has been changed.*

"The build-up for me was from the age of about 12"

I was 13 years old when my journey really began. But as you can appreciate, you don't just hit 13 and all of a sudden you're involved in county lines [moving and selling drugs across regions], 'gangs' or anything like that. The build-up for me was from the age of about 12, and then by the time that I'd reached 13, I was certainly involved in drug-dealing activities, criminal activities and borderline 'gang' affiliation as well.

Where I'm from, we had a three-tier school system – primary school, middle school and upper school. The second I hit upper school, I was thrown into this mix of new people, new environments, new timetables – everything was new. And to put it quite frankly, it was chaotic and borderline exciting. But then, my dad got diagnosed with cancer quite early on, and a couple of months later, my granddad got diagnosed with terminal cancer.

At this stage, I knew I was dyslexic, but I've also recently found out that I've got ADHD. I think when you throw all of that into the mix and all of these different factors, they were some of the driving points to what made me so vulnerable to criminal exploitation, county lines, all of those sorts of things. I really tried opening up to the school, but unfortunately, that wasn't very well received.

I'd describe myself as actually a good student. And I know everyone wants to be able to say that, but I never had detentions, I wasn't getting into trouble in school, I wasn't getting into fights or anything like that. But my real weakness and my most pivotal point was drugs. At a very, very young age – 12 or 13 – people are offering me joints of cannabis, cigarettes, vapes, MDMA, pills. I came from a background where my parents had never taken drugs before. They've never seen drugs. They've never spoken to me about drugs. All of a sudden, I'm being offered these different substances. I didn't have a clue that they were a criminal offence. All I knew was they made me feel good. I knew that they made my family situation a lot easier.

The problem was, how do you pay for those drugs? All of these older peers are telling me to drop off little packages of drugs, or it might be to go and steal a bike from somewhere. That was my world at age 13.

"And I remember my heart just dropping. I think 'Payment?' I know it's naïve, but I truly didn't believe that this stuff really cost a great deal of money."

I remember being 13 years old, joining my high school, and straight away, all of the Year 11 and the sixth formers – so peers who were a lot older than me – took a real liking to me. I don't actually really understand why, but they wanted to be my friend. And I was loving that. I've got all these great peers. I'm becoming kind of cool. I've got people watching my back. Then they're offering me drugs, cannabis. I'm starting to get into a routine of drinking on the weekends, taking drugs before school, after school. And I remember one day, particularly, and I'll never ever forget it, they said to me, "*You smoke all our weed, you drink our alcohol on the weekends, we let you hang around with us, but you've never, ever paid for any of this stuff ever before.*" And I remember my heart just dropping. I think '*Payment?*' I know it's naïve, but I truly didn't believe that this stuff really cost a great deal of money. And my head went straight away to "*Well, dad's ill, mum's really stressed looking after dad".* The thought of going home and asking them for money – the anxiety was insane.

I just about managed to say that to these guys, and I remember him wording it like, "*Ah, don't you worry. Do you think that we had money when we were 13?"* And I stood there and was like, "*Well, I don't know?"* And they said, "*Well, we didn't. The way that we got our money [was] by taking these little packages and going and dropping it off. And if you do that, everything gets to stay the same.*"

It wasn't like a yes or no choice, but it was, "*What's going to make me most happy in this situation?*" And for me, it was about prioritising my family. I knew they were stressed; I knew they were worried. I knew if I went home and asked them for money that it would start alarm bells ringing. So, I went along with that. It almost felt like a rite of passage. It felt so, so normal, like it was just so casual.

As I get older, and as I go through my journey, I'd say age 14 was probably the first point in my life that I realised I did not have a choice. I was put into environments that I certainly was not comfortable with. I was in properties where I'm watching people inject heroin or smoke crack cocaine. And that's when I started to realise, "*OK, maybe this isn't that normal*". I'm seeing my peers hanging around in parks or building dirt jumps to bike over. And that's when I then started to say stuff like, "*Do I really have to do that? Can someone else do it today?"* Or *"I need to go and see my family tonight; I've got [a] family meal".* And that's when I very quickly realised that I did not have a choice in what's going on or the decisions being made.

"I truly thought they had my best interests at heart"

I thought they were like my best friends. I truly thought they had my best interests at heart. I remember certain people saying to me, "*Why are you hanging around with him or her? Or do you know who they're connected to?"* I thought, *"No, these guys are amazing. They're looking after me. They listen to me when I'm having a bad day about my dad or my granddad".* And I truly believed that they were my friends, without a doubt. That was part of the hardest journey for me – understanding criminal exploitation and understanding that maybe I could have been a victim of the situation. That was a long process. Actually, understanding that I could have been a victim and that maybe I wasn't just a hardened criminal or anything like that.

I thought they were good friends. I thought they were borderline family. And at that point, I believed that they prioritised my interests more than my own family. And I thought that they were going to take better care of me than my mum and dad could.

On a weekly basis, I feared for my safety. The first time I was ever stabbed – well, stabbed might be a strong word actually, but sliced in the arm fairly severely – was age 14. And from age 14 up until the age of 18, I was stabbed on two separate occasions. I had a chemical substance thrown in my face. I was bottled on more occasions than I can count. Had lots of fights – lots. And people constantly trying to rob me. That all sounds horrendous, right? It doesn't sound very normal.

But for me, what I used to find the most scary is when you're being criminally exploited or part of a drug dealing network, quite often you can find yourself standing on a street corner, at like three in the morning. You're just standing there alone with your thoughts, waiting for that next customer to come through. It's actually the internal fear that starts taking over more than anything. You start picturing things in your head that you're about to die, or someone might quickly run along and shoot you, or you're about to get kidnapped, or the police come along again. The internal fear was very severe. And of course, it inevitably took a humongous impact on my mental health. Without being too sinister, it unfortunately led to a couple of suicide attempts.

"My exploiters kept saying to me, 'If you want to be successful, you'll do exactly what we say when your mum calls'."

What you've got to understand when we're talking about criminal exploitation is, yes, it's very common for young people to go missing. I was never actually reported missing, as in reported to the police. But instead, what would happen is I would have a lot of older peers or like mates, family members calling up my mum saying, *"Oh, don't worry, James is staying with us for the night. We're having a birthday party", or "Don't worry, James is here, staying with us for dinner tonight".* I had people around me exploiting my every single move. Not just financially, not just in the sense of selling drugs, but they were also manipulating my parents.

I remember on many occasions sitting inside trap houses [places used for dealing and taking drugs] in the early morning, and my mum would be calling me, calling me and calling me. One of the exploiters might take the phone, or my "mate's mum" might answer and say, "*Oh, don't worry, James is with us. We're taking care of him".* So then there wasn't a need for an actual police report to be filed.

Me and my mum are incredibly close now, and we reflect on my journey quite often. My mum always says that she really struggled with the fact that she felt she was always left on a cliffhanger. You know, I'd finished school and mum would say to me, "*You need to come straight home today",* and then she'd receive a text, "*I've just stopped off by friends. I'll be home in an hour".* Then she'd receive a phone call from my "friend's mum" saying, "*Oh, he's just staying over for dinner now. He'll be home in a couple of hours".* That would continuously go on every single night, and then by the end of the night, it's 11 pm, and I'm walking through the door going, "*Oh, sorry, mum. You know, my mate's mum made us this lovely dinner and this dessert".* You're being taught to constantly lie and to constantly make excuses.

You're in that constant fight or flight. You know that being truthful is going to potentially get you in trouble criminally. And it's also going to make home life really tricky. You've then got your exploiters saying to you, "*Just lie. Just lie. If you tell them the truth, you're a snitch. You're a snitch*".

My exploiters kept saying to me, "*If you want to be successful, you'll do exactly what we say when your mum calls. You're gonna tell her this, or when someone comes for you, you're going to say this*". So it's that rewiring – it's being brainwashed. There was certainly a two-year period where I believed that I was going to be successful by hanging around with these people.

"I think my very first, let's say, lightbulb moment was when I first sliced my arm."

I truly believe because I'd been kicked out of school, because I'd been arrested, that I wasn't ever going to be able to get a job or have any life, dreams or anything like that. And all of a sudden, I've got much older people telling me, "*Do exactly what we say and you'll be fine in life*". And for me, being neurodiverse, someone giving me clear instructions of, "*Go and drop this off. Come back. Give us the money and give it a couple of years, and you'll be the most successful person ever*". I thought, "*OK, all right*". So it's that rewiring, it's like learning how to walk, but instead you learn how to sell drugs, you learn how to lie, you learn how to carry weapons, you learn how to manufacture drugs. Like all of these crazy scenarios.

I think my very first, let's say, lightbulb moment was when I first sliced my arm. The person who did it was a drug user. He's stolen the drugs. And I remember running for my life. I was so confused. I've run back to the trap house – this awful, dingy, disgusting place. And I've ran in and said, "*I've been stabbed! I've been stabbed! They've taken the drugs!*" I remember there are these two 25-year-old males, there's a drug user in the corner of the house, and these 25-year-olds are going, "*What? You've let yourself be robbed, have ya?*" And they've just grabbed that drug user, they've thrown him to the ground, and they've just beat him black and blue. And they've said to me, unless I go back out there and make back the money I'd just lost, that was going to be me.

Now I hate seeing people get hurt. My whole life, I've been anti-violence, so watching somebody get beaten up because of me was a wake-up call. The fact that I've gone running back, and I truly believed I was about to get sympathy. I thought they would sit me down and be like, "*It's OK, James. It's alright*". It sounds a bit bizarre, but I truly [believed] that's how it would be received. That was like day one of me trying to escape that exploitative relationship.

"Now I hate seeing people get hurt. My whole life, I've been anti-violence, so watching somebody get beaten up because of me was a wake-up call."

But unfortunately, I was being sent to an Alternative Provision in a different town and was provided with a taxi driver to get to school every single day, and, unfortunately, that taxi driver had a huge cocaine issue. And he was actually buying the cocaine off my exploiters. So, then the exploiters were able to gain

information about where I lived, where I was going to school. They were actually controlling where I got dropped off after school. Sometimes, I wouldn't even make it to school.

I'm now starting to realise, "*OK, that these guys have even [been] controlling the taxi drivers around here*". That was another lightbulb moment, but I realised that wasn't an option for me – escaping. It took four to five years of trying my absolute hardest with many, many stories like that.

Aged 14, just before I was kicked out of school, I was arrested in school in possession of Class A drugs. I told the school, I told the police, I told everyone, everything that was happening to me – the situation with my family, the drug use, the drug dealing, what people were making me do and everything like that. And unfortunately, the words I would be met with were, "*You've made your bed. You need to lie in it. You've made your choice, and that's your choice. And now you're going to be arrested for those choices".*

I was called a liar. People may think, when I was getting taken to school every day with the taxi driver on cocaine, why was I not telling the school? Why would I not tell my family? Well, I tried that, and people shouted at me, told me I was worthless and weak. I believed that, I thought, "*OK, you're the head teacher, you're a police officer, you must know what you're talking about here".* And so I thought, "*OK, then I am a weak individual, and I'm now in this situation, and no one's going to help me get out of it".*

There were many, many missed opportunities. When I first joined up for school, my mum told the school that my dad had been diagnosed with cancer, that I'm dyslexic and that granddad's got terminal cancer. I'd like to think that would have triggered some sort of support, right? Early intervention, making sure the right support network is in place to ensure that this situation doesn't happen.

"I'd like to think they would have used some sort of professional curiosity and think, 'OK, he's 14 years old. He's been arrested for drugs. Where are those drugs coming from?'"

[At] age 14, I made a huge disclosure. I told everybody, and it was not very well received to say the least. When I made that disclosure after being arrested, I also think that the police officers could have used that as an opportunity to build a relationship with me. I'd like to think they would have used some sort of professional curiosity and think, "*OK, he's 14 years old. He's been arrested for drugs. Where are those drugs coming from? And also, the chances of him coming back into contact with custody are actually quite likely due to the scenario that he's faced with. Let's build that rapport now so that next time I see him out and about on the streets, we can start that conversation".* Or, *"God forbid, next time he gets arrested, there will be some sort of positive interaction there".*

The Pupil Referral Unit I attended was absolutely brilliant, but we had lots of different people come into the school there. The exploiters had a trap house quite close to the school as well, although it's in a different town. The school [was] aware of that, but no actions were taken. So again, I feel like that was a massive missed opportunity. And every single time I was arrested from the age of 14 upwards – about three or four times – I think every single time, there was a missed opportunity. I was also appointed a youth justice worker, a social worker and various different agencies like that, but without sounding really biased, those services didn't understand what I was going through.

I remember on one occasion, when I was about 16, I'd been arrested for a really serious offence that I was looking at a prison sentence, and me and my mum [had] opened up to my youth justice worker – a brilliant bloke. You could tell he wanted to help so badly, but he just sat there and said, *"Look, I don't know what to say right now. I don't know what to do. The only tool I have is to sit here and pray with you".* I knew for a fact that everyone I engaged with wanted to help me so badly, but none of them could even get the language right. None of them really could understand what was going on, and nobody ever mentioned the words 'county lines', 'criminal exploitation' or 'victim' to me until I was 17 years old.

Now, if the school had mentioned to me at 14, *"Have you heard of county lines? Do you know you can be a victim of this?"* Then things would have been different. I can remember on quite a few occasions thinking, "Maybe I should call the police or go to the police". But then [I] thought, "*Hold on a second, I'm selling drugs. I'm going to be snitching on myself*". I didn't know that there was such a thing as being a victim drug dealer. If someone had mentioned the word 'victim' to me, I think that could have made a humongous, humongous difference.

"My mum never gave up on me. She built up that relationship; she researched everything there was to know about county lines, drug supply and everything like that."

My mum never gave up on me. She built up that relationship; she researched everything there was to know about county lines, drug supply and everything like that. Of course, there were many breakdowns in that relationship, as expected.

I found Leaders Unlocked at the age of 16. They knew I had some sort of youth justice experience, but they didn't know the extent of it. But they just made me feel like a human. And they exposed me to normal situations and helped me to understand that there are opportunities out there to be successful without going down certain paths. And from them being able to give me that platform, those opportunities, that time and that compassion, that then led me to open up to them.

A couple of months before my 18th birthday, we went to a meeting about county lines, and as we left, I said to the CEO of Leaders Unlocked, Rose Dowling, "*Do you know, everything we spoke about the last couple of weeks, you are describing me. This is exactly what I'm going through right now. I'm being exploited. I'm about to go to prison. I've got all these people threatening my life constantly*". And Rose, she looked at me and just said, "*This is going to be OK*". And I thought, "*I haven't heard that for a while*".

She said, "*Who's your solicitor?*" I said, *"I've got this awful duty solicitor. I can't get hold of him. He just tells me to say no comment. He shouts at me. He's quite aggressive".* And she went, "*Right, OK. There's this organisation called Just for Kids Law, and they're a child-first solicitor".* She made some calls, and a few days later, we were introduced to JFKL [Just For Kids Law], and straight away, they said to me, *"You have a Conclusive Grounds, NRM - a National Referral Mechanism."* I thought to myself, "*I don't know anything about this".*

Rose from Leaders Unlocked, Just for Kids Law and the Alliance for Youth Justice, all grouping together, making their own multi-agency response. JFKL sat down with me and my mum, and they talked us through

every step of the journey. They said to me, "*Do you know you're a victim? Do you know about county lines? Do you know about debt bondage? We are going to help you".*

And if it wasn't for this collective of third sector organisations and an expert witness, I would not be sitting here today. And the really crucial part is having that exposure to a normal life, being with like-minded, nice people and actually seeing that there was more to life than the life I was living. They really helped me understand that I was a victim. I was 19 years old when the charges against me were finally dropped.

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