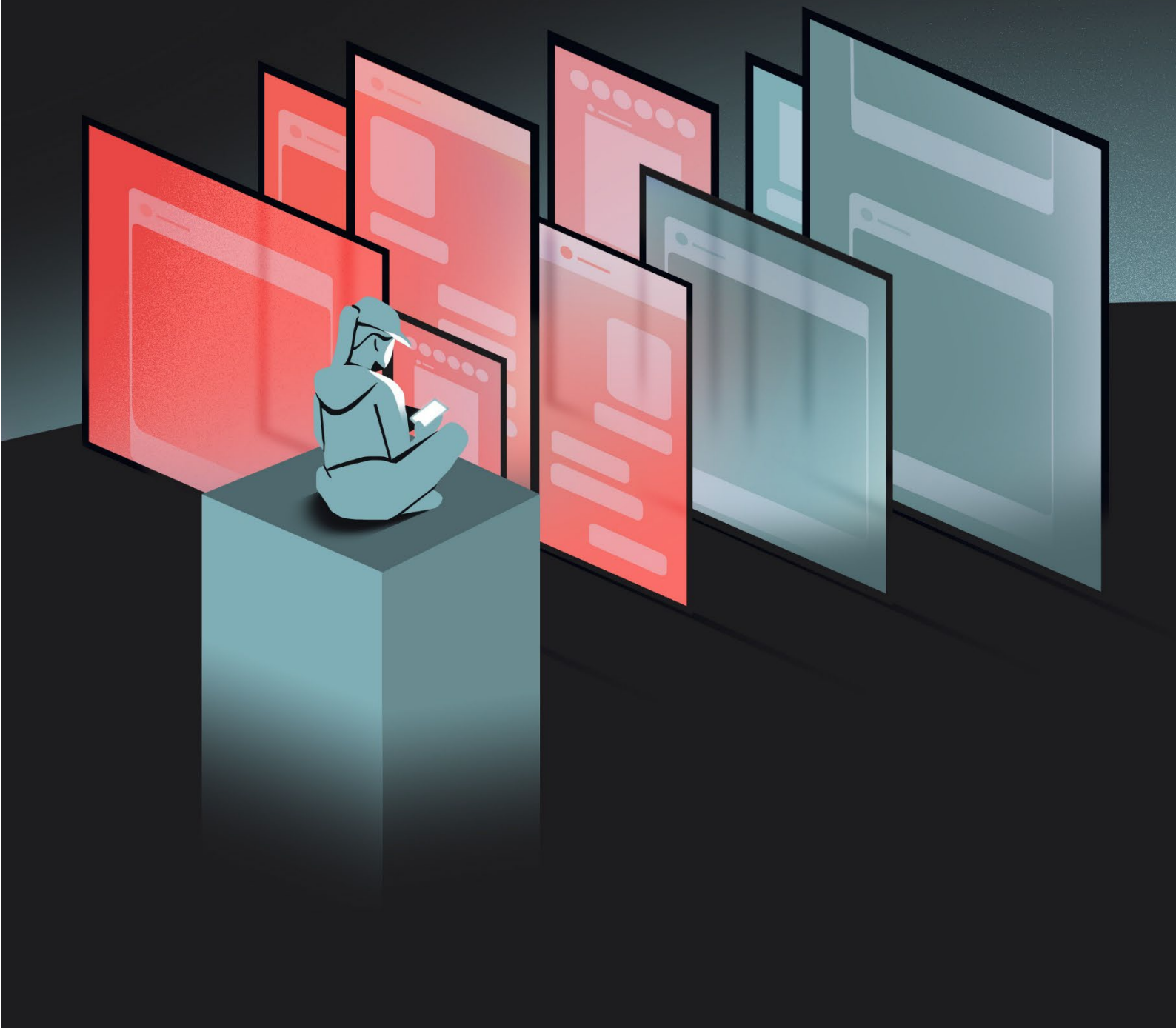
YOUTH ENDOWMENT FUND

Report 2

Children, violence and vulnerability 2026

Violence and social media



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

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Main findings and summary



Executive summary

The Youth Endowment Fund (YEF) surveyed nearly 10,000 children aged 13–17 in England and Wales to hear directly from them about their experiences of violence.

The results are being shared across four separate reports, each focusing on a different theme. This second report looks at **violence and social media**: how much violent content children see and how they get around online age checks; which children see the most violent content and how it overlaps with experiences of violence offline; and views on age restrictions and an under-16 ban.

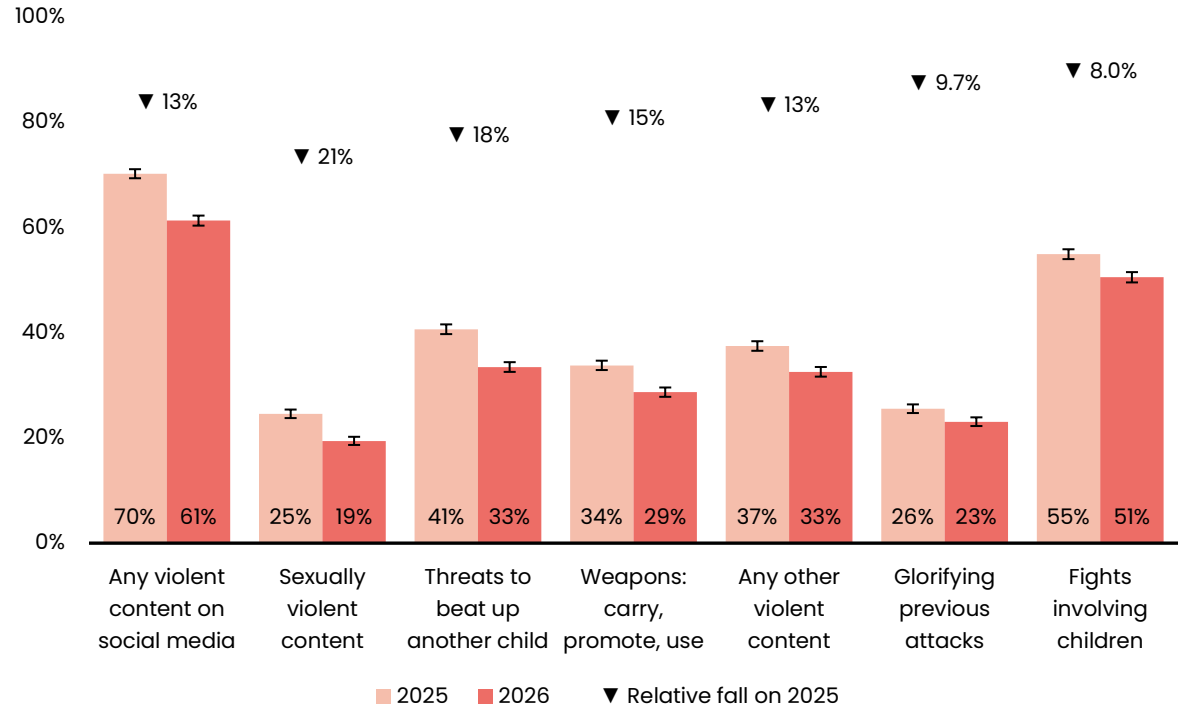
Here's what we found.

Fewer teens are seeing violence on social media, but it's still widespread.

Social media took up a large share of teenage children's lives. On average, 13–17-year-olds reported spending 4.3 hours a day on social media – around a quarter of their waking hours – rising from 3.8 hours among 13-year-olds to 4.8 hours among 17-year-olds.

Six in 10 teens have still seen violent content on social media, despite falls.

PROPORTION OF 13–17-YEAR-OLDS WHO'D SEEN VIOLENT CONTENT ON SOCIAL MEDIA, 2025 AND 2026



Note. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals – this reflects the range we expect the true value to fall within.

Most encountered violence there. Sixty-one per cent of 13–17-year-olds said they'd seen real-world acts of violence on social media in the past 12 months – equivalent to around 2.3 million children across England and Wales. This was a large fall from 70% in each of the previous two years, and every type of violent content was seen by fewer children than last year, with the biggest relative fall in sexually violent content.

The fall coincided with new duties on social media companies under the Online Safety Act, in force since July 2025. Platforms now have a legal duty to prevent children from viewing harmful and age-inappropriate content. We can't tell from our survey whether the Act is responsible for the reduction in children seeing violence or whether other changes made by platforms on their own terms have had an effect. What we can say is that the work of protecting children online, via enforcement of the Act as well as other means, is far from complete. Nearly one in 10 teenage children (8.7%) had seen pages or accounts selling weapons – illegal content that platforms are legally required to keep from children. And a third (32%) had got around age checks to access age-restricted content, most commonly using VPNs (12%), often with an adult's help.

Teens involved in violence don't just see more violence online – they're involved in generating it.

The most vulnerable children spent the most time on social media, were the most likely to have bypassed age restrictions and were the most likely to have been exposed to violent content. Nearly nine in 10 (88%) children who'd been criminally exploited had seen violent content, and 43% had seen pages selling weapons, compared to 61% and 8.7% of all teenage children, respectively. Among victims of serious violence – violence requiring medical treatment – 92% had seen violent content; among those who'd perpetrated serious violence, 91%. Half (50%) of those who'd perpetrated serious violence had seen pages selling weapons, compared to 6.3% of children not involved in violence. And the fall in exposure had not reached them: among children not involved in violence, the proportion seeing violent content fell from 65% to 56%, but among victims and perpetrators of serious violence it was unchanged at around nine in 10 (89% last year; 92% and 91% this year).

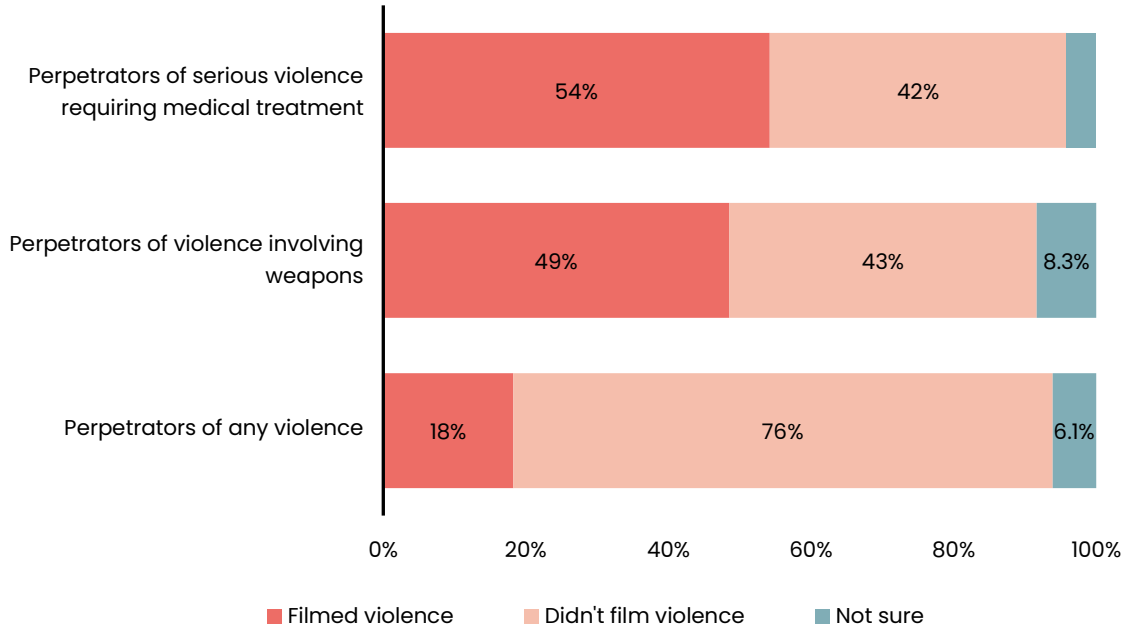
Seeing violent content changed how children felt and acted. Of those who saw it, 39% avoided a place because they were worried about violence and 22% left home less often. A smaller group were drawn closer to violence: 5.7% used social media to plan or organise violence and 3.1% started carrying a weapon – rising to 15% and 11% among children who'd seen weapon-selling pages, and to 46% and 33% among serious violence perpetrators who'd seen violent content.

Teenage children were not only seeing this content but engaging in and generating it themselves. Among children who'd perpetrated violence, 18% said the incident had been filmed and put on social media, rising to 49% where a weapon was used and 54% where the victim needed medical treatment.

AI tools add a further layer: 5.4% of all teenage children had created and shared AI-generated violent content, rising to 17% of those who'd perpetrated violence and 51% of those who'd perpetrated violence requiring medical treatment. The survey can't tell us whether seeing violence online leads children to perpetrate violence, or whether children already involved are more likely to encounter or seek it out. But it does tell us that social media is an important part of the picture.

Over half of teens who've perpetrated serious violence say violence they perpetrated was filmed and posted on social media.

PROPORTION OF PERPETRATORS OF VIOLENCE WHO SAID VIOLENCE THEY'D PERPETRATED HAD BEEN FILMED AND POSTED ON SOCIAL MEDIA, BY TYPE OF VIOLENCE



On the prevalence and impacts of seeing violence on social media, one of our Youth Advisory Board members commented:

> ***Social media can be a really negative place so obviously the more time you spend on it the more negativity you're going to see. Young people don't necessarily realise that it's going to harm them longer term, so like, becoming desensitised to seeing violence, becoming desensitised to just seeing just some of the harsher things. In reality, it's just at their fingertips whenever they want it, whether that's 1am, 1pm, when they're supposed to be at school learning, when they're supposed to be sleeping; it just makes everything so much more prevalent in their day-to-day lives.***
>
> Ajada, YEF Youth Advisory Board member

Teens support age restrictions, but those closest to violence say they'd get around them.

The government has announced a ban on under-16s accessing major social media platforms, expected to come into force from spring 2027. Teenage children broadly backed the principle: 88% supported some minimum age for social media access, though only a third (33%) put it at 16 or later – the government's threshold – and half (51%) put it somewhere between 10 and 15. Support for 16 or later as the threshold was higher among older teens (40% of 17-year-olds) but substantial even among those who'd fall within the ban's limits (e.g. 30% of 13-year-olds).

Children expected spending less time on social media would bring both positive and negative consequences. Half thought it would improve their family relationships (50%) and 45% their mental health, but 40% thought it would cut them off from friends. Most expected reducing social media use to have no impact on their involvement in or safety from violence. Perpetrators were the most likely to expect their involvement in violence to fall (32%, compared to 18% of children who were neither victims nor perpetrators), although most still expected no change.

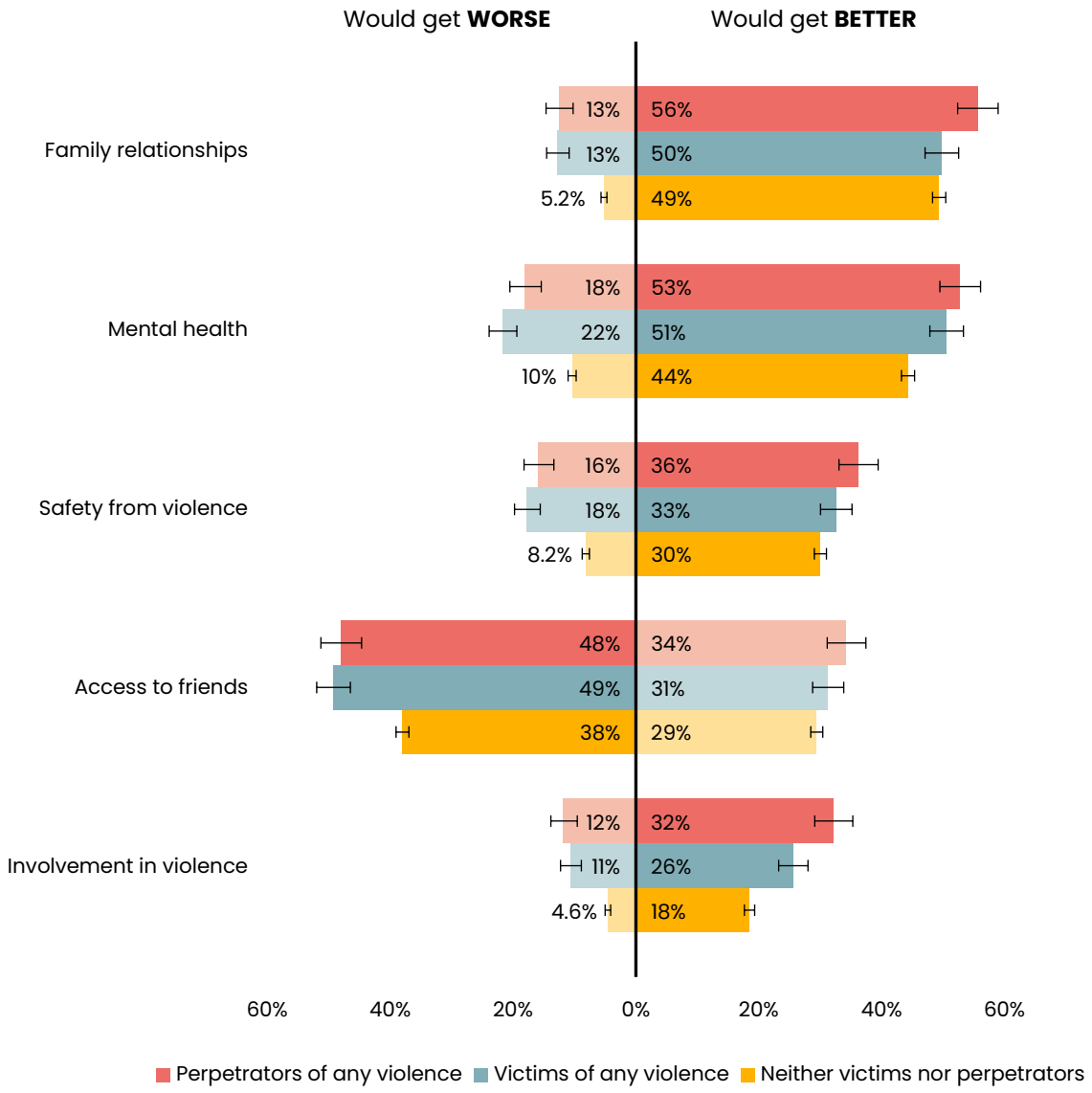
Those closest to violence were least likely to say they'd stop using social media if it were banned for children their age. Almost half (47%) of 13–17-year-olds said they'd find a way to keep using social media if it were banned – most often by moving to sites not covered by the ban (33%) – and only a quarter said they'd stop. Among children who'd perpetrated serious violence, 80% said they'd keep using it somehow. If restrictions are to reach the children with the closest links to violence, they will need to be far harder to get around than the age checks in place today.

Many of the young people we spoke to about our results expressed scepticism that a ban would protect children online. For example, one of our Youth Advisory Board members commented:

> ***Young people will find another alternative. Social media is an ever-growing technology and young people are very innovative and very smart so they will find ways to go about this ban. So, I guess it's the social media companies who need to find ways to regulate these platforms properly if young people are going to use these sites, so impacting the algorithm so young people are not having access to violent content, content that's misogynist, content that distorts the reality of what it means to be a female, what it means to be a male or you know all these all these stuff that we're seeing online that's contributing to violence amongst young people.***
>
> Jess, YEF Youth Advisory Board member

A minority of teens think that spending less time on social media would improve their safety and involvement in violence.

PROPORTION OF 13–17-YEAR-OLDS WHO THOUGHT AREAS OF THEIR LIFE WOULD GET BETTER OR WORSE IF THEY SPENT LESS TIME ON SOCIAL MEDIA, BY EXPERIENCE OF VIOLENCE



Note. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals – this reflects the range we expect the true value to fall within.

How can we keep children safe?

While fewer children were seeing violent content on social media than in previous years, it was still widespread. Those involved in violence were much more likely to encounter it, seek it out and create it.

Our wider guidance reports set out evidence-backed ways for young people to develop the skills and knowledge to empathise with others and stay safe online, while equipping the adults who work with them to safeguard them from online threats too. This includes **developing children's social and emotional skills in schools** through a universal curriculum, alongside targeted support and effective anti-bullying strategies. **Supervision and specialist training for youth workers** can also strengthen the informal safeguarding many already provide, from de-escalating conflicts to tackling dangerous misinformation that often spreads online.

The message is clear: keeping children safe from violence requires action both online and offline. Safer online spaces, alongside effective prevention and support from the adults and services around children, can help move us closer to a future where no child is affected by violence.

> ***The reality for a lot of young people is if you take away their social media access, then you're taking away their sense of community and connection to others. So I think what's really important is to make sure that young people don't fill this lonely gap they're being left with, with more harmful content. However, the social media ban can be a way of having more positive interaction with others and understanding healthy ideas and what good relationships look like – with schools and youth clubs getting involved to take preventative action.***
>
> Elijah, YEF Youth Advisory Board member

Headline findings

	Fewer teens are seeing violence on social media, but it's still widespread.
Teens spend a quarter of their waking hours on social media.	On average, 13–17-year-olds reported spending 4.3 hours a day on social media – around a quarter of their waking hours – rising from 3.8 hours at age 13 to 4.8 hours at 17. Very few (2.5%) spent no time on social media, while 13% reported spending 8 hours or more a day.
Although declining, most teens still see acts of violence involving young people on social media.	61% of 13–17-year-olds said they'd seen acts of violence involving young people on social media in the past 12 months – equivalent to 2.3 million children across England and Wales – down from 70% in both 2024 and 2025. Fights were most common (seen by 51% of 13–17-year-olds), followed by threats (33%), weapons content (29%), glorification of previous attacks (23%) and sexually violent content (19%), all down on last year. Nearly 1 in 10 (8.7%) teens had seen pages or accounts selling weapons – content platforms are now legally required to keep from children.
A third of teens get around age checks – most often to view explicit content.	Around a third (32%) had bypassed age checks – most commonly using VPNs (12%) or alternative sites without restrictions (8.5%) and often with an adult's help (8.4% used an adult's device or account with their knowledge). The most common content accessed was sexually explicit material (25% of those who'd bypassed checks).
	Teens involved in violence don't just see more violence online – they're involved in generating it.
The falls in exposure to violent content haven't reached teens involved in violence.	The fall in exposure to violence on social media was confined to teens not involved in violence: 65% of those who hadn't been victims or perpetrators had seen violent content in 2025, falling to 56% this year (2026). For victims and perpetrators of serious violence requiring medical treatment, it stayed at around 9 in 10 (89% of both in 2025 to 92% of victims and 91% of perpetrators in 2026). While only 8.7% of all teens had seen pages selling weapons, this rose to 39% of serious violence victims and 50% of serious violence perpetrators.
Teens are filming and sharing the violence they're involved in and using AI to generate more violent content.	18% of teens who'd perpetrated violence said they or someone they knew had filmed the violence and put it on social media. This rose to 49% of those who'd perpetrated weapons violence and 54% of those who'd perpetrated serious violence requiring medical treatment. 5.4% of all teens had generated violent content with AI and shared it, rising to 17% of those who'd perpetrated violence and 51% of those who'd perpetrated serious violence.
A minority say seeing violence on social media led them to plan fights or carry weapons.	39% of teens who'd seen violent content on social media said they'd avoided a place due to fear of violence as a result. 22% said they left home less often. A minority felt more aggressive (8.1%), felt pressured into fights (6.8%), used social media to plan violence (5.7%) and started carrying a weapon (3.1%) as a result of what they'd seen. Teens who'd seen pages selling weapons were more likely to report all these effects. For example, 30% left home less often and 11% started carrying a weapon for safety.

	Teens support age restrictions, but those closest to violence say they'd get around them.
Most teens support age restrictions on social media, but only a third favour a ban for under-16s.	Almost 9 in 10 (88%) 13–17-year-olds supported a minimum age for social media; 12% said there should be none. Just over half (51%) put it between 10 and 15, most commonly 13 (17%). A third (33%) said 16 or later – the government's planned threshold, though we asked about minimum age rather than support for a ban. Support for 16 or later rose with age but was substantial even among those a ban would cover (e.g. 30% of 13-year-olds compared to 40% of 17-year-olds).
Teens think reducing social media use would improve their wellbeing and family life but cut them off from friends.	Half thought less time on social media would improve their family relationships (50%, against 6.4% who thought they'd get worse) and mental health (45%, against 12% expecting worse). The main downside was losing access to friends and other connections: 40% expected this to get worse, 30% to improve. On violence, most expected no change: 62% for their involvement in violence (20% expected improvement) and 51% for their safety from violence (30% expected improvement).
Teens involved in violence see more to gain – and more to lose.	Teens who'd perpetrated violence in the past year were the most likely to expect their involvement in violence to fall (32% vs. 26% of victims and 18% of teens who hadn't experienced violence) and their safety to improve (36% vs. 33% and 30%) if they spent less time on social media. Over half expected better family relationships (56%) and mental health (53%). But nearly half (48%) feared losing access to friends, compared to 38% of teens who hadn't been affected by violence, and they were almost twice as likely to expect their mental health (18%) and safety from violence (16%) to get worse compared to those who hadn't experienced violence (10% and 8.2%, respectively).
Almost half of teens say they'd get around a ban.	Almost half (47%) of 13–17-year-olds said they'd find a way to keep using social media if it were banned for their age; a quarter (25%) said they'd stop. Among 13–15-year-olds, the group a ban would aim to affect, 44% said they'd do something to retain access. This rose to 68% of teens who'd perpetrated violence and 80% of serious violence perpetrators (where the victim required medical treatment).

Methodology



About this year's survey

Question and thematic overview

This is our fifth annual survey of children's experiences of violence. This year we surveyed nearly 10,000 13–17-year-olds across England and Wales about their experiences over the past 12 months. We also surveyed around 4,000 18–21-year-olds, to hear how violence has affected them and what's changed since they were teenagers. We focused on the following themes.

- What's the scale and nature of violence experienced by teenage children, as victims and perpetrators? How has this changed? Which children are most affected, and how many are fixated on violence?
- How many teenage children see violent content on social media? What role does AI-generated content play? How do children view age restrictions on social media?
- How many teenage children are exposed to violence against women and girls, online and offline? What attitudes do they hold towards women and girls?
- What are teenage children's experiences of the care and youth justice systems? How much violence do they experience while they're there and what types of support do they receive?

This is the second report in this year's series. It covers how much violent content children see on social media and how they get around age checks online; which children see the most violent content and how it overlaps with experiences of offline violence; and views on age restrictions and an under-16 ban.

What we did

This year, a total of 9,988 13–17-year-olds responded to our survey, compared to 10,835 last year. We also recruited an additional sample of 4,256 18–21-year-olds, to get their retrospective accounts of their childhood experiences.

As in previous years, we used an online survey conducted by our survey partner, Savanta. The median survey completion time was around 14 minutes, and the survey was live between May and July 2026. 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.
- Secondly, we weighted the results to ensure overall representativeness. For more details on this, see the technical report on our website.

How children were kept safe

Participants 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 fewer 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, and while our sample of 9,988 13–17-year-olds is comparatively large for this type of survey, 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. We've refined the weighting strategy 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 or unable to respond openly and honestly, particularly about things they may have done.

For context, the Office for National Statistics' (ONS) Children's Crime Survey for England and Wales (CCSEW) – the main national source on children's experiences of crime – stopped collecting data at the end of March 2025 and has been redesigned as an online survey of 10–15-year-olds sampled from administrative data. Its first results were published in September 2026 and cover children's online activity, exposure to harmful content, sexual messages and perceptions of safety, based on responses from 6,031 children. Questions measuring children's experiences of victimisation will be added at a later stage, meaning there are currently no national estimates of how many children are affected by crime and violence.

Detailed findings



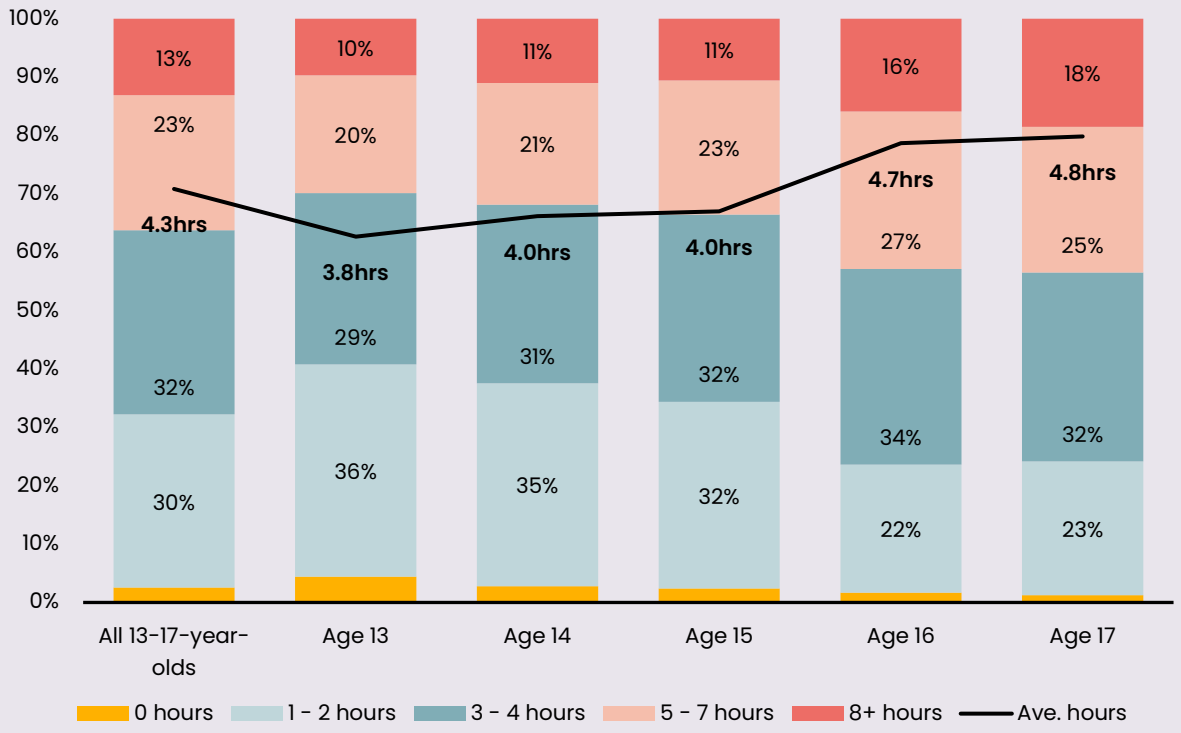
What we found

Fewer teens are seeing violence on social media, but it's still widespread.

Teens spend a quarter of their waking hours on social media.

Social media took up a considerable share of children's waking hours. On average, 13–17-year-olds reported spending 4.3 hours on social media a day.[1] This is around a quarter of their waking hours.[2] Very few (2.5%) reported spending no time on social media, with a significant minority (13%) reporting spending eight or more hours. Time spent on social media increased with age. On average, 13-year-olds were spending 3.8 hours a day on social media. This increased to 4.8 hours for 17-year-olds.

FIGURE 1.1: HOURS SPENT ON SOCIAL MEDIA IN A TYPICAL DAY, BY AGE



[1] We didn't ask what social media platforms children were using. According to our 2024 survey and Ofcom's 2026 Children's Online Safety Tracker, the most commonly used platforms among teenagers were YouTube, WhatsApp, TikTok, Instagram and Snapchat.

[2] Teenagers sleep for around seven hours a night on average. This means they spend 17 hours a day awake on average. 4.3 hours of time on social media out of 17 waking hours equates to 25% of the day.

Girls were spending a little more time on social media than boys. On average, girls reported spending 4.4 hours a day on social media compared to 4.1 hours a day for boys. This difference was significant. Social media use was also higher among Black teens. Black teens reported an average of 5.1 hours a day on social media, compared to 4.4 hours for teens of Mixed ethnicity and 4.2 hours for White and Asian teens. These differences were statistically significant.

How do our results compare to other sources?

Research conducted by Ofcom for its Children's Passive Online Measurement study tracked the devices of a panel of 701 children aged eight to 14 and recorded what they did. The children in their study spent an average of three hours and 36 minutes a day online, of which one hour and 59 minutes was on social media. This sat well below the average in our survey, although the Ofcom results were based on a younger group of children. Their results showed total time online rose steeply with age, from two hours and 53 minutes a day among eight- and nine-year-olds to four hours and 19 minutes among 13–14-year-olds – age breakdowns were not provided for time on social media. Ofcom put total online time among 15–17-year-olds, the group closest to ours, at six hours and 20 minutes a day, drawn from a separate and smaller panel. Ofcom did not give a combined social media figure for this age group, but adding up the time they recorded on YouTube, TikTok, Instagram and Snapchat gave three hours and 44 minutes a day, which was closer to what teenage children told us.

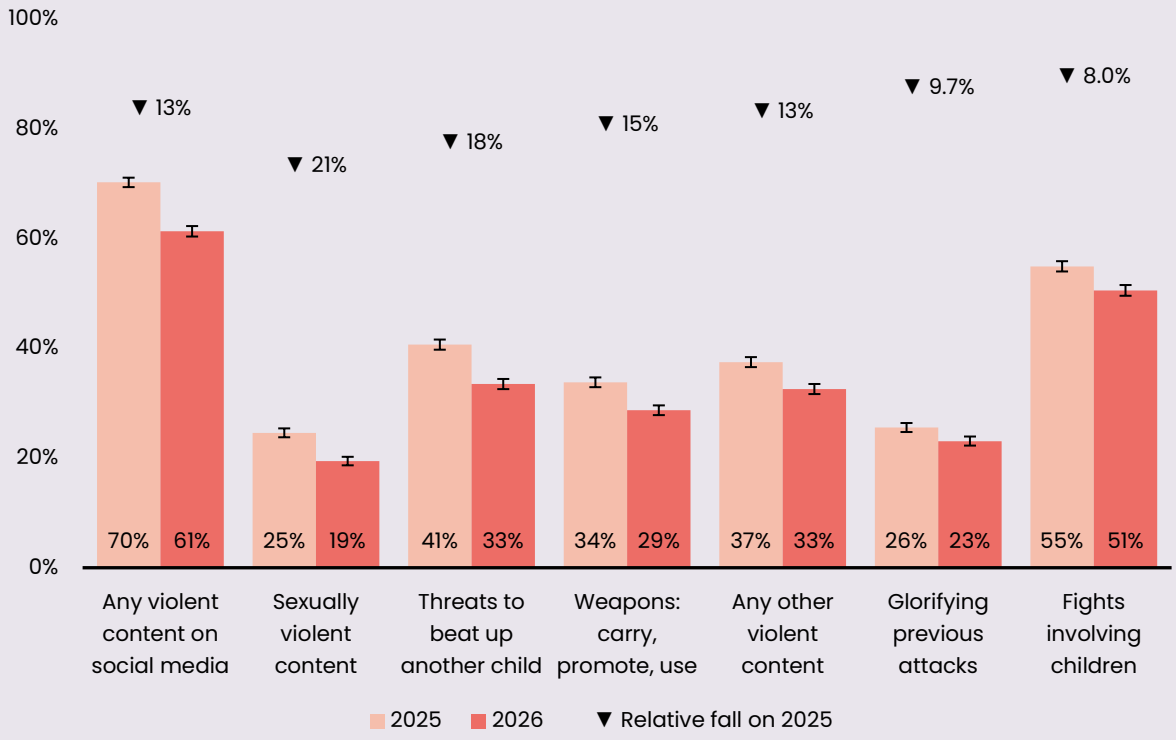
Although declining, most teens still see acts of violence involving young people on social media.

The majority of teens said they'd seen real-world acts of violence involving young people on social media, with 61% reporting seeing at least one type in the past 12 months.[3] This is equivalent to around 2.3 million 13–17-year-olds in England and Wales.[4] While still representing the majority of teenage children being exposed to this type of content, it was a large reduction on the levels we'd found in the two previous years of our survey, at 70% in both 2024 and 2025.

The most common type of content seen this year was fights involving young people (51%), followed by threats to beat up young people (33%), other types of violence (33%), young people carrying, promoting or using weapons (29%), glorification of violence that had been carried out against young people (23%) and sexually violent content (19%). This largely mirrored the pattern seen in previous years, although rates were down across all types of violent content. Threats to beat up another child fell furthest in percentage-point terms (down from 41% to 33%), while sexually violent content saw the largest relative fall (down from 25% to 19%).

[3] When asking this question, respondents were asked to think about real-world violence (not including content in the news, on TV, in video games or in films), including people in their local area or that they knew.
[4] Estimates derived using Office for National Statistics mid-2025 population estimates.

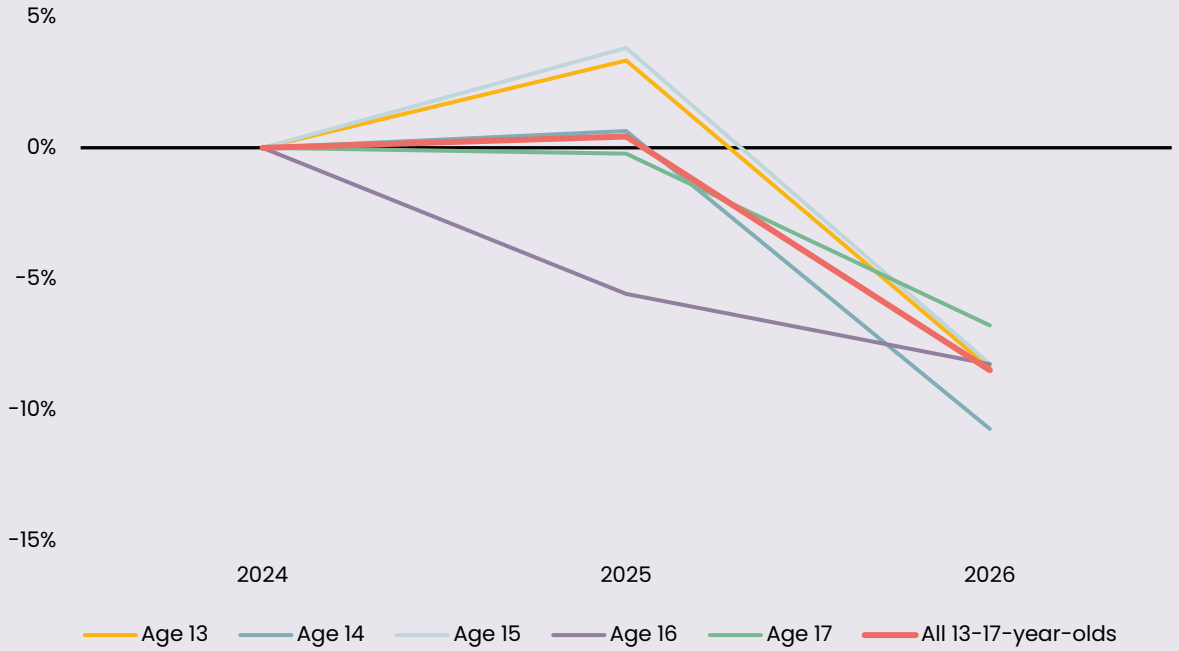
FIGURE 1.2: PROPORTION OF 13–17-YEAR-OLDS WHO'D SEEN DIFFERENT TYPES OF VIOLENT CONTENT ON SOCIAL MEDIA, 2025 AND 2026



Note. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals – this reflects the range we expect the true value to fall within.

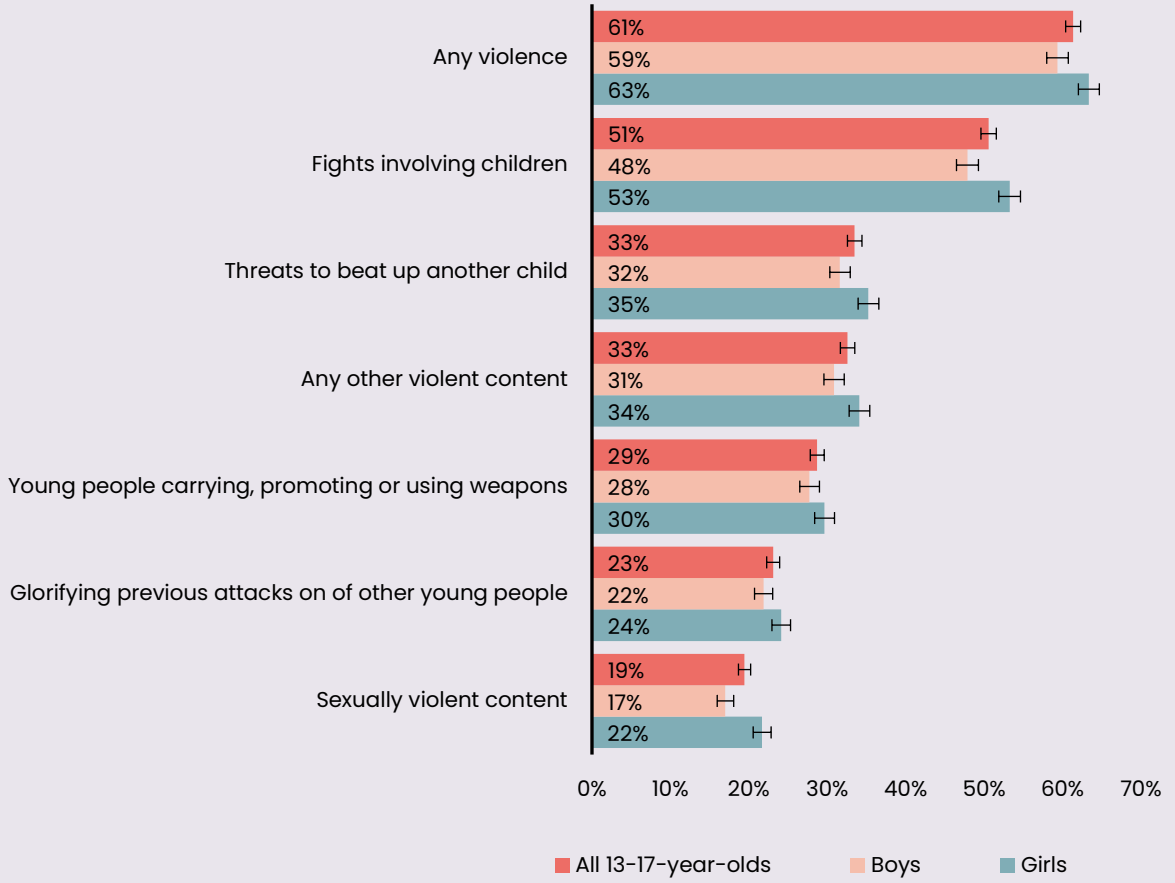
These falls occurred across all ages but were particularly large for the youngest teenagers. The largest relative reduction was for 13-year-olds, falling from 69% in 2025 to 57% in 2026, equivalent to 17% fewer children at this age seeing violent content. For 16- and 17-year-olds, the relative reductions were 3.9% and 9.4% respectively, falling from 68% to 66% for 16-year-olds and 70% to 64% for 17-year-olds. Older teens were now the most likely to have come across violent content. Sixty-five per cent of 16–17-year-olds had seen violent content on social media, compared to 59% of 13–15-year-olds. This difference was statistically significant.

FIGURE 1.3: PERCENTAGE POINT CHANGE SINCE 2024 IN THE PROPORTION OF 13–17-YEAR-OLDS WHO'D SEEN VIOLENT CONTENT ON SOCIAL MEDIA, BY AGE



Although exposure to violent content on social media fell among both boys and girls, the reduction was greater for boys. Exposure was relatively stable across 2024 and 2025 with 70% of both boys and girls reporting seeing violent content in 2024, compared with 70% of boys and 71% of girls in 2025. This year, exposure among boys fell to 59% – a 10 percentage point reduction from last year. Among girls, exposure fell to 63%, a smaller reduction of 7.3 percentage points. Girls were now statistically significantly more likely than boys to have seen all types of violent content on social media, including fights involving young people (53% vs. 48%), threats to beat up other young people (35% vs. 32%) and sexually violent content (22% vs. 17%).

FIGURE 1.4: TYPES OF VIOLENT CONTENT SEEN ON SOCIAL MEDIA IN 2026, BY GENDER



Note. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals – this reflects the range we expect the true value to fall within.

Exposure to violent content also varied by ethnicity and region. Teenage children from Mixed ethnicity backgrounds reported the highest levels of exposure (68%), followed by those from Black and White backgrounds (both 62%). Teens from Asian backgrounds reported the lowest exposure (56%) compared with teens overall. Within the Mixed ethnicity group, exposure was particularly high among Black Caribbean and White teens (74%) and Black African and White teens (72%). However, exposure fell across nearly all ethnic groups in the past year. For example, among Black teens it fell from 74% in 2025 to 62% this year, while among Mixed ethnicity teens it fell from 73% in 2025 to 68% this year.

Regional differences were relatively modest. Exposure was highest in London, the North West and South East (all 63%) and lowest in the East of England (57%) and Yorkshire and the Humber (58%). These differences were statistically significant. All regions saw falls in exposure, with some particularly large reductions. In London, exposure fell from 77% last year to 63% this year, while in Wales it fell from 73% to 59% and in the North West from 75% to 63%.

Did views of violent content on social media really fall in the past year?

The fall in exposure to violent content from 2025 to 2026 could reflect a real change in what teenage children saw, or changes in who responded to the survey. To test this, survey-weighted logistic regression models were used to test whether the fall in exposure remained significant when controlling for respondent characteristics.[5] The first stage controlled for sociodemographic factors: age, gender, ethnicity, region, social grade, living situation and school absence. These were measured in all three years, so the model used 2024, 2025 and 2026 data. The second stage added adversity factors: school suspension or exclusion, physical abuse by a parent, physical violence between parents, parental drinking or drug use, and imprisonment of a parent or sibling. These questions weren't asked in 2024, so this model used the 2025 and 2026 data only.

FIGURE 1.5: CHANGE IN THE SHARE OF 13–17-YEAR-OLDS WHO'D SEEN VIOLENT CONTENT ON SOCIAL MEDIA RELATIVE TO 2024 AND 2025, BEFORE AND AFTER ADJUSTING FOR SAMPLE COMPOSITION



Notes. The models exclude 'other' types of violent content, so the changes shown here differ slightly from those in Figure 1.2 and the text, which include it. The unadjusted and sociodemographic models are measured relative to 2024. Adversity factors were only included from 2025, so that model is measured relative to 2025. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals – this reflects the range we expect the true value to fall within.

Adding the controls changed the estimate only slightly. Between the 2024 and 2026 surveys, the weighted proportion of 13–17-year-olds who'd seen violent content on social media fell by 9.3 percentage points (pp). Almost all of this fall occurred between 2025 and 2026. Controlling for sociodemographic factors, the 2024–2026 fall was 8.7pp. Controlling for adversity factors as well, the fall from 2025 to 2026 was still significant at 8.3pp. The fall was therefore not explained by changes in the measured characteristics of respondents. It could still reflect factors we couldn't test here, such as changes in how respondents interpreted or recalled violent content. However, given the range of controls included in the analysis and the size of the reduction, the most likely explanation is that fewer teenage children were seeing violent content on social media in 2026 than in previous years.

[5] The analysis was conducted by our technical advisor Dr Krisztián Pósch and will be published in a forthcoming paper on the potential impact of the Online Safety Act.

The falls in overall exposure to violent content came as new protections under the Online Safety Act began to take effect. Since July 2025 (after last year's survey closed), social media companies and search services have had new legal duties to protect children from harmful and age-inappropriate content. Under the Act, violent content is designated "priority content that is harmful to children", meaning online platforms must assess the risk it poses and then protect children from encountering it. This could include measures such as age checks, filtering it out of children's feeds, content moderation and easier reporting. For other forms of harmful content (e.g. pornography, suicide/self-harm and eating disorders), there are stricter requirements, with social media companies expected to actively prevent it from reaching children. These stricter requirements also fall on illegal content, such as drug-related and weapons offences.

It's not possible to say whether or not the implementation of the Online Safety Act directly led to the falls in violent content being seen on social media. As the additional analysis set out in the box above confirmed, these falls seen in our data were unlikely to be due to changes in the composition of the children responding to our survey. Controlling for background characteristics accounted for less than one percentage point of the fall seen in the headline rate between the 2024 and 2026 surveys. We're confident therefore that this was a real reduction in the numbers of children seeing violent content. Factors other than the Online Safety Act could also have led to fewer children seeing violent content. Independent of the Online Safety Act, social media platforms have been rolling out child-safety changes. For example, Meta's Teen Accounts launched in September 2024 with restrictive content settings on by default, extended to Facebook and Messenger in the UK from April 2025. The EU Digital Services Act set out expectations for age assurance and for what appeared in children's recommended feeds. However, the Online Safety Act may have played a role.

How do our results compare to other sources?

Other evidence since the Online Safety Act's child safety duties came into force on 25 July 2025 mostly showed little change:

- Ofcom's Children's Online Safety Tracker surveyed 1,396 children aged 11–17 before the duties took effect (March–April 2025) and 1,625 afterwards (November–December 2025) on the harmful content they'd seen. Prompted with a list of harmful content types, 73% recalled seeing at least one in the previous four weeks, which Ofcom described as comparable with the 70% recorded beforehand. Twenty-four per cent recalled seeing violent content, defined as serious violence or its encouragement, serious injuries caused by others, and real or fictional animals being hurt, also broadly unchanged from 25% in the earlier period.

- The Molly Rose Foundation reported that 34% of 13–17-year-olds had seen high-risk suicide, self-harm, depression or eating disorder content on six major platforms in the previous week, based on a survey conducted by M·E·L Research of 1,825 children in schools across the UK during April and May 2026. This was not much down compared with 37% seeing such content in summer 2025, according to a separate study by Revealing Reality in summer 2025.

Combined, these sources made our 8.9 percentage point fall an outlier compared to other research. However, we asked about harmful content in a different way to these other surveys and had a much larger sample size of 9,988 13–17-year-olds.

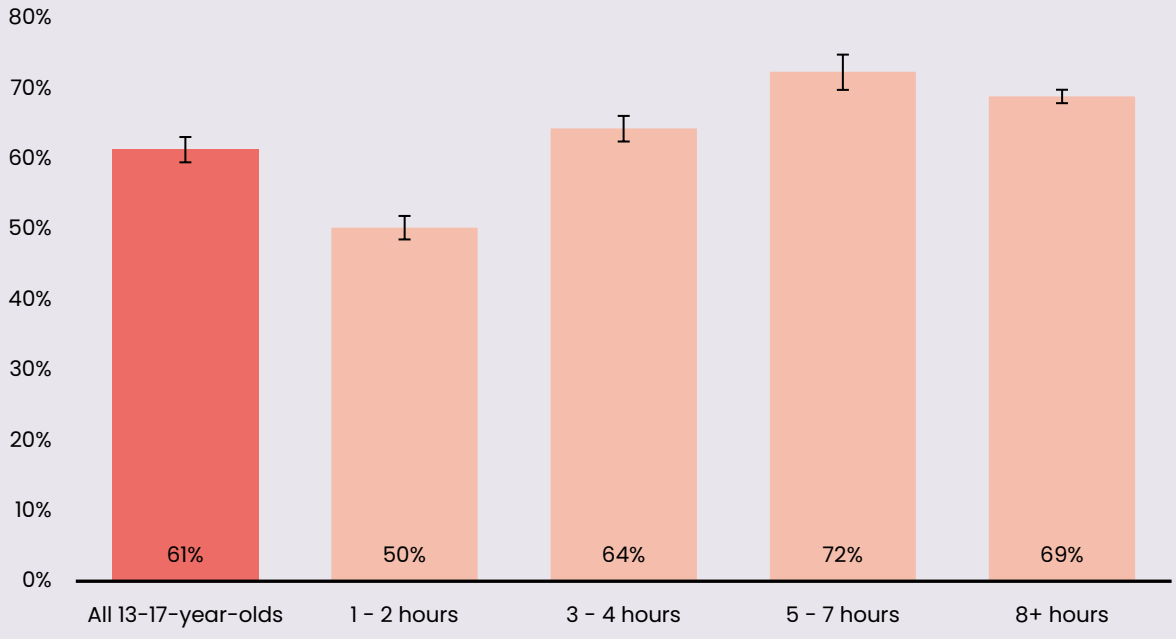
Teens who spend more time on social media are more likely to see violent content.

Time spent on social media appeared to partly explain exposure to violent content. Overall, 61% of teens had seen violent content on social media, but exposure varied considerably according to the amount of time they spent on social media. Half (50%) of teens spending one to two hours a day on social media had seen violent content, rising to 64% among those spending three to four hours and 72% among those spending five to seven hours. Exposure still remained high among the heaviest users (those spending eight or more hours a day on social media), but dropped slightly to 69%. Teens who had seen violent content also spent an average of 4.6 hours a day on social media, compared with 3.4 hours among those who had not seen any violent content.

This might help to explain some of the differences by age and gender. Girls reported spending an average of 4.4 hours a day on social media compared with 4.1 hours for boys, while 16–17-year-olds spent 4.8 hours compared with 3.9 hours among 13–15-year-olds. However, time spent on social media did not neatly explain differences by ethnicity or region. For example, Black teenagers spent an average of 5.1 hours a day on social media compared with 4.4 hours among Mixed ethnicity teenagers, despite Mixed ethnicity teens reporting higher exposure to violent content. Similarly, teenagers in London spent an average of 4.5 hours on social media, compared with 4.4 hours in the North East, 4.2 hours in Yorkshire and the Humber and 4.1 hours in the South East, despite relatively similar levels of exposure across some of these regions.

Time spent on social media therefore appears to be one factor associated with exposure, but what the algorithm shows to children, the online spaces they use and their wider experiences are also likely to matter.

FIGURE 1.6: PROPORTION OF 13–17-YEAR-OLDS WHO'D SEEN VIOLENT CONTENT, BY AVERAGE TIME SPENT ON SOCIAL MEDIA



Note. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals – this reflects the range we expect the true value to fall within.

Nearly one in 10 teens are seeing weapons for sale on social media, despite new safety duties.

Despite the Online Safety Act, children were still seeing some of the most harmful and illegal content on social media. For the first time this year, we asked teens whether they had seen pages or accounts on social media where you could buy weapons. Nearly one in 10 (8.7%) 13–17-year-olds had seen somewhere they could buy weapons on social media in the past 12 months – equivalent to around 330,000 children in England and Wales. The more time teens spent on social media, the more likely they were to see this content; 4.8% of those spending one to two hours a day on social media had seen pages or accounts selling weapons, rising to 7.6% of those spending three to four hours, 12% of those spending five to seven hours and 16% of those spending eight or more hours on social media.

Exposure to this type of content was similar by age – at 8.2% among 13–15-year-olds and 9.4% among 16–17-year-olds, though this difference was significant. Boys were also significantly more likely than girls to have seen this content (10% vs. 7.6%). There was little variation by ethnicity – exposure was 7.9% among Asian children, 8.0% among Black children, 8.5% among Mixed ethnicity children and 9.1% among White children. Regional differences were also relatively small. Exposure was highest in London and the North West (10%) and lowest in the South East (7.6%) and East Midlands (6.4%).

This content sits at the sharpest end of what the Act is meant to address. Selling weapons is a criminal offence, so pages advertising them fall under the Act's strictest duties, which require platforms to actively prevent illegal content from reaching children rather than simply reduce the risk. Our survey ran between May and July 2026, so the 12-month period teens were asked about was after those duties took effect in July 2025 – a period in which platforms were legally required to keep such content from children.

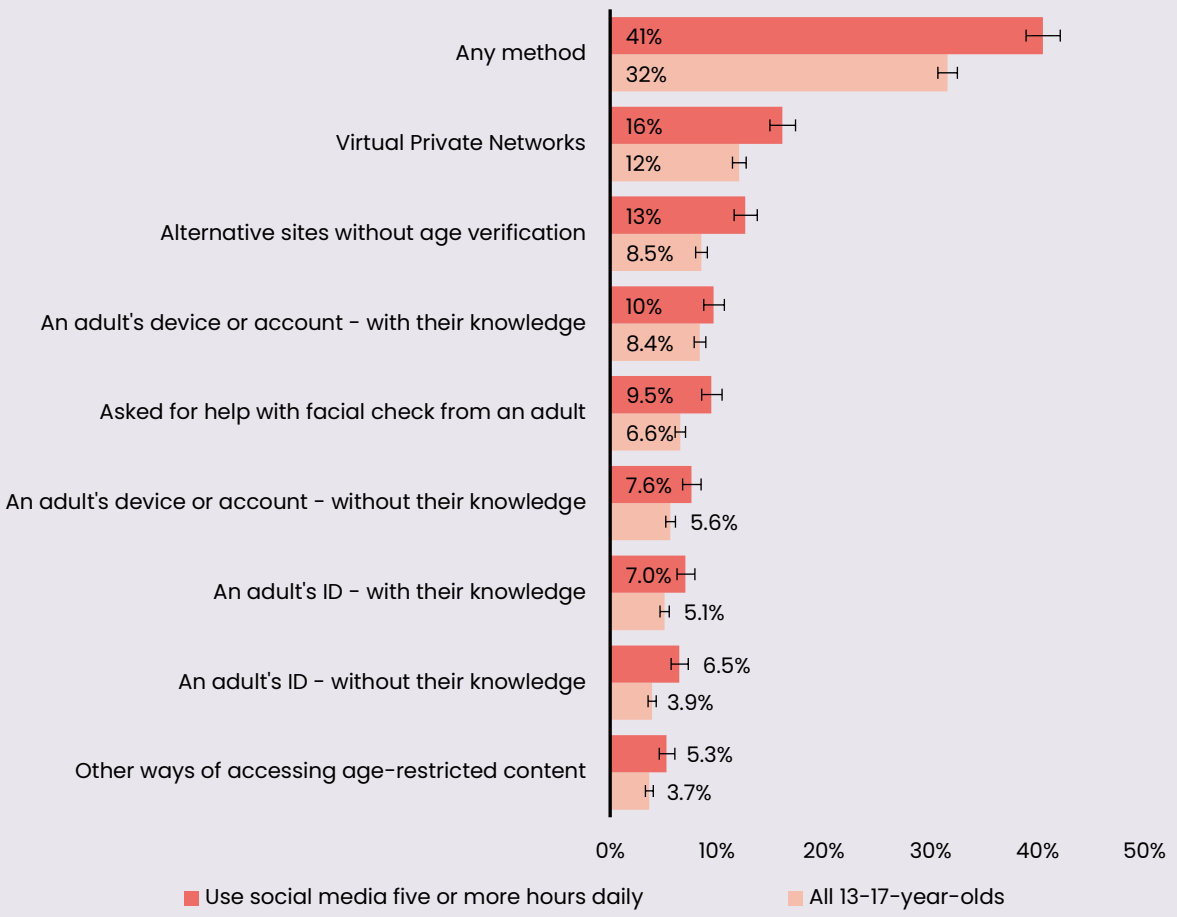
A third of teens get around age checks – most often to view explicit content.

Despite the fall year-on-year in the proportion of children seeing violent content, it was still the majority who were seeing it. To understand how, despite the introduction of the Online Safety Act, we asked teens if and how they were bypassing age checks to access restricted content online. Around a third (32%) of all 13–17-year-olds had used at least one method to get around age checks. Virtual Private Networks (VPNs)[6] were the most common single method: 12% of all 13–17-year-olds had used one. This was followed by using alternative sites without age verification (8.5% of all 13–17-year-olds). The remaining methods involved an adult's device, account, identity or help: 8.4% had used an adult's device or account with the adult's knowledge, 6.6% had asked an adult for help with a facial check, 5.6% had used an adult's device or account without their knowledge, 5.1% had used an adult's ID with their knowledge and 3.9% without, and 3.7% had used some other method.

The more time teenagers spent on social media, the more likely they were to have bypassed the age checks somehow. Of those who were spending five or more hours on social media a day, 41% said they'd done something to get around them.

[6] VPNs make a phone or computer look like it's browsing from another country, so websites can't tell the user is in the UK and therefore won't apply UK age checks.

FIGURE 1.7: METHODS USED TO BYPASS ONLINE AGE CHECKS, BY SOCIAL MEDIA USE



Note. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals – this reflects the range we expect the true value to fall within.

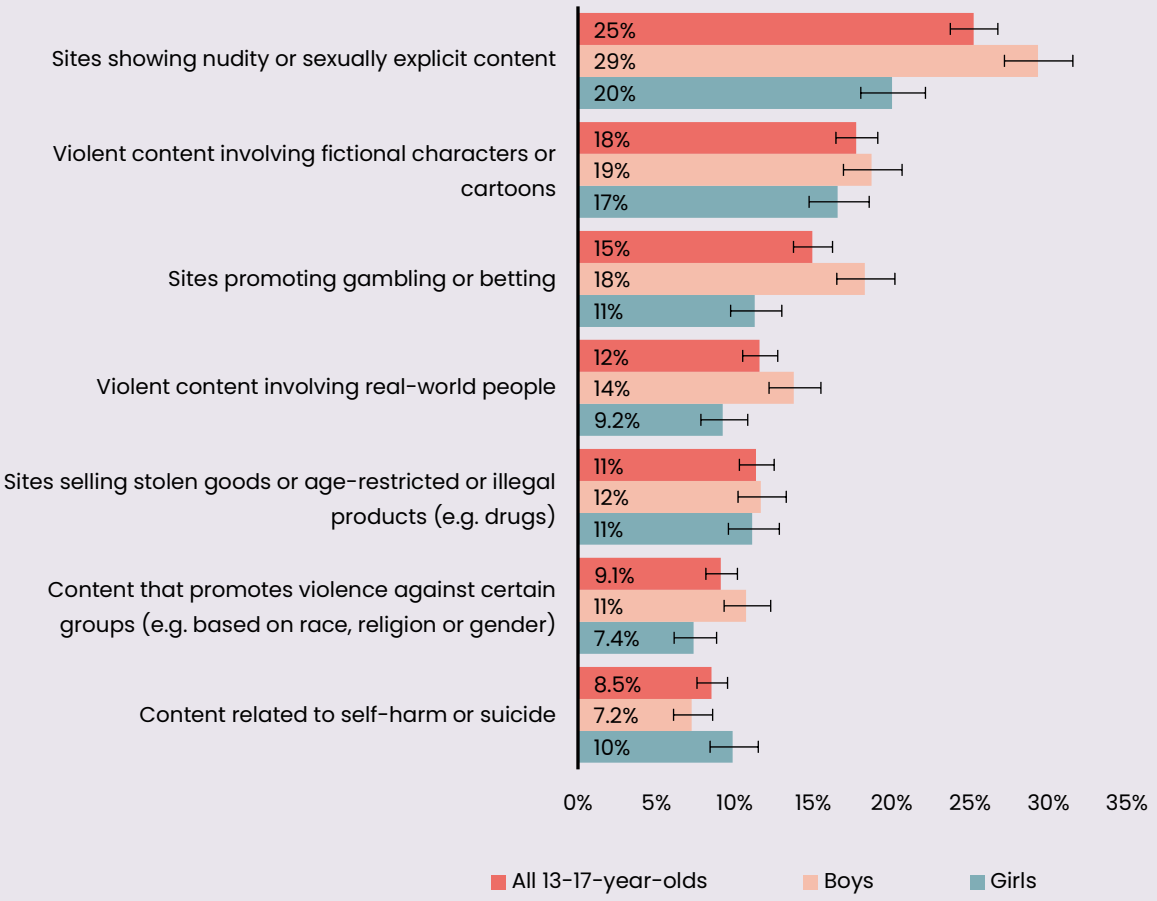
How do our results compare to other sources?

Our finding that around a third of teenage children (32%) had got around age checks was close to the estimate from the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, based on 2,299 children aged 11 to 17 surveyed in May 2026, which found that 39% had successfully got around an age check. We also found that 12% of teenage children had used a VPN; they found 10% had used settings or tools that made it look as though they were in a different country (i.e. a VPN).

Bypassing age checks was slightly more common among younger teens than older teens. A third (33%) of 13–15-year-olds had used any method to do so, compared with 30% of teens aged 16–17. Boys were also significantly more likely than girls to have done this (34% vs. 29%). Children from Mixed ethnicity backgrounds were the most likely to report bypassing (34%), making them significantly more likely to have done this than children from Black backgrounds (29%). There were no other significant differences by race; 32% of White, 31% of Asian and 30% of children from Other backgrounds had bypassed age checks.

Among children who had bypassed age checks, the most common content they had accessed was sites showing nudity or sexually explicit content (25%). The next most common types were fictionalised violence (18%), sites promoting gambling or betting (15%), violent content involving real-world people (12%) and sites selling stolen goods or age-restricted or illegal products such as drugs (11%). Smaller proportions had bypassed checks to view content promoting violence against certain groups (9.1%) or content related to self-harm or suicide (8.5%). There were some differences between boys and girls. Boys were more likely to have accessed sexually explicit content (29% compared to 20% of girls) and gambling sites (18% vs. 11%), while girls were more likely to have accessed content related to self-harm or suicide (10% vs. 7.2%).

FIGURE 1.8: TYPES OF CONTENT VIEWED BY 13–17-YEAR-OLDS WHO'D BYPASSED ONLINE AGE CHECKS



Note. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals – this reflects the range we expect the true value to fall within.

Some age differences also emerged in the type of content teens accessed after bypassing age checks. Older teenagers were more likely to access nudity or sexually explicit content (32% of 16–17-year-olds compared with 21% of 13–15-year-olds), while younger teenagers were more likely to access fictionalised violent content (20% of 13–15-year-olds vs. 14% of 16–17-year-olds) and content promoting violence against certain groups (11% vs. 5.8%).

Teens involved in violence don't just see more violence online – they're involved in generating it.

The falls in exposure to violent content haven't reached teens involved in violence.

Teens vulnerable to violence spend more time on social media...

Teenage children who were more vulnerable to or who'd been affected by violence spent even more time on social media than the average. For example, those who'd been taken into care reported an average of 5.4 hours, those with self-harm or suicidal thoughts averaged 5.6 hours and teens with frequent drug use reported 6.2 hours. Teens who'd had contact with the justice system, been criminally exploited or reported being in a 'gang' – the groups most likely to have been affected by serious violence (see the first report in this year's series) – were also spending the most time on social media, on average.

FIGURE 2.1: AVERAGE HOURS SPENT ON SOCIAL MEDIA EACH DAY, BY VULNERABILITIES TO VIOLENCE



Note. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals – this reflects the range we expect the true value to fall within.

This trend continued for teenage children involved in violence, particularly serious violence. Those who'd been a victim of any type of violence reported 5.5 hours of social media use per day on average. The average was 5.4 hours for those who'd perpetrated violence themselves. This rose to an average of 6.4 hours among victims of serious violence requiring medical treatment and an average of 7.2 hours among teens who had perpetrated serious violence requiring medical treatment.

… and are more likely to see violent content on social media.

Those vulnerable to and affected by violence offline were also significantly more likely to be exposed to violence on social media. For example, 88% of 13–17-year-olds who had been criminally exploited had seen violent content on social media, compared to 61% of all 13–17-year-olds. There were similarly high rates for those with frequent drug use (88%), who were frequently missing (87%) or had been excluded from school in the past year (89%). Teens who had self-harmed or had suicidal thoughts were at 83%.

There was a similar pattern for seeing some of the most harmful content: pages or accounts where you could buy weapons. Overall, 8.7% of 13–17-year-olds had seen this type of content in the past year. Nearly one in five 13–17-year-olds who had self-harmed or had suicidal thoughts (19%) had seen this type of content. This rose even further to 43% for those who had been criminally exploited and more than half (57%) of those who reported being in a 'gang'.

FIGURE 2.2: PROPORTION OF 13–17-YEAR-OLDS WHO'D SEEN VIOLENT CONTENT AND PAGES OR ACCOUNTS SELLING WEAPONS ON SOCIAL MEDIA, BY VULNERABILITIES TO VIOLENCE

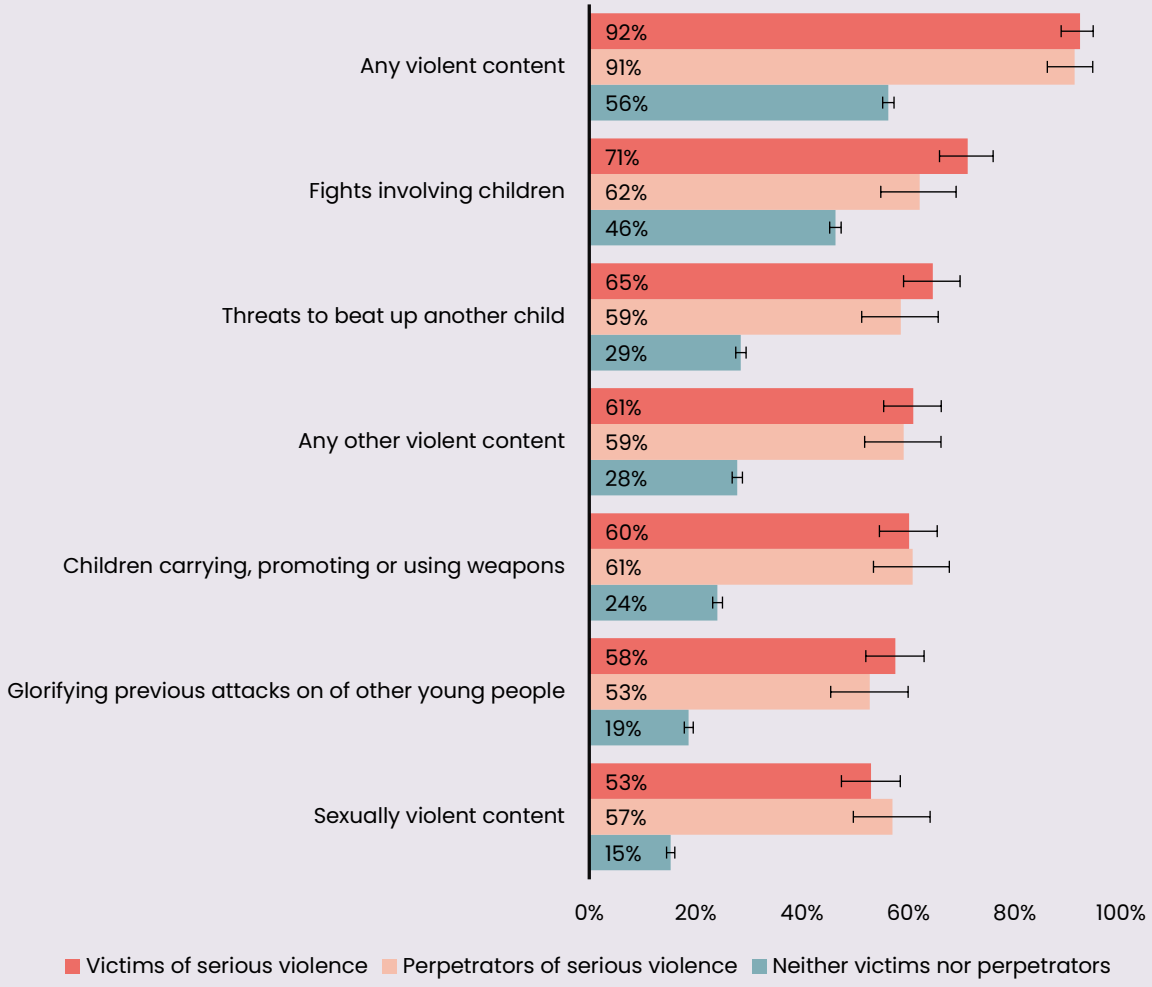


Note. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals – this reflects the range we expect the true value to fall within.

The starkest differences were between teenage children who had and hadn't been involved in violence offline. Teens involved in serious violence – violence that required medical treatment – whether as victims or perpetrators, were far more likely to have seen every type of violent content on social media. More than nine in 10 serious violence victims (92%) and perpetrators (91%) had seen some form of violent content on social media, compared to 56% of 13–17-year-olds who hadn't been affected by violence as victims or perpetrators.

The gaps were widest for the most serious types of content. Serious violence perpetrators were more than three times as likely to have seen sexually violent content as teens who were neither victims nor perpetrators (57% vs. 15%), and more than twice as likely to have seen children carrying, promoting or using weapons (61% vs. 24%). The pattern was near-identical for victims: 53% had seen sexually violent content (vs. 15% of teens who were neither victims nor perpetrators), 58% content glorifying previous attacks (vs. 19%) and 65% threats to beat up another child (vs. 29%). For the most common content – fights involving children – the differences were smaller but still substantial (71% of serious violence victims vs. 46% of teens who were neither victims nor perpetrators).

FIGURE 2.3: TYPES OF VIOLENT CONTENT SEEN ON SOCIAL MEDIA, BY EXPERIENCE OF VIOLENCE



Note. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals – this reflects the range we expect the true value to fall within.

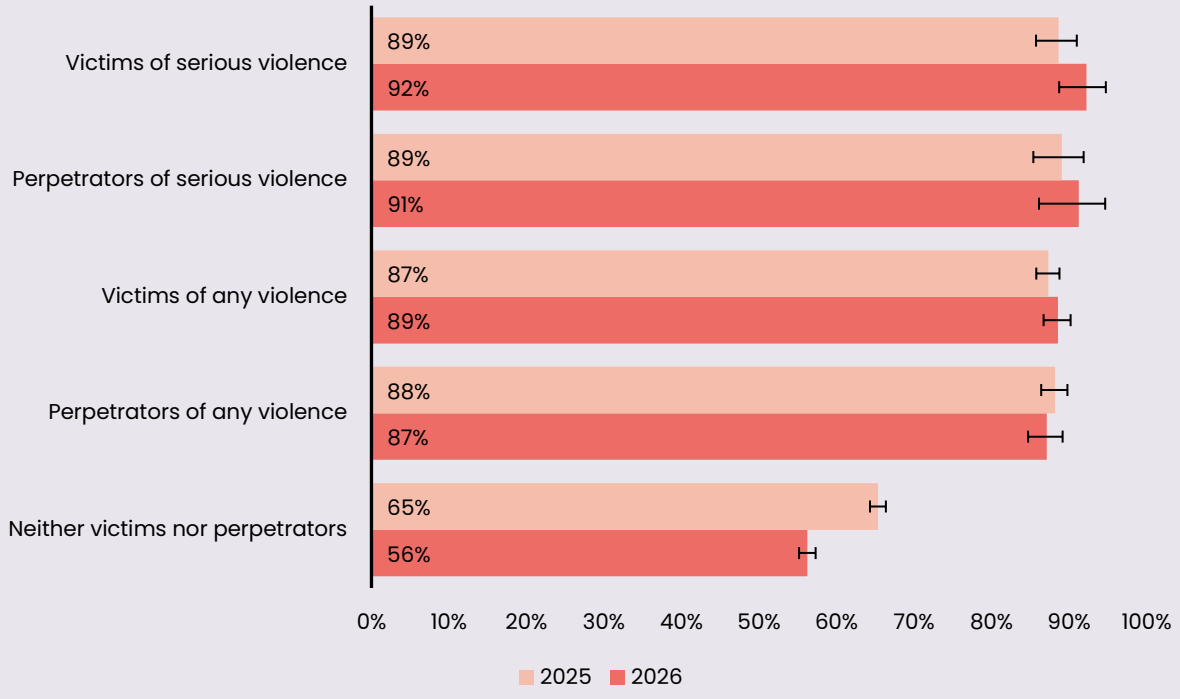
Pages selling weapons were the content most concentrated among teenage children closest to serious violence. Half (50%) of serious violence perpetrators had seen weapon-selling pages, compared to just 6.3% of 13–17-year-olds who hadn't been a victim or perpetrator of any violence – eight times as likely. Serious violence victims were more than six times as likely as those not involved in violence (39%). We don't know how teens came across this content despite it falling within the Online Safety Act's restrictions; they may have searched for it or had it shown to them by contacts or the algorithm.

Despite overall falls in teens' exposure to violent content, those affected by violence remain just as likely to see it as in previous years.

Although overall exposure to violent content fell from 70% in 2025 to 61% in 2026, there was no evidence of the same reduction among 13–17-year-olds already involved in violence. Rates of exposure remained broadly unchanged, at 89% for victims of any violence compared to 87% in 2025, 92% for victims of serious violence (vs. 89% in 2025), 87% for perpetrators of any violence (vs. 88% in 2025) and 91% for perpetrators of serious violence (vs. 89% in 2025). Exposure among 13–17-year-olds who were neither victims nor perpetrators fell from 65% in 2025 to 56% this year.

Therefore, whatever drove the overall fall in exposure, it didn't reduce exposure for the children most closely involved in violence. Protections introduced under the Online Safety Act might have reduced more incidental exposure, but had less impact on 13–17-year-olds who were more actively engaged with violent content or whose peer networks and online spaces exposed them to it more directly. However, our survey can't establish whether this is the mechanism behind the changes.

FIGURE 2.4: PROPORTION OF 13–17-YEAR-OLDS WHO'D SEEN VIOLENT CONTENT ON SOCIAL MEDIA, BY SURVEY YEAR AND EXPERIENCE OF VIOLENCE



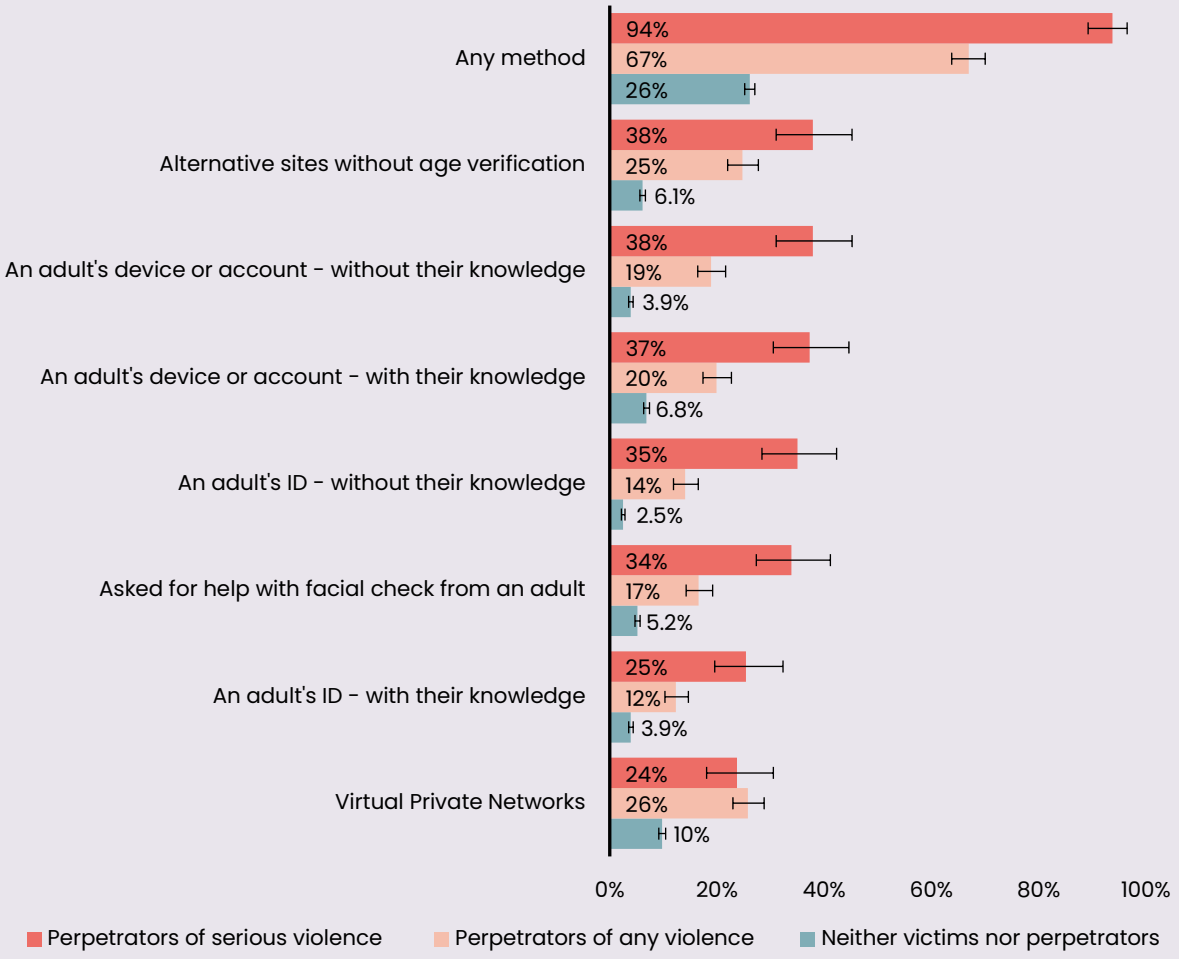
Note. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals – this reflects the range we expect the true value to fall within.

Teens involved in violence are more likely to bypass age checks.

One of the reasons 13–17-year-olds affected by violence continued to see violence on social media at such high rates could be that they were also significantly more likely than other 13–17-year-olds to have bypassed existing age restrictions on social media. Overall, 32% of 13–17-year-olds said they'd bypassed age checks. Just over a quarter (26%) of those who hadn't been victims or perpetrators of violence in the past year had done so. Those who'd perpetrated violence were more than twice as likely (67%) to have done so. This rose even further to more than nine in 10 (94%) of those who'd perpetrated serious violence where the victim required medical treatment.

Teenage children involved in violence were more likely to report every method of bypassing age checks. Among serious violence perpetrators, nearly two in five (38%) had used alternative sites without age verification, compared with 25% of all perpetrators and just 6.1% of those who were neither victims nor perpetrators of violence. Similarly, 38% of serious violence perpetrators had used an adult's device or account without their knowledge, compared to 19% of perpetrators of violence in general and 3.9% of those who were neither victims nor perpetrators.

FIGURE 2.5: METHODS USED TO BYPASS ONLINE AGE CHECKS, BY PERPETRATION OF VIOLENCE



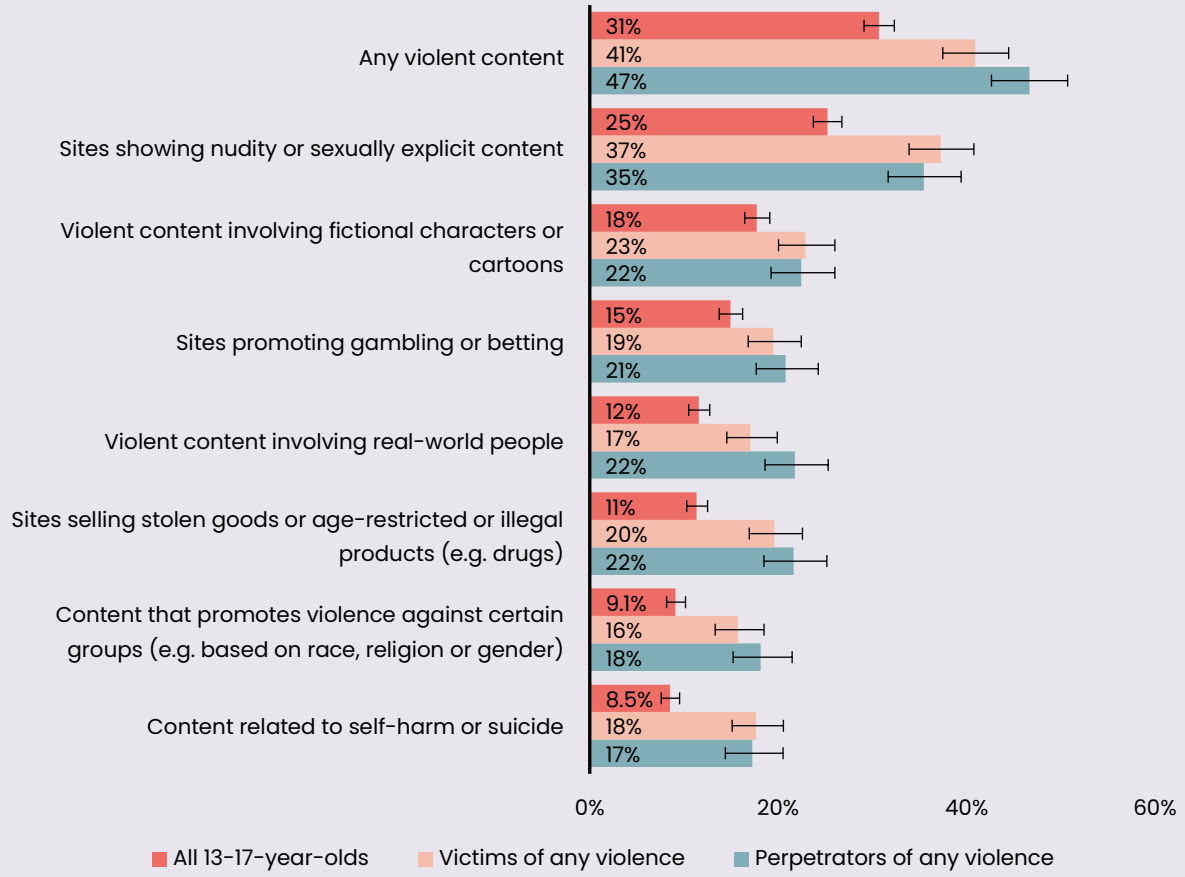
Note. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals – this reflects the range we expect the true value to fall within.

Teenage children who'd perpetrated serious violence were also far more likely to be getting help from an adult. Over a third (37%) of serious violence perpetrators had used an adult's device or account with their knowledge, compared to 20% of all perpetrators and 6.8% of those who were neither victims nor perpetrators. Similarly, 34% had help from an adult with a facial check, compared to 17% of all perpetrators and just 5.2% of those who were neither victims nor perpetrators.

Victims and perpetrators of violence are more likely to view all types of age-restricted content.

Among 13–17-year-olds who had accessed age-restricted content, those who'd been victims or perpetrators of violence were more likely than teenagers overall to report viewing a range of restricted content. The most common was nudity or sexually explicit content, accessed by 35% of perpetrators, 37% of victims and 25% of all 13–17-year-olds who'd accessed age-restricted content. Teens who had perpetrated violence were around twice as likely as 13–17-year-olds overall to have accessed violent content involving real-world people (22% vs. 12%), sites selling stolen goods or illegal products (22% vs. 11%) and content promoting violence against certain groups (18% vs. 9.1%).

FIGURE 2.6: TYPES OF CONTENT VIEWED BY 13–17-YEAR-OLDS WHO'D BYPASSED ONLINE AGE CHECKS, BY EXPERIENCE OF VIOLENCE



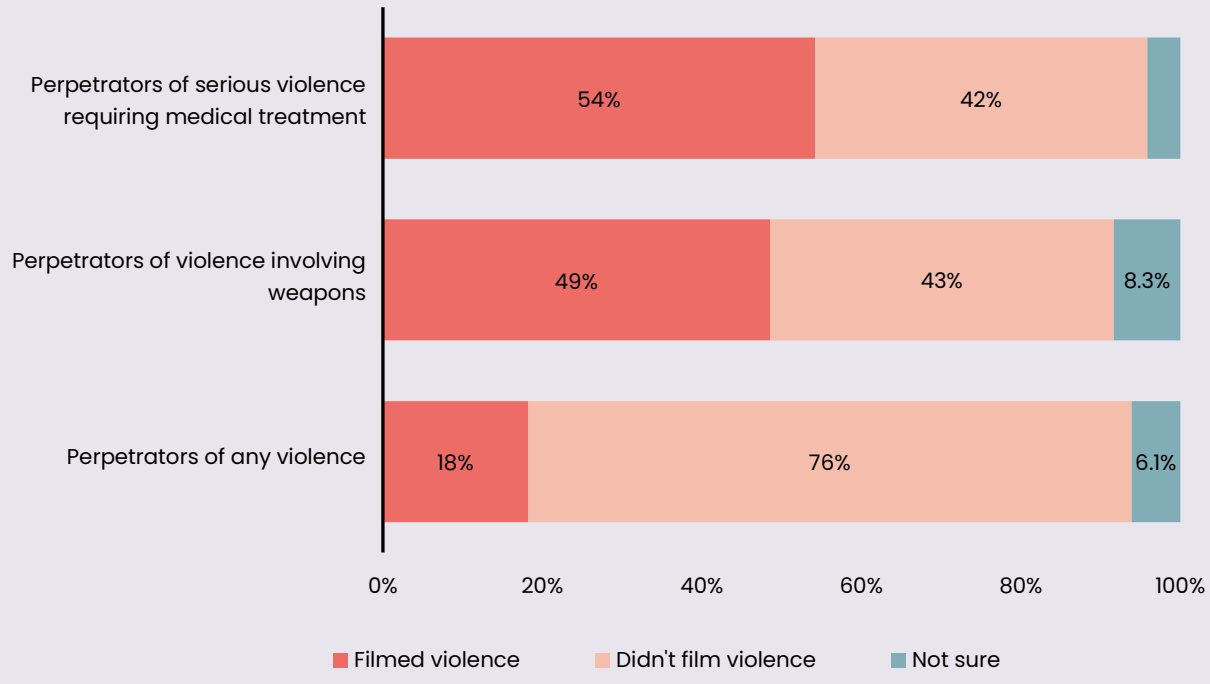
Note. Any violent content here includes violent content involving fictional characters, violent content involving real-world people and content promoting violence against specific groups. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals – this reflects the range we expect the true value to fall within.

Teenage children who had self-harmed were around twice as likely to have accessed content related to self-harm or suicide (19% compared to 8.5% of all who'd bypassed checks) – meaning the checks designed to keep the most harmful content from the most vulnerable children appeared to be least effective for exactly those groups. They were also more likely to have accessed sexually explicit content (33% compared to 25% of all who'd bypassed checks).

Teens are filming and sharing the violence they're involved in and using AI to generate more violent content.

To better understand the role that social media plays in violence, this year we asked those who'd perpetrated violence whether any violent incident they'd been involved in had been filmed and put on social media. Around three quarters of those who'd perpetrated violence (76%) said this hadn't happened, but 18% said that they or someone they knew had filmed the violence and posted it on social media. Whether the violence was filmed and shared was strongly correlated with the seriousness of the violence that had been perpetrated. The proportion who said that an incident had been filmed and put on social media increased to nearly half (49%) among those who had used a weapon and more than half (54%) where the victim of the incident had required medical treatment.

FIGURE 2.7: PROPORTION OF PERPETRATORS OF VIOLENCE WHO SAID VIOLENCE THEY'D PERPETRATED HAD BEEN FILMED AND POSTED ON SOCIAL MEDIA, BY TYPE OF VIOLENCE

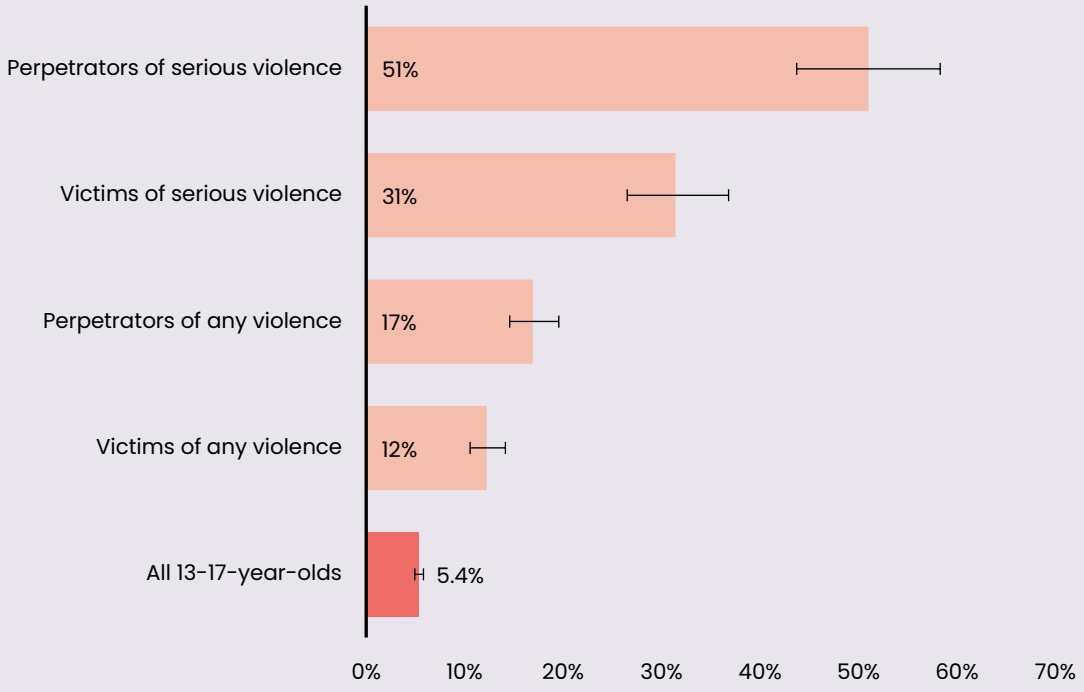


Filming and sharing violence online can be a route to proliferation of violence: victims are humiliated and feel the need to retaliate and post evidence of this on social media. The growth in use of generative artificial intelligence (gen-AI) might be further fuelling this cycle.

Gen-AI tools are being used to produce realistic images, video and audio including depictions of fights, weapons and injuries that never happened. They can also alter real material – placing a real, identifiable person into a violent scene, adding weapons to genuine footage, or fabricating threats in someone's voice – which makes AI-generated content a way to intimidate, humiliate or provoke specific people. In this year's survey, for the first time, we asked whether respondents had generated violent content with AI and shared it.

Creating and sharing AI-generated violent content was relatively uncommon among teenage children overall, with just 5.4% of 13–17-year-olds reporting having done this. However, it was substantially more common among those involved in violence, particularly more serious violence. Seventeen per cent of 13–17-year-olds who'd perpetrated violence said they had created or shared this type of content. This figure rose to over half (51%) among those whose violence had resulted in the victim needing medical treatment.

FIGURE 2.8: PROPORTION OF 13–17-YEAR-OLDS WHO'D CREATED AND SHARED AI-GENERATED VIOLENT CONTENT, BY EXPERIENCE OF VIOLENCE



Note. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals – this reflects the range we expect the true value to fall within.

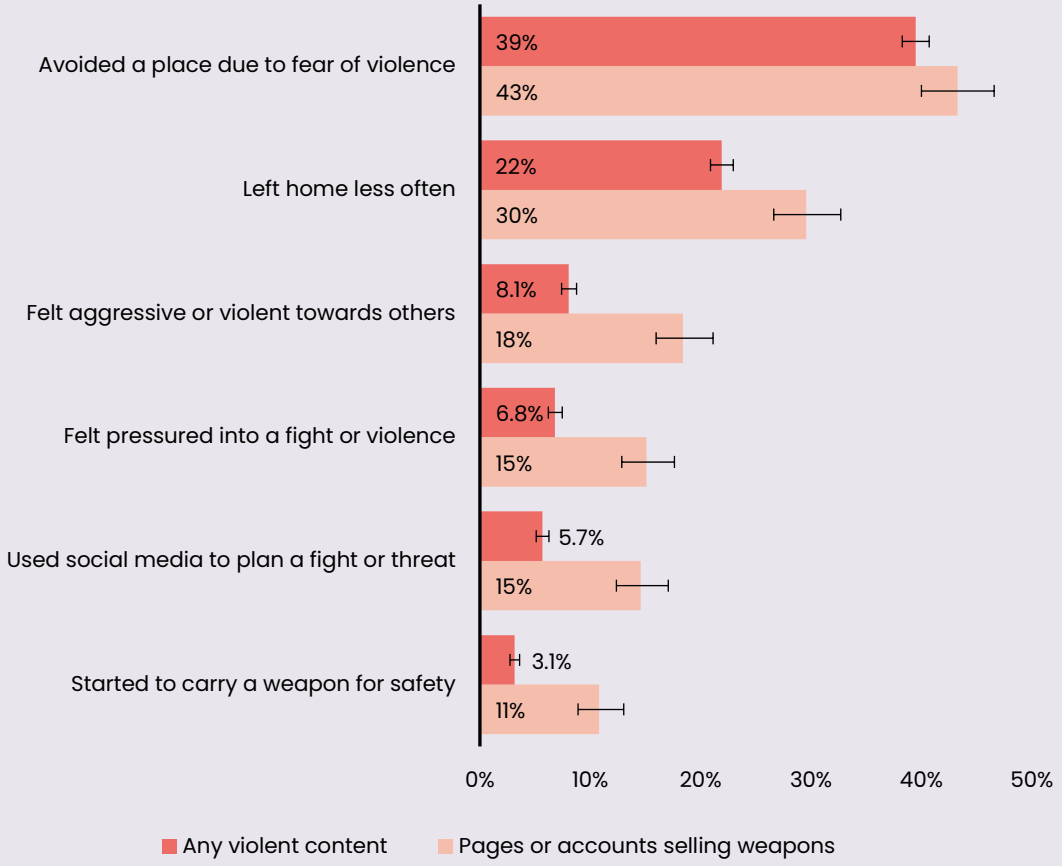
A similar pattern, though less pronounced, was evident among victims of violence. Twelve per cent of 13–17-year-olds who'd experienced violence as victims had created and shared AI-generated violent content, rising to nearly a third (31%) of victims whose experience of violence had resulted in them needing medical treatment.

From these results, we can see a link between experiences of violence and use of social media and generative AI to spread violent content. However, it's important to note that the data can't tell us why the incidents were filmed or shared or why individuals created AI-generated violent content, who ultimately viewed the content and what role posting it online may have played in the violence happening in the first place.

A minority say seeing violence on social media led them to plan fights or carry weapons.

Teenage children also self-reported that seeing violent content on social media had real impacts on their behaviour. For many, it made them change their behaviour to try and prevent violence happening to them: 39% of those who had seen it had avoided a place because they were worried about violence, and 22% had left home less often. A smaller group said it increased their involvement in violence – 8.1% felt more aggressive or violent towards others, 6.8% felt pressured into fights or violent activity, 5.7% used social media to plan or organise violence and 3.1% started carrying a weapon for safety. Teens who had seen pages or accounts selling weapons reported every response more often, but the gap was widest for the behaviours connected to violence: they were only somewhat more likely to have avoided places (43%) or stayed home more (30%), but more than twice as likely to have felt aggressive (18%), felt pressured (15%) or planned violence on social media (15%), and more than three times as likely to have started carrying a weapon (11% vs. 3.1%).

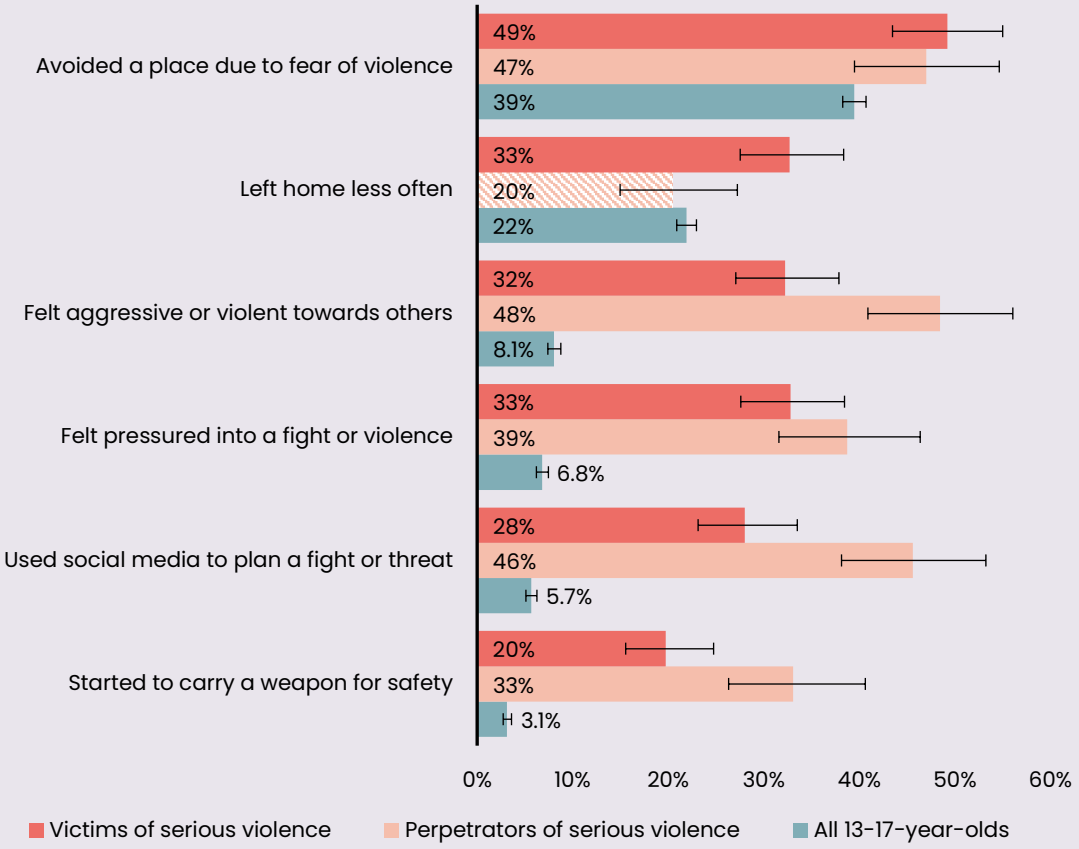
FIGURE 2.9: REPORTED IMPACTS OF SEEING VIOLENT CONTENT ON SOCIAL MEDIA, BY TYPE OF CONTENT



Note. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals – this reflects the range we expect the true value to fall within.

Teenage children who had been victims or perpetrators of serious violence (where the victim required medical treatment) were even more likely to report seeing violence on social media changed the way they felt and behaved offline. A third (33%) of those who had perpetrated serious violence and seen violent content started carrying a weapon. Just under half (46%) used social media to plan or organise a fight, threat or violent act and 39% felt pressured to get involved in a fight or violent activity. There was a similar pattern for victims of serious violence. One in five victims (20%) started carrying a weapon for their safety, 28% used social media to plan or organise a fight, threat or violent act and 33% felt pressured to get involved in a fight or violent activity.

FIGURE 2.10: REPORTED IMPACTS OF SEEING VIOLENT CONTENT ON SOCIAL MEDIA, BY EXPERIENCE OF VIOLENCE



Note. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals – this reflects the range we expect the true value to fall within.

How do our results compare to other sources?

Existing research is yet to show whether or not social media plays a causal role in the scale and nature of real-world violence. However, research has shown that it's likely to amplify existing conflicts and expose them to a much larger and wider audience. Research by the London Violence Reduction Unit found that online activity can keep conflict going, draw more people in and create pressure to respond physically. It identified the filming and circulation of violent incidents as one way this happens.

Similarly, research by Ofcom found that children considered seeing violence online as almost unavoidable, although much of their exposure was not deliberate. It found strong motivations for some children to actively share violent content, particularly boys aged 13 to 15, who described sharing violent content to fit in with their peers and to gain popularity. Content was shared through group messages, posts and stories. Ofcom also found evidence of offline impacts, with children describing a desensitisation to violence and other children staying at home and avoiding places they feared.

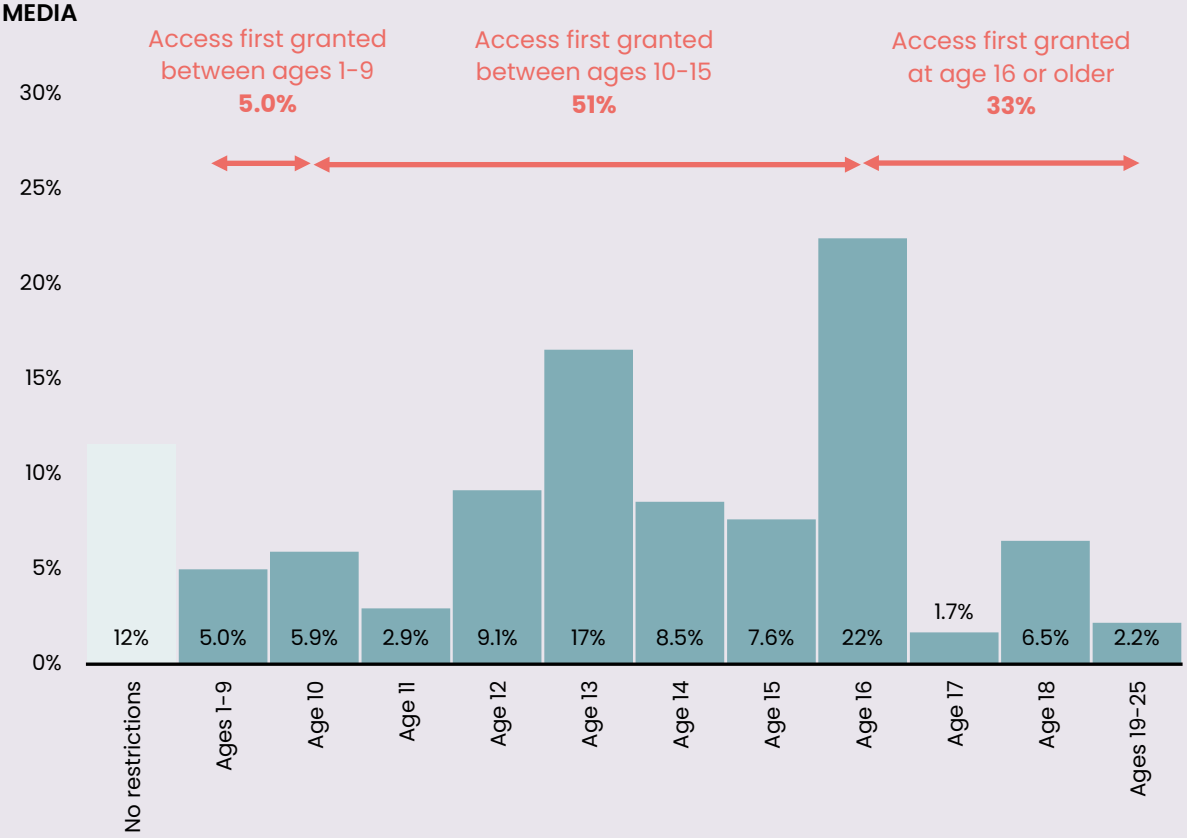
Our findings echoed this research. We found that 18% of 13–17-year-olds who had perpetrated violence said an incident had been filmed and put on social media, rising to 39% among frequent perpetrators, 49% where a weapon was used, 54% where the victim required medical treatment and 71% among 'gang'-involved teens. We also found similar evidence of fear and avoidance, with 39% of teens who had seen violent content avoiding certain areas and 22% leaving home less often.

Teens support age restrictions, but those closest to violence say they'd get around them.

Most teens support age restrictions on social media, but only a third favour a ban for under-16s.

Following the Growing Up in the Online World consultation, the government announced in June 2026 that it will ban under-16s from major social media platforms (including TikTok, Instagram and Snapchat, but not messaging services such as WhatsApp), with default restrictions on some features for 16–17-year-olds. The ban is expected to come into force from Spring 2027. This year we asked teenage children their views on age restrictions for social media and how limiting access might impact them.

FIGURE 3.1: AGE AT WHICH 13–17-YEAR-OLDS THOUGHT PEOPLE SHOULD FIRST GAIN ACCESS TO SOCIAL MEDIA



There was widespread support for having some form of minimum age for accessing social media. Only 12% of 13–17-year-olds said that there should be no age restrictions, meaning almost nine in 10 (88%) supported restricting access for at least some ages. However, views about where this restriction should be brought in varied considerably. Only a third (33%) thought access should first be granted at 16 or later – a position consistent with the government's planned under-16 ban, though we asked about the minimum age of access rather than support for a ban as such. Access being first granted at 16 was the most common response, supported by 22% of 13–17-year-olds. A smaller group thought this was too early, with 8.2% saying it should happen between ages 17 and 18. A further 2.2% thought access should come in later

still. Just over half (51%) thought access should first begin between the ages of 10 and 15, with age 13 being the most commonly selected age within this range (17%).

There was more support for under-16s being prevented from accessing social media amongst older respondents. However, support was still comparatively high among those who would be immediately affected. Thirty per cent of 13-year-olds thought access should begin at 16 or later, compared to 40% of 17-year-olds.

How much support is there for a social media ban?

Other sources also point to a mixed picture in terms of young people's views on a social media ban. In a nationally representative survey conducted by UK Youth, 29% of 10–21-year-olds supported a full ban on under-16s, rising to 40% among 16–21-year-olds. The same research found the clearest consensus was for selective access – roughly half of young people said under-16s should be allowed on some platforms but not others – and that only 19% of the wider public backed a full ban. Recent research by the NSPCC found that three quarters of children would support film-style age ratings on social media. Girlguiding found that 72% of 10–16-year-olds surveyed believed social media companies need to do more to protect them, but only 15% said a ban would make them feel safer. More than half (56%) thought under-16s would find ways around it.

Although there is broad support across sectors for stronger protections for children, several major children's organisations oppose an outright ban, favouring duties on platforms. The Children's Commissioner has welcomed stronger restrictions but has argued that the focus should be on requiring platforms to provide safe services. Similarly, the NSPCC also believes more focus should be on the platforms, rather than simply restricting access for children. The Children's Society has also argued that a ban could be bypassed and that the focus should be on the platforms rather than on children. This should include forcing platforms to keep under-13s off social media, while preventing them from designing their platforms to keep teens addicted and compelling platforms to use technology that can stop the creation and sharing of illegal images. The Molly Rose Foundation opposes an under-16 ban, warning it would create a cliff-edge at 16 and give parents a false sense of security, and arguing that regulating addictive design features would do more to protect children. Its polling of 1,050 Australian 12–15-year-olds found a majority still using social media despite Australia's ban.

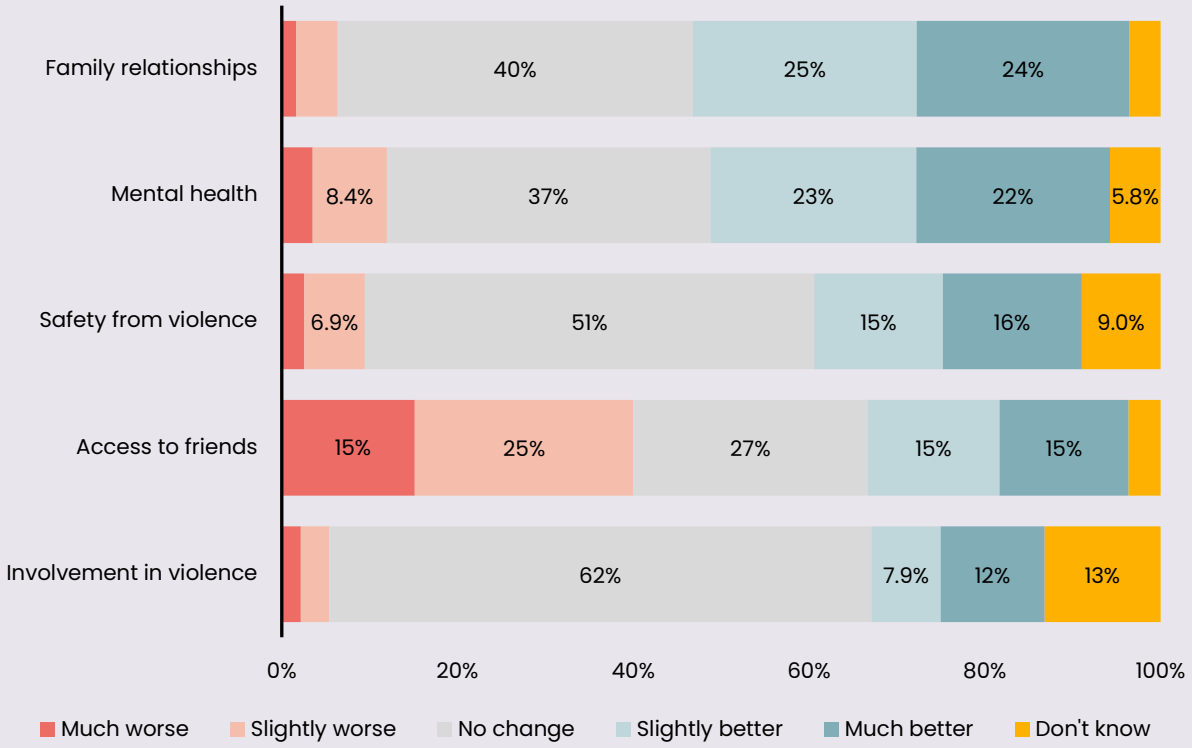
Teens think reducing social media use would improve their wellbeing and family life but cut them off from friends.

To find out what impact limiting access might have, we asked how spending less time on social media would impact respondents' behaviours and wellbeing. Children anticipated a mixture of both positive and negative effects. The clearest perceived benefits related to their family relationships and their mental health. Half (50%) thought their family relationships would get better, including 24% who thought they would get much better. Very few expected it to negatively affect their family relationships, with only 6.4% saying so. Similarly, 45% thought that their mental health would improve, compared to just 12% who thought it would get worse.

However, children showed some concern that spending less time on social media would negatively impact their friendships and social connections. Two in five (40%) thought their access to friends and other connections would get worse, including 15% who thought it would become much worse. This compared to three in 10 (30%) who thought their connections would improve, with 27% expecting no change.

With respect to their personal safety, children were most likely to think that spending less time on social media would have no impact. Nearly two-thirds (62%) thought their involvement in violence would remain unchanged, compared to one in five (20%) who thought it would get better. Similarly, just over half (51%) expected no change in their safety from violence compared to three in 10 (30%) who thought it would improve.

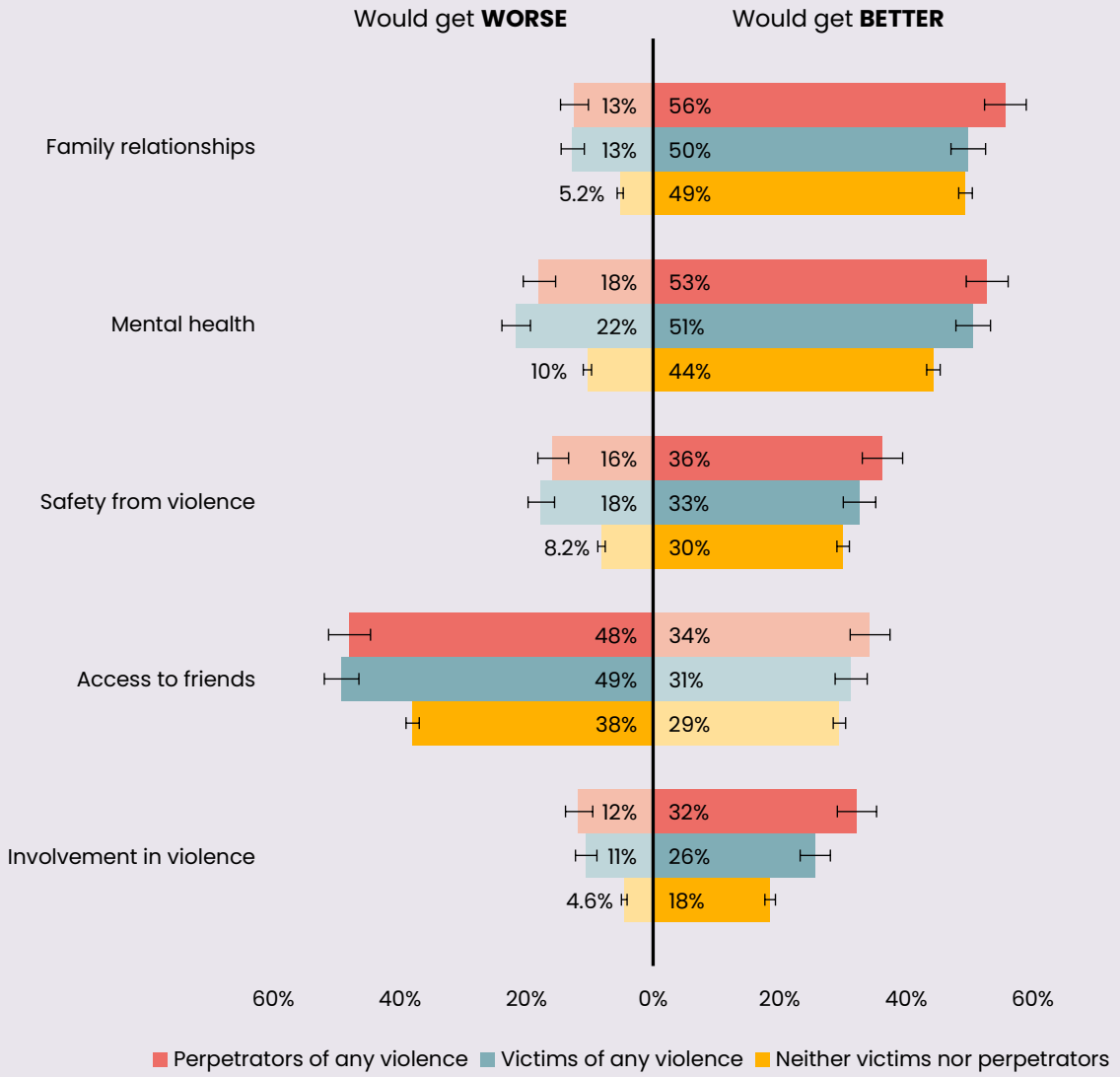
FIGURE 3.2: WHAT IMPACT 13–17-YEAR-OLDS THOUGHT REDUCING THEIR TIME ON SOCIAL MEDIA WOULD HAVE ON DIFFERENT AREAS OF THEIR LIFE



Teens involved in violence see more to gain – and more to lose.

Across every aspect of life we asked about, 13–17-year-olds who had perpetrated violence were more likely than those who hadn't been affected by violence to think that spending less time on social media would improve things. Differences between the groups were largest for violence itself. Almost a third (32%) of 13–17-year-olds who had perpetrated violence thought their involvement in violence would improve, compared to 26% of victims and 18% of 13–17-year-olds who were neither victims nor perpetrators. However, this remained the area in which all groups were most sceptical about seeing improvements. Those who'd perpetrated violence were also the most likely to think their safety from violence would improve (36%, compared to 33% of victims and 30% of teens who were neither). More than half of teens who'd perpetrated violence expected their family relationships (56%) and mental health (53%) to improve.

FIGURE 3.3: PROPORTION OF 13–17-YEAR-OLDS WHO THOUGHT AREAS OF THEIR LIFE WOULD GET BETTER OR WORSE IF THEY SPENT LESS TIME ON SOCIAL MEDIA, BY EXPERIENCE OF VIOLENCE



Note. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals – this reflects the range we expect the true value to fall within.

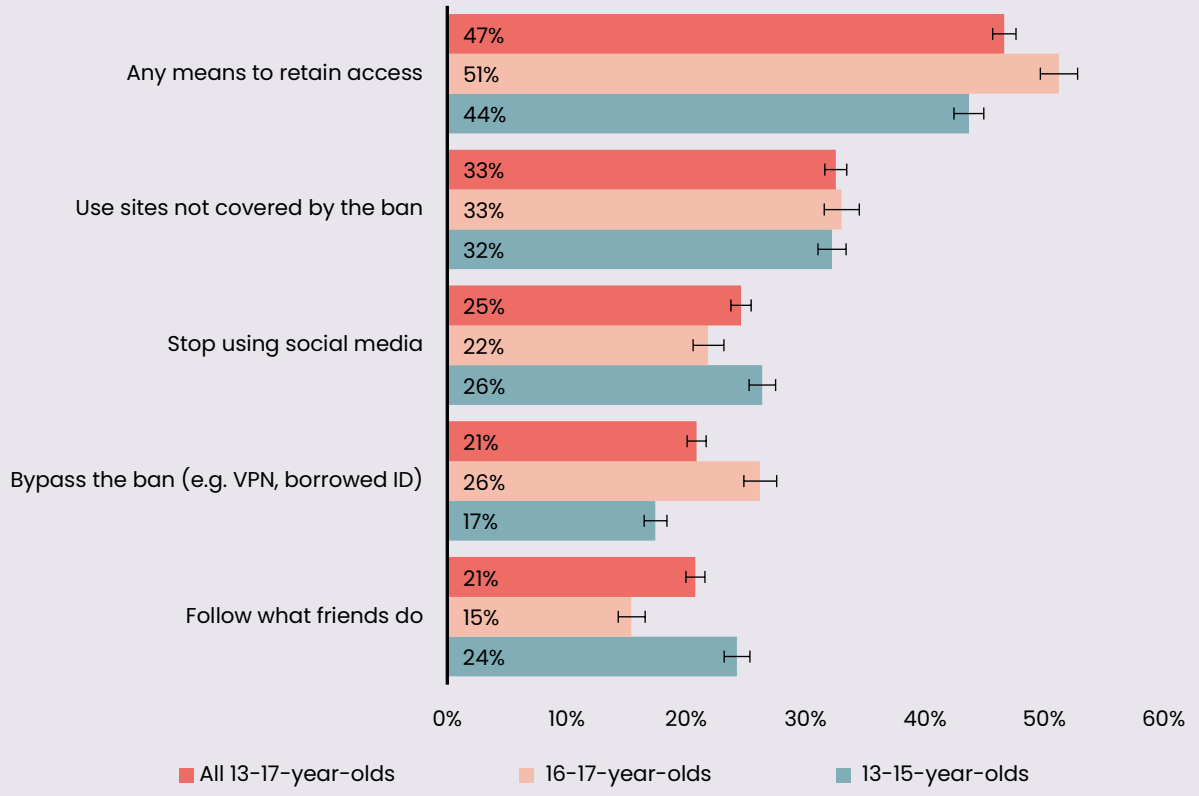
Teenage children who had experienced violence were also more likely to expect parts of their lives to get worse. The biggest concern was losing access to friends and other connections: almost half of victims (49%) and perpetrators (48%) thought this would get worse, compared to 38% of those who hadn't been affected by violence. Victims and perpetrators were also more likely to anticipate worse mental health (22% and 18%, compared to 10% of 13–17-year-olds who were neither), worse family relationships (both 13%, compared to 5.2%) and worse safety from violence (18% and 16%, compared to 8.2%). Around one in 10 victims (11%) and perpetrators (12%) thought their involvement in violence would get worse, compared to 4.6% of 13–17-year-olds who were neither victims nor perpetrators.

Almost half of teens say they'd get around a ban.

Finally, we asked what children would do if social media were banned for people their age. In the first section of this report, we saw that 32% of 13–17-year-olds were finding some way around the current age restrictions on certain types of content. When asked what they would do in the event of a total social media ban, almost half (47%) of 13–17-year-olds said they would use at least one means to retain access to social media if it were banned for their age group. The most common response was using sites not covered by the ban (33%), followed by finding ways around it, such as VPNs, fake ID or other people's accounts (21%). However, there was also a lot of uncertainty. Around one in five (21%) said they'd follow what their friends did and 15% weren't sure. Only a quarter (25%) said they would stop using social media. The pattern of responses was broadly similar across age groups, with older teenagers slightly more likely to say they'd bypass the ban (e.g. using VPNs) and younger teenagers more likely to say they'd follow what their friends did.

The group that matters most here is 13–15-year-olds, as they would be who a social media ban for under-16s would aim to target. Of these, 44% said they would find some means of retaining access, and only around a quarter (26%) said they would stop using social media altogether.

FIGURE 3.4: HOW 13–17-YEAR-OLDS THOUGHT THEY WOULD RESPOND IF SOCIAL MEDIA WERE BANNED FOR CHILDREN THEIR AGE, BY AGE GROUP



Note. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals – this reflects the range we expect the true value to fall within.

Children currently spending more time on social media were more likely to say they'd find a way around the ban. For example, 56% of those using it for five or more hours a day on average said they'd find a way

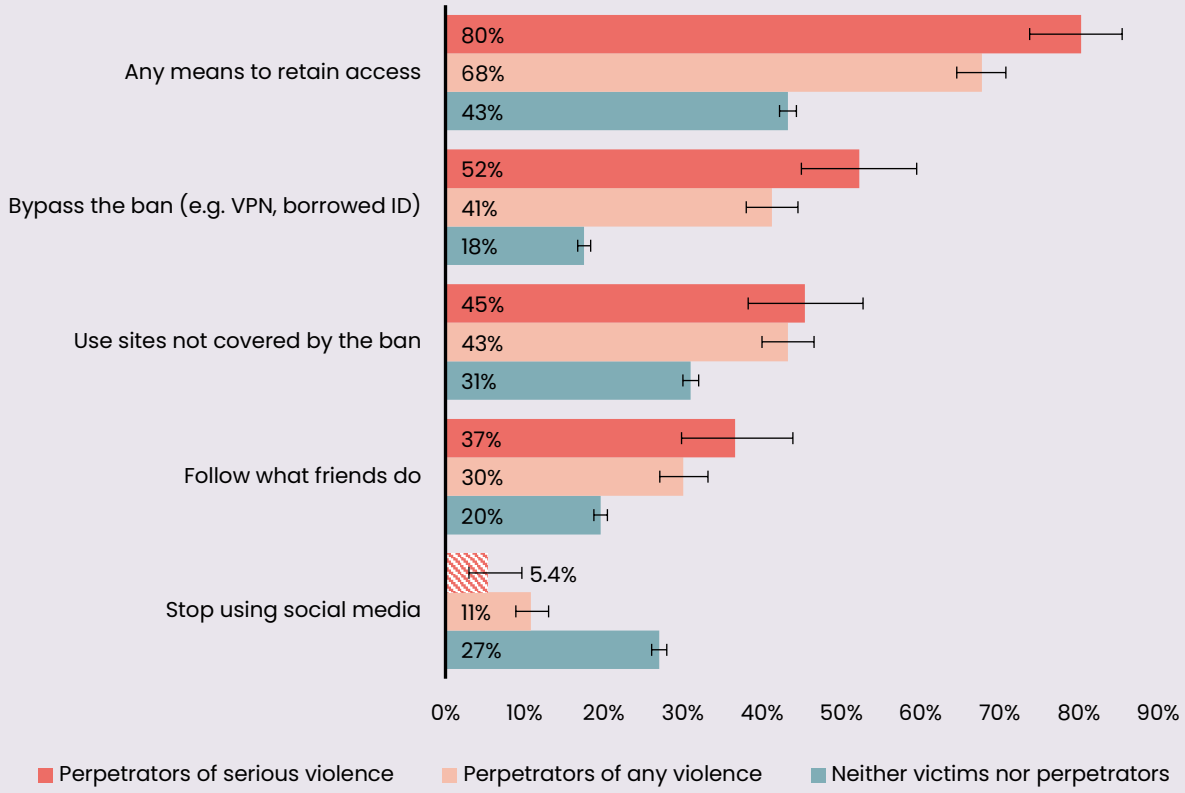
around the ban. Over a third (37%) said they'd find alternative sites and 28% said they'd use another method such as VPNs. Those who'd seen real-world violent content on social media were similarly likely to say they'd find workarounds – 55% would find any, 37% would use other sites and 27% would find other ways around it. This rose further for those who'd seen pages on social media selling weapons – 61% of these teenagers said they'd find a way around a ban.

Those involved in violence were even more likely to say they would keep accessing social media despite a ban. While 43% of 13–17-year-olds who were neither victims nor perpetrators said they would use at least one method to retain access, this rose to 68% of perpetrators of violence and 80% of those who had perpetrated serious violence (where the victim required medical treatment).

The same gradient ran through every response. Over half (52%) of serious violence perpetrators said they would find ways around the ban such as VPNs or fake identification, compared with 41% of all perpetrators and 18% of 13–17-year-olds not involved in violence; 45% would move to sites not covered by it (vs. 43% and 31%), and 37% said their response would depend on what friends did (vs. 30% and 20%).

These findings suggest that 13–17-year-olds already involved in violence might be among the least likely to stop using social media following restrictions. This is particularly important given earlier findings showing the substantial overlap between online and offline violence. Restrictions might therefore have less of an impact on some of the young people they could potentially benefit the most.

FIGURE 3.5: HOW 13–17-YEAR-OLDS THOUGHT THEY WOULD RESPOND IF SOCIAL MEDIA WERE BANNED FOR CHILDREN THEIR AGE, BY PERPETRATION OF VIOLENCE



Note. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals – this reflects the range we expect the true value to fall within. Bars with striped shading have cell counts of less than 50, so these figures should be interpreted with caution.

Youth Endowment Fund
Charitable Trust
Registered Charity Number: 1185413

youthendowmentfund.org.uk
hello@youthendowmentfund.org.uk