

VRP Community Research Project

Overall Project Summary Report

Violence Reduction Partnership Research Report, written by BVSC Research

Project at a Glance

Community/Peer Research Model:

72	159	16	4
Interviews Conducted	Survey Responses	Community Researchers	Focus Groups

1. Context

This report provides an overall summary of the West Midlands Violence Reduction Partnership (VRP) community research project, delivered by Birmingham Voluntary Service Council (BVSC) Research. The project set out to understand the safety experiences of children and young people across the West Midlands through a programme of peer-led, community-based research.

The project was commissioned by the West Midlands VRP and addressed four interconnected research areas:

- How children and young people with Special Educational Needs (SEN) and neurodiversity experience safety, risk and violence in their everyday lives, and what they, parents and educational professionals think would help them feel safer.
- What young people's experiences of online harm are, how they have seen it transition into real-world violence, bullying, retaliation or self-harm, and what they think could help to reduce that risk.
- What stories and messages shape how children and young people think about violence, which counternarratives they find most convincing, and what they think about the VRP's My Tomorrow campaign.
- What does existing research tell us about children and young people's experiences of social harm, and what conditions – relationships, spaces, and structures – enable safety, help and healing? This fourth strand comprised a rapid critical interpretive review of literature conducted by Colin Michel and Ariana Markowitz, providing a scholarly framework for interpreting the project's primary research findings.

A community research (CR) approach was central to the project's design. Rather than relying solely on external researchers, BVSC Research worked with 16 community researchers — individuals with direct lived experience of the issues explored, or strong connections to the communities involved. This approach was intended to reduce traditional power imbalances in research, increase trust with participants, and capture more authentic accounts of young people's experiences.

The research took place across the West Midlands Combined Authority area, with a particular concentration in Birmingham, as well as representation from Sandwell, Coventry, Dudley, Walsall and Solihull. The research was conducted in 2024/2025.

2. Methodology

2.1 Community Research Approach

The project was designed around a community research (CR) model, which involved recruiting and training individuals from communities across the West Midlands to participate in research design, data collection, and analysis. In total, 16 community researchers were recruited and supported throughout the project.

Community researchers were involved from the outset in shaping the research design. This included a collaborative topic guide development process, in which CRs worked together to identify key themes and co-produce the wording of interview questions. Their familiarity with local contexts was considered a core strength of the approach, enabling them to build trust and rapport with participants — particularly those who may otherwise be less likely to engage with formal research.

Following data collection, community researchers reviewed transcripts and identified initial codes across their interviews. These were refined further during a collaborative analysis workshop with BVSC researchers, before being cross-checked by experienced researchers to ensure consistency and reduce potential bias.

2.2 Data Collection Methods

Three primary data collection methods were used across the project, with each method selected to suit the specific research question being explored:

- **Semi-structured interviews:** 72 interviews were conducted across the two qualitative research strands (27 on SEN and neurodiversity; 45 on online and offline harm). A semi-structured approach was selected to allow for consistency while also enabling participants to share their experiences in depth. Community researchers led the data collection process with support from BVSC Research staff.
- **Online survey:** A young people's survey was designed and disseminated by BVSC Research via Survey Monkey. It was shared through partner networks, mailing lists, social media, and in-person outreach by Community Research Champions. After data cleaning, 159 valid responses were available for analysis.
- **Focus groups:** Four focus groups were delivered by BVSC Research in four different locations across the West Midlands, specifically to explore the counternarratives and messaging research question. Groups took place with established youth organisations to ensure participant safety and comfort.

2.3 Participant Profile

Across all data collection methods, participants were predominantly young people aged under 25, based primarily in Birmingham. The participant profile was diverse in terms of ethnicity, with 14 distinct ethnic groups represented across the interview sample. A summary of the interview participant demographics is provided below:

- 85% of interview participants (61 of 72) shared demographic information.
- 76% of interview respondents with a valid date of birth were aged under 25.
- 61% identified as women; 38% identified as men; 1 person identified as non-binary.
- 77% were based in Birmingham, with spread across Sandwell, Coventry, Dudley, Walsall and Solihull.
- 14 distinct ethnic groups were represented, with the largest group being Asian/Asian British – Pakistani (23%).
- 82% identified as straight; 10% identified as LGB+.

2.4 Analysis

Thematic analysis was used for the qualitative data. Community researchers reviewed transcripts and identified initial codes before attending collaborative analysis workshops with BVSC researchers. Themes were organised into superordinate and subordinate categories to reflect the structure of participant accounts. Survey data was analysed quantitatively, with descriptive statistics used to summarise responses. Where applicable, qualitative and quantitative data were triangulated to strengthen findings.

3. Timeline

The project was delivered within a defined and relatively compressed timeframe. The key stages of delivery are summarised below:

Stage	Activity
Project inception December 2025	Commission confirmed; BVSC Research engaged as delivery partner; project scope and research questions agreed with VRP.
Community researcher recruitment January 2026	16 community researchers recruited from across the West Midlands, prioritising individuals with lived experience or strong community connections.
Survey Development January 2026	Survey developed alongside the development of interview questions to ensure a wide range of young people could be engaged on all four topics across the West Midlands.
Literature Review started February 2026	Colin Michel and colleague Ariana Markoqitz agreed to undertake the literature review for the Social Harm vs. Social Capital research topic. Rapid literature Review agreed due to timeframe.
Training and co-design February 2026 (half term)	Community researchers participated in research training and collaborative topic guide development workshops. Interview schedules were co-produced with CRs.

Data collection – Phase 1 (Interviews) Throughout March 2026	72 semi-structured interviews conducted by community researchers across the SEN/neurodiversity and online/offline harm research strands. Interviews conducted simultaneously across both topics.
Data collection – Phase 2 (Survey) Feb/March 2026	Online young people's survey launched and disseminated through partner networks and community outreach. 159 valid responses received after data cleaning.
Data collection – Phase 3 (Focus groups) Feb/March 2026	Four focus groups delivered with established youth organisations across the West Midlands to explore counternarratives and messaging research topic.
Analysis and reporting March 2026	Collaborative thematic analysis workshops held with community researchers and BVSC Research staff. Individual strand reports drafted and reviewed.
Reporting and dissemination April 2026	Final reports produced for each research strand. This summary report produced to bring together the overall project findings.

4. Achievements

4.1 Meaningful Community Involvement

One of the most significant achievements of the project was the successful recruitment, training and deployment of 16 community researchers from across the West Midlands. The community research model worked effectively in practice, enabling BVSC Research to reach participants who may not have engaged with more traditional research approaches. Community researchers brought invaluable local knowledge, trust and contextual understanding to the data collection process. Their involvement in analysis workshops further strengthened the quality and authenticity of the findings.

4.2 Scale and Diversity of Data

Across all data collection methods, the project generated a rich and substantial evidence base:

- 72 semi-structured interviews conducted with a diverse participant group spanning 14 ethnic groups.
- 159 valid survey responses from young people across the West Midlands, predominantly aged 16–17.
- 4 focus groups involving young people aged 16–25 in four different locations across the West Midlands, and with one group that had a range of young people from across the region.

An 85% demographic completion rate across interview participants demonstrated a high level of engagement and willingness to contribute to the research, and perhaps demonstrating a level of trust between young people and the peer researchers asking them to share their details (as opposed to if academic or VRP researchers were working directly with the young people).

4.3 New Insights Across Four Research Strands

The project generated important new evidence across all four research strands:

SEN and Neurodiversity

The research produced one of the first community-led accounts of how neurodivergent children and young people experience safety in the West Midlands. Key findings included:

- Neurodivergent young people actively construct their own safety within narrow, private spaces such as the home and bedroom, while experiencing many public environments as overwhelming and unpredictable.
- Public transport, town centres and urban spaces were consistently identified as high-risk environments due to sensory overload, unpredictability and a lack of professional understanding of neurodiversity.
- Professionals – including school staff and police – were felt to lack the knowledge and training to respond appropriately to the needs of neurodiverse young people.
- Delays in diagnosis (waiting times of two to three years in some cases) were identified as leaving young people vulnerable during critical developmental stages.

Online and Offline Harm

The research captured an in-depth picture of how online harm manifests and escalates into real-world violence among young people, drawing on real-life experiences and first-hand accounts from young people living in the West Midlands. Key findings included:

- A wide spectrum of online harms was identified, including image-based abuse ('bait pages', 'muggies', leaked images), cyberbullying, indirect aggression, and sustained social comparison driven by curated content.
- The line between online and offline life is effectively non-existent for most young people; conflicts originating online translate rapidly into real-world consequences because participants interact online primarily with people they already know.
- Peer bystanders – those who share screenshots, amplify arguments or encourage confrontation – were identified as critical drivers of escalation.
- Mental health impacts were significant and cumulative, ranging from anxiety and low self-esteem to social withdrawal, school refusal, self-harm and, in some cases, suicidal ideation.
- Young people face significant barriers to help-seeking, particularly distrust of adults and institutions, fear of having devices confiscated, and concerns about confidentiality in school settings.

Counternarratives and Messaging

The research provided clear intelligence on what works – and what does not – in violence reduction messaging for young people. It also drew out feedback and young people's opinions on the VRP's My Tomorrow campaign. Key findings included:

- Traditional messaging formats (school assemblies, posters, broadcast campaigns) were widely dismissed as 'preachy', repetitive and inauthentic.
- Young people are desensitised to shocking imagery; messages that are most impactful are those grounded in lived experience, delivered by people who have personally experienced violence or its consequences.
- Awareness of the VRP's My Tomorrow campaign was very low (93.4% of survey respondents had never heard of it), representing a significant gap in reach.

- The campaign itself was valued by those who had seen it, with its co-production with young people – including youth involvement in scriptwriting – seen as a key strength.
- Young people called for messages that balance honest acknowledgement of the realities of violence with hope-based, solution-focused content that offers a way forward.

Social Harm and Social Capital

The rapid critical interpretive review, prepared by Colin Michel and Ariana Markowitz and drawing on approximately 35 high-quality, youth-centred studies, provided a powerful theoretical lens through which to understand and contextualise the project's primary research findings.

The review's core analytical frame is particularly significant for the VRP's work: existing definitions of youth violence – whether from the World Health Organization or the UK government – tend to frame young people as the source of the problem, obscuring the structural, relational and cumulative dimensions of violence they experience. The review recontextualises those experiences.

The review reconceptualises young people's experiences of harm, safety, help and healing through five interacting systemic layers: micro, meso, exo, macro and chrono. Taken together, these layers demonstrate that harm is not simply a series of individual incidents but is produced and sustained through the interaction of environments, institutions and time.

Across all five layers, the review identifies a central dynamic: the systematic misrecognition of young people's survival strategies, which are penalised by the very systems meant to protect them. The review uses the concept of 'haunting' to describe how past systemic injustices and personal traumas refuse to stay in the past, actively shaping young people's present and future. Healing, therefore, requires not just individual support but a process of 'laying ghosts to rest' through the creation of relational trust and the material restoration of help and opportunity.

The review's framing directly enriches the project's primary findings. Young people's experiences of safety, risk, online harm and messaging cannot be understood in isolation from the structural conditions in which they live. Harm, haunting and healing are fundamentally social and relational: stigma, exclusion and mistrust are experienced as distinct forms of harm, while trust, recognition and supportive relationships create the conditions for safety and hope. This finding validates the community research approach at the heart of this project and strengthens the case for VRP investment in relational, community-based responses.

4.4 Evidence to Support VRP Strategy

Across all four strands, the research produced actionable evidence to support VRP programme development, communications strategy and commissioning decisions. The literature review provides a scholarly framework that both validates and deepens the primary research findings, demonstrating that the experiences documented by community researchers in the West Midlands are consistent with patterns identified across the wider UK evidence base. Together, the four strands strengthen the evidence base for continued investment in community-led research models, relational and trauma-informed approaches, peer education, early intervention, and the restoration of accessible community spaces.

5. Challenges

5.1 Timeline Pressures

The project was delivered within a compressed timeframe, which created pressures at multiple stages of delivery. The simultaneous conduct of two interview strands – the SEN/neurodiversity and online/offline harm research – required careful coordination and placed significant demands on community researchers and BVSC Research staff. Some elements of the project, including the methodology section of one report, required further completion following the main data collection phase.

If community research was to be undertaken by (or commissioned by) the Violence Reduction Partnership in the future, it would be highly recommended for the timeline to be significantly longer, particularly if the aim was to recruit, train and engage with new and inexperienced young people who have never delivered research work before. This approach of bringing in new researchers from across the West Midlands was originally suggested by BVSC Research, but the fixed deadline of the end of March 2026 for the fieldwork meant it wasn't possible to train new young researchers and maintain rigour, ethics and pastoral support for the young people involved.

5.2 Geographic Coverage

While the project aimed to represent the full breadth of the West Midlands Combined Authority area, geographic coverage was uneven in practice. The majority of interview participants (77%) were based in Birmingham, reflecting the fact that the project primarily drew on existing BVSC Research community researcher networks, which are predominantly Birmingham-based. Wolverhampton was the only WMCA borough not represented in the final interview demographic data, which was identified as a limitation by the project team. The BVSC Research team tried to ensure all areas were represented by creating a pipeline of interviewees, but in practice not all people who said they were happy to be interviewed actually responded to our community researchers when it came to organising an interview.

This geographic concentration reflects a structural challenge common to projects delivered within compressed timescales: when working with existing networks, it is difficult to ensure proportionate representation from all areas of a large and diverse region.

5.3 Demographic Data Completion

While the overall demographic completion rate for interview participants was high (85%), the SEN/neurodiversity section of the demographic questionnaire had notably lower completion, with only 29 of 61 respondents answering this section. This may reflect sensitivities around disclosure of neurodevelopmental conditions or simply reflect the optional nature of the section. The result means that findings in this area should be interpreted with some caution.

5.4 Survey Reach and Sample Bias

The online survey reached a substantial number of young people (159 valid responses after cleaning), but the sample was skewed in a number of ways. Participants were predominantly female (74.7%), aged 16–17 and based in Birmingham (64.8%). While steps were taken to broaden reach through partner networks and in-person outreach, the reliance on digital dissemination and existing partner relationships inevitably shaped the profile of who responded. Findings from the survey should be understood in light of these limitations.

5.5 Sensitivity of Research Topics

The three primary research strands involved exploring sensitive and potentially distressing topics with young people, including experiences of violence, online abuse, mental health difficulties and

safety fears. This required careful safeguarding consideration throughout the project, robust briefing and support for community researchers, and a sensitive approach to data collection and analysis. Managing these responsibilities effectively within a constrained timeline was a consistent challenge. The literature review strand, while not involving direct participant engagement, engaged with equally difficult material, including academic literature on exploitation, self-harm, suicidal ideation, criminalisation and structural neglect.

6. Suggestions for Future Projects

6.1 Build Community Researcher Capacity Across the Region

Future projects should invest in building a geographically distributed community researcher network from the outset, with representation from all seven WMCA boroughs. This could be achieved by partnering with trusted organisations in each area before the project begins, and by allowing sufficient lead time for recruitment, relationship-building and training. This would help address the geographic coverage gaps observed in this project and ensure that peer research genuinely reaches all parts of the region.

6.2 Allow Longer Timescales

A compressed timeline was one of the most consistently cited challenges across this project. Future projects of similar scope would benefit from a longer delivery period, particularly to allow for more robust community researcher recruitment and training, a more extended data collection phase, greater time for analysis and reflection between data collection and reporting, and the flexibility to respond to emerging findings and pursue additional data where needed.

6.3 Strengthen Dissemination and Feedback Loops

Young people who participated in the research expressed frustration that feedback given to decision-makers is not always acted upon, and that the changes they call for can feel distant or invisible. Future projects should incorporate structured dissemination events that bring research findings directly back to participants, clear communication about how findings will be used, and ongoing mechanisms for young people to track the impact of their contributions. Closing this feedback loop is essential to maintaining trust and sustaining engagement with community research models.

6.4 Expand the My Tomorrow Campaign

The findings from the counternarratives and messaging strand provide clear direction for VRP communications strategy. Given that 93.4% of survey respondents had no awareness of the My Tomorrow campaign, a significant investment in distribution and promotion is needed. Future activity should prioritise digital channels used by young people (particularly TikTok, Instagram and Snapchat), influencer and community leader partnerships, and hyper-local content that reflects the specific contexts and cultures of different West Midlands communities. The co-production model used in the campaign's development should be maintained and extended.

6.5 Address Systemic Gaps Identified in the Research

The research findings point to a number of systemic issues that fall outside the scope of any single project, but which are important to highlight for commissioners and policymakers:

- Mandatory neurodiversity training for all professionals working with children and young people, particularly school staff, police, and transport staff.
- Urgent reform of diagnostic pathways to reduce waiting times and provide earlier support for neurodivergent young people.
- Investment in community infrastructure, including youth clubs and outreach projects, which were consistently cited by participants as safe, supervised social environments whose loss leaves a significant gap.
- Greater platform accountability, including stricter content moderation and ID verification requirements, to reduce the volume and impact of online harm.
- Improved school-based online safety education, with content delivered by credible, up-to-date practitioners who understand the digital environments young people actually inhabit.

6.6 Invest in further Research

This project has generated a valuable cross-sectional snapshot of young people's experiences. A longitudinal follow-up study, revisiting participants over a period of two to three years, would enable the VRP and BVSC Research to track whether safety conditions are improving, monitor the impact of interventions, and deepen understanding of how experiences of harm and risk change over time. This would significantly strengthen the evidence base for VRP strategy and investment decisions. If this isn't realistic given funding timelines, it would be recommended to commission more peer/community research in the financial year 26/27 with a longer timeframe to allow for wider participation across the region.

About this report

This summary report was produced by BVSC Research on behalf of the West Midlands Violence Reduction Partnership. It draws on the full suite of research outputs produced as part of the VRP Community Research Project. Each of these reports should be read in full for the complete findings from each research strand.