



Community Research

Counternarratives and
Messaging: Focus Group
Analysis

Commissioned by the West
Midlands VRP, delivered by
BVSC Research and a team of
community researchers

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Counternarratives and Messaging: Focus Group Data Analysis

Violence Reduction Partnership Research Report, written by BVSC Research

1. Introduction

By engaging young people in their own communities, this research sought to reduce traditional power imbalances and capture the real voices of young people living in the West Midlands. This data analysis report brings together the findings from focus groups, and aligns them with survey data gathered as part of the same project, to address the following specific research questions posed by West Midlands Violence Reduction Partnership (VRP):

- What stories and messages shape how children and young people think about violence and which messages do they feel are most convincing in challenging fear and normalising safer choices?
- What do children and young people think about the My Tomorrow campaign, have they seen it and if so, how does it make them feel about their future, and does it influence the choices they make?

The data gathered and presented here provides an insight into children and young people's experiences of messaging campaigns related to their safety, and provides a roadmap for developing more effective content and campaigns which will resonate with children and young people and make a lasting difference.

2. Methodology

The methodology chosen for this research topic was designed to complement the other elements of the wider project. Qualitative interviews, an online survey and a literature review were being conducted simultaneously across the region to gather information on how young people experience issues of social harm, safety and exposure to violence.

For this topic, four focus groups were delivered by Birmingham Voluntary Service Council (BVSC) Research team in four different locations, with the aim of reaching young people (aged 16-25 years) based in different parts of the West Midlands.

Focus groups are particularly effective when working with children and young people, and are widely used in youth research, education, health, and policy contexts. Several factors explain this:

- **Reduced power imbalance:** The peer group setting dilutes the power dynamic inherent in interviews, particularly between an adult and a young person. Young people often feel more confident and less "tested" when peers are there too.
- **Natural social environment:** Young people are accustomed to discussing things in groups (classrooms, friend groups), so the format feels familiar and less formal.
- **Peer validation:** Group discussion can encourage participation from those who might feel their view is unusual or "wrong".
- **Richer responses:** Young people, particularly younger children, may give brief answers in individual interviews but elaborate more freely in group dialogue.

We did need to bear in mind that the limitations of focus groups are that they can allow one voice to dominate, and that the presence of peers can contribute to peer pressure, or influence how children and young people respond. We felt that overall, we could ensure our

facilitation allowed space for all children and young people to contribute as much as they wanted to and were happy that the specific groups we were working with were established groups where children already knew each other and were used to working in a fair, respectful and co-operative way.

To reach a wide range of experiences and help ensure accessibility for the young people involved, the researchers travelled to places where the young people were already comfortable, and joined existing meetings organised by trusted organisations and individuals in the young people's lives. This was also a key factor in ensuring the safety of the children and young people involved, particularly when working on a restricted timeline.

The project overall was delivered within a compressed timeframe, which created pressures at multiple stages of delivery. 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 engage with young people from all parts of the West Midlands Combined Authority region.

Originally, this topic was designed to be delivered as a community research project with community members delivering semi-structured interviews with their peers, however it was decided the focus groups would reach more young people more efficiently. In the end, BVSC Research felt that this methodology was probably best suited to this topic – allowing young people to discuss their experiences of safety and messages they hear in the media in a group setting, in an environment they felt comfortable in, produced some rich and authentic insights.

Despite this change in the research design, the methodology behind the focus groups was inclusive and designed with community engagement at its heart.

Four groups of young people were identified through trusted partners of the West Midlands Violence Reduction Partnership and/or Birmingham voluntary Service Council:

- *Positive Youth foundation Changemakers*: representing young people from all parts of the West Midlands. 6 participants aged 16-25 years old.
- *Sandwell SHAPE Group*: representing young people in Sandwell. 5 participants aged 16-25 years old.
- *Coventry Hillfields youth group*: representing young people in Coventry, and particularly those living in and around the Hillfields area. 7 participants aged 16-25 years old.
- *The Springfield Project youth advisory group*: representing young people in Birmingham and specifically located in the Sparkbrook/Moseley area. 5 participants aged 16-25 years old.

To ensure the insight we gained from the focus groups was supported by quantitative data, we ensured the young people's survey which was conducted at the same time as these groups, included questions about counternarratives and messaging campaigns.

In the survey, we asked the following questions:

1. *Have you seen or heard of the 'My Tomorrow' campaign from the West Midlands VRP?*
2. *If you have seen 'My Tomorrow', where did you come across it?*
3. *If you have seen 'My Tomorrow', how did it make you feel?*
4. *What type of messages do you find most convincing when it comes to making safer choices?*
5. *Overall, how much do you agree with this statement: 'The messages and campaigns I've seen about violence make me more likely to make safer choices'?*

The results from the survey are used in this report to confirm the qualitative data gathered from the focus groups with young people, and the full results of the survey related to the topic of counternarratives, and messaging are shared in Appendix 1.

After the focus groups were delivered, the BVSC Research team undertook a thematic analysis of the discussions in each setting, and have brought these together to draw some conclusions on how young people feel counternarrative messaging can be most successful in the future.

3. Thematic Analysis – Focus Groups

Analysis of the four focus group transcripts reveals several overarching (superordinate) themes and underlying (subordinate) themes regarding how young people perceive and engage with messaging around violence, the construction of counternarratives, and the specific impact of the 'My Tomorrow' campaign.

3.1 Theme 1: The Landscape of Messaging: where and how young people encounter information

This theme explores where young people encounter messages and why traditional methods often fail to resonate.

Sub-theme: Digital Saturation and Algorithmic Influence

Social media, particularly TikTok, Instagram, and Snapchat, are the primary sources of both negative and preventative messaging. Participants also highlighted gaming platforms like Roblox and Discord as spaces where they are exposed to unregulated, graphic content that contributes to a “deregulated” digital environment.

"The government's introduced these ads on specifically TikTok... there's like a snake that goes around her [that] kind of represents the evil."

"They would send like... pictures of like things that you see on Twitter, like, without, like, any safety control... cats being put in blenders."

Sub-theme: The Failure of “Preachy” and Repetitive Content

School assemblies and posters are often dismissed as “cheesy,” “cringy,” or “generic”. Young people noted that messages are often repeated from primary school through college, causing them to lose meaning and feel like a “script” rather than a genuine conversation.

"Teachers are using the script like in assembly... you hear it from primary school to secondary to college... you become more familiar to it... you become more used to hearing things."

Sub-theme: “Drilling” and Community Warnings

In contrast to formal campaigns, “drilled” messages from family and community — such as warnings about gang grooming at chip shops or safety during civil unrest (e.g., EDL threats) — are viewed as more vital for immediate survival.

"Those were the ones that were, I guess, drilled so much into my head... Be careful of these people, if they say you owe them, you go to police. Don't do it to yourself, don't feel like you owe them."

3.2 Theme 2: Desensitization vs. Authentic Impact

This theme focuses on the psychological state of the audience and what truly “sticks” with them.

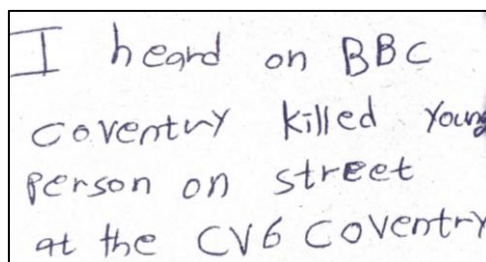


Image: note written by a young person in a focus group – see Appendix 2 for more on this activity.

Sub-theme: Normalisation and Desensitisation

Many young people admitted to being “desensitised” to violence due to its prevalence on the news and social media. This normalisation means that shocking imagery or “scare tactics” often fail because the audience is “not surprised or shocked” by reports of stabbings or shootings.

"Linking it to what we said before — do you think you are desensitised to shootings, stabbings and drug dealings? ... you wouldn't be surprised or shocked."

Sub-theme: The Power of Lived Experience

Messages carry significantly more weight when delivered by someone with personal experience, such as a victim’s mother or a former gang member. Relatability is key; participants preferred seeing “British society and culture” reflected (e.g., the show *Adolescence*) rather than “American-based” content that feels fake.

"Hearing a story from someone that has experienced knife crime... is always going to hit more than a 50-year-old random professional."

Sub-theme: Visual and Emotional Proof

Seeing the physical “proof” of violence — such as a teacher showing a shirt they were wearing when they were stabbed — was noted as being far more impactful than a PowerPoint presentation.

"Seeing it from a mum's point of view... it hit everyone — like people started praying and that... So, like is it worth sacrificing 20, 25 years of your life to kill someone?"

"One of my teachers... he showed the shirt he was wearing when he got stabbed and that was more impactful cuz it's like something you know, like, you see the proof of it."

3.3 Theme 3: Constructing Effective Counternarratives

Participants discussed how to challenge existing narratives of violence through strategic messaging.

Sub-theme: Balancing Fear (Consequences) and Hope (Solutions)

There is a tension between the need for “fear-based” messaging that highlights the consequences of crime (e.g., “dead or in jail”) and “hope-based” messaging that offers a positive future. Participants emphasised that messages must offer a “way out” or a “solution” rather than just stating that violence is bad.

"People react two different ways. The other react through fear or through hope... if you carry on with what you're doing, this is what could end up to you. But then also... there is hope in the city even if it doesn't feel like it."

Sub-theme: Challenging Area and Racial Stereotypes

Participants highlighted how media narratives often blame minorities or specific areas like Hillfields and Foleshill, creating a "low reputation". They noted that being constantly stereotyped by authorities can ironically push some young people towards crime as a response to frustration.

"They'll take the fact it happened, they'll report that, but then they'll add kind of their own narrative into it... blame it on kind of minorities."

Sub-theme: Peer-to-Peer Delivery

The most effective counternarrative is seen as one delivered by young people, for young people. This approach allows for more engaging methods, such as using Jenga with questions or music, which "sparks a conversation" rather than "speaking at" them.

"We came up with some like really good ideas on how we can make things educational but also like you know at least somewhat fun... we did games like having like Jenga where you pull out a block and then you also have a question on it."

3.4 Theme 4: Evaluating the 'My Tomorrow' Campaign

This theme specifically addresses the feedback on the campaign's film and its youth-led design.

Sub-theme: Authenticity through Co-production

The campaign was praised for involving young people in the scriptwriting and design process, ensuring the dialogue sounded "real". This "realness" helps young people feel "seen" and more likely to resonate with the content.

"He would have lines of a script, and he would say this doesn't sound right — how would a young person say it? And all of us had input on that."

Sub-theme: The "Lucozade Scene" as a Catalyst for Reflection

The film's scene depicting a "fake" drug deal that turned out to be Lucozade was a major talking point. It successfully forced participants to confront their own internal stereotypes and the "normalisation" of crime in their minds.

"Why are you thinking it was a drug deal when these man were just selling Lucozade... we've normalised it. That's why we thought that."

Sub-theme: Barriers to Engagement and Promotion

Despite the quality of the film, participants noted a lack of awareness and promotion outside of specific screenings. They also expressed frustration that feedback given to decision-makers (like councils) is often not "chased up," leading to a feeling that their voices are heard but not always acted upon.

"Does it actually offer a solution? Because... crime affects people who probably can't see a way out."

Sub-theme: The Need for Gender-Informed Content

Some participants suggested that future iterations of the campaign should include more diverse perspectives, such as a “female person’s point of view,” to ensure it doesn’t just feel targeted at young males.

"Make another movie... do the female person's point of view... so it's not just targeted as young males."

4. Survey

The survey findings from BVSC Research Young People’s survey devised as part of this project for the West Midlands Violence Reduction Partnership provide a quantitative foundation that strongly reinforces the qualitative themes identified in the focus group analysis. The survey confirms that young people feel negatively portrayed by existing media and are largely unaware of current campaigns, yet they have clear preferences for what makes messaging convincing.

1. Negative Portrayal and Media Narrative

The survey results validate focus group concerns regarding how young people are viewed by society.

- **Survey Data:** A significant **66.6% of respondents** reported that the messages they see about young people are either **negative (30.2%) or somewhat negative (36.4%)**. Only **7.8%** reported seeing predominantly positive portrayals.
- **Focus Group Alignment:** This aligns with focus group discussions where participants felt the media adds its "own narrative" and often blames minorities or specific faiths for violence, rather than reporting accurately. Participants in focus groups noted they are often seen as a "problem to be managed" rather than a resource.

2. Reach and Awareness of 'My Tomorrow'

Both data sources highlight a significant gap in the visibility of formal violence reduction efforts.

- **Survey Data:** Awareness of the 'My Tomorrow' campaign is extremely low; **93.4% of respondents had never heard of it**.
- **Focus Group Alignment:** Participants who were involved in the campaign's co-production noted that there was a lack of promotion and awareness outside of specific events like the film premiere at Millennium Point.

3. Lived Experience as the "Most Convincing" Format

There is a near-total consensus on what type of messaging resonates with this demographic.

- **Survey Data:** **"Real stories from young people with similar experiences"** was the most compelling format by a vast margin, selected by **78.9% of participants**. This was followed by **positive examples** of people choosing a different path (**50.9%**).
- **Focus Group Alignment:** This matches the "Power of Lived Experience" theme from the focus groups, where participants stated that a story from someone who has "been through it" will always "hit more than a 50-year-old random professional".

Visual "proof," like a teacher showing a shirt from a stabbing, was also cited as highly impactful.

4. Ambivalence Toward Current Messaging

The survey quantifies the "desensitization" and "generic" feel noted in the focus groups.

- **Survey Data:** The largest group of survey respondents (**48.7%**) "**neither agreed nor disagreed**" that current safety messages make them more likely to make safer choices.
- **Focus Group Alignment:** This "neutral middle ground" reflects the focus group sentiment that messages are often "generic," "preachy," or "repetitive" scripts that young people become too familiar with, causing them to lose their meaning.

5. Digital Platforms and Peer Engagement

The survey confirms which digital spaces are most active—and potentially most harmful.

- **Survey Data: TikTok and Snapchat** were jointly identified as the platforms where harmful behaviour occurs most often (**60.5% each**), followed by Instagram and gaming platforms like Roblox and Discord.
- **Focus Group Alignment:** Focus group members explicitly mentioned TikTok ads and unregulated content on Roblox/Discord (such as graphic videos of animal abuse) as primary sources of distress and desensitisation.

5. Recommendations

Based on the focus group discussions and the survey results, the following recommendations and next steps are proposed to ensure preventative messages effectively reach and resonate with both young people and the wider community. The recommendations are explored in more detail through the overarching themes below, but can be summarised neatly into the following suggestion which came directly from a young person in one of the focus groups:

"Content made by young people for young people"

5.1 Diversify Delivery Platforms and Methods

- **Utilise Influencer Partnerships:** Move beyond official council accounts and partner with content creators and influencers on TikTok and Instagram whom young people already recognise and watch.

"Partner with someone young people recognise... like a content creator on TikTok, yeah, to post this, because that way it's going to get more attention."

- **Target Unexpected Physical Locations:** Place messaging in everyday spaces where young people naturally gather, such as local chip shops, parks, fast-food outlets, and designer clothing stores.

"You could literally do the most random places — which, let's say, I don't know, the local chip shop. Just have a poster there or a park somewhere you don't expect it, so you'll see it and you'll probably think, what the hell is this."

- **Adopt Interactive Engagement:** Avoid “preachy” PowerPoints. Use interactive tools like Jenga with embedded discussion questions or music to spark genuine conversations rather than just “speaking at” an audience.

5.2 Refine Messaging Content and Tone

- **Prioritise Lived Experience:** Use real voices, such as victims’ family members or survivors of violence, as these personal stories have a significantly higher emotional impact and “realness” than professional speakers.
- **Balance “Fear” with “Hope”:** While highlighting harsh consequences like being “dead or in jail” can be effective, it must be balanced with hope-based messaging that offers a positive future and a “way out” for those who feel trapped.
- **Provide Tangible Solutions:** Preventative messages should not just state that violence is bad; they must offer concrete solutions or pathways to support for young people who cannot see an alternative.
- **Ensure Cultural and Gender Representation:** Messages should feature a diverse range of backgrounds (race, religion, and gender) to ensure relatability. Specifically, future content should include female perspectives to avoid the perception that violence prevention only concerns young males.

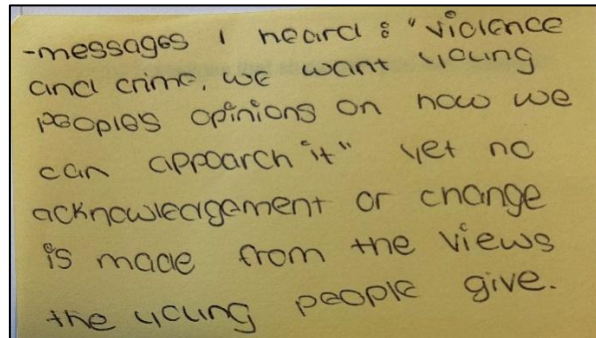


Image: a post-it note written by a young person in a focus group – see Appendix 2 for more on this activity.

5.3 Institutional and Systemic Next Steps

- **Embed Campaigns Consistently in Education:** Rather than one-off assemblies, schools should show films like My Tomorrow consistently across the curriculum (e.g., in PSHE/Life Skills classes) to ensure the message reaches every student.
- **Close the Feedback Loop:** When young people provide input to researchers or decision-makers, there must be a formal “catch-up” process to show how their feedback was used. A lack of follow-up leads to the belief that their voices are not truly being heard.
"They kind of missed out on catching up on things and kind of chasing things up... things that we said to the council they weren't really chased up, and they weren't really kind of fed back to us."
- **Initiate Earlier Intervention:** Messaging needs to reach younger children (ages 10–11) to counteract the influence of unregulated digital content and “toxic” cultures before they become more deeply entrenched.
- **Broaden Campaign Promotion:** Successful existing assets, such as the My Tomorrow film, require increased general awareness and promotion outside of specific launch events to maximise their community reach.

6. Conclusion

The data gathered from the four focus groups clearly highlights that children and young people in the West Midlands are surrounded by messages, and most notably warnings, about risks to their safety, the ‘murders’ reported to be happening in the streets they live on, and the dangers related to online harm, particularly the risk of “grooming”. Although some of these fear-based messages, predominantly delivered by family members, caregivers and school teachers have stuck with the young people, they also note that this type of messaging has also resulted in “desensitisation” – the repetitive or “drilled” messages are losing their impact, and young people want to see a more hopeful style of counternarrative, developed by young people with lived experience to really resonate with them and encourage preventative support.

While the ‘My Tomorrow’ campaign led by West Midlands VRP and Positive Youth Foundation is praised for its authentic co-production and “real” dialogue, it currently suffers from very low awareness, as discovered through the Young People’s Survey: 93.4% of survey respondents had never heard of the initiative.

Ultimately, the next steps should demonstrate a strategic shift and meaningful commitment from institutions and policymakers to support “content made by young people for young people”. By diversifying delivery through influencer or community leader partnerships and using unexpected or hyper-local community locations for the development of content and campaigns, the Violence Reduction Partnership can genuinely make a difference to the way young people perceive themselves, their neighbourhoods and their futures. It will be vital to balance the real-life dangers surrounding the lives of children and young people with more “hope-based” solutions in order for young people to feel engaged and motivated. To further increase impact, institutions must close the feedback loop, ensuring young people feel their voices are not just heard but are an integral part of shaping a safer future in the West Midlands.

Appendices

Appendix 1

Full survey results relating to the Counternarratives and Messaging research question

1.7 Young People Feel Negatively Portrayed: Current Campaigns Are Not Landing

Most participants reported that the messages they most often see about young people are negative or somewhat negative. Very few reported encountering predominantly positive portrayals of young people. This matters because it shapes how young people understand their own place in society: as a problem to be managed, rather than a resource to be invested in.

Young people consistently experience themselves as the subject of concern or suspicion — rarely as the subject of hope.

This backdrop is important when considering the reach and impact of violence reduction campaigns, including the West Midlands VRP's own 'My Tomorrow' campaign. Awareness of the campaign among respondents was extremely low, with the vast majority reporting they had never heard of it. This is a significant finding, not as a critique, but as a clear signal that current reach is limited and that new approaches to distribution and engagement are needed.

When asked about the kinds of messages they find most convincing, young people were unambiguous. Real stories from people with lived experience like their own were by far the most compelling format. Positive examples of people who chose a different path, and facts about the impact of violence, were also valued. Broadcast messages, social media posts from organisations, and celebrity-style endorsements were much less likely to resonate.

Importantly, just under half of respondents were ambivalent about whether the messages and campaigns they had seen made them more likely to make safer choices. Only a minority actively disagreed, but the size of the neutral middle ground is telling. It suggests that young people are not unreachable or hostile to this kind of communication, but that the current approach is not yet connecting in a way that feels personally relevant or motivating.

Perceptions of How Young People Are Portrayed

Participants were asked what kind of messages they most often see about young people in news stories, adult conversations, reports, and online. The majority reported encountering predominantly negative portrayals of young people. A combined 66.6% reported either outright negative messaging (30.2%) and others reported somewhat negative messaging (36.4%). Only 7.8% reported seeing predominantly positive messages portraying young people.

Table 22

Response	n = 129	Participants (%)
Somewhat Negative	47	36.4%
Negative	39	30.2%
Neutral	33	25.6%
Somewhat Positive	6	4.7%

Response	n = 129	Participants (%)
Positive	4	3.1%

Awareness of the 'My Tomorrow' Campaign

Participants were asked whether they had seen or heard of the 'My Tomorrow' campaign from the West Midlands VRP. Awareness was very low: 93.4% had not heard of the campaign, 3.3% had heard of it but not seen it, and only 3.3% reported having seen it. This suggests the campaign had not reached most of this cohort at the time of the survey.

Table 23

Response	n = 122	Participants (%)
No, I haven't heard of it	114	93.4%
I've heard of it but haven't seen it	4	3.3%
Yes, I've seen it	4	3.3%

Most Convincing Types of Messages

Whether they had seen the campaign or not, participants were asked what types of messages they find most convincing when it comes to making safer choices (select up to 3 options). Real stories from young people with similar experiences was the most compelling format by a considerable margin (78.9%), followed by positive examples of people who chose a different path (50.9%) and statistics or facts about the impact of violence (38.6%). In-person conversations with peers or mentors (37.7%) and messages from respected community figures (28.9%) were also valued.

Table 24.

Message Type	n = 114	Participants (%)
Real stories from young people with similar experiences	90	78.9%
Positive examples of people who chose a different path	58	50.9%
Statistics or facts about the impact of violence	44	38.6%
In-person conversations with peers or mentors	43	37.7%
Messages from people I respect in my community	33	28.9%
Short videos or creative content	31	27.2%
Messages shared by friends on social media	22	19.3%

Message Type	n = 114	Participants (%)
Other (please specify)	1	0.9%

Note: Participants could select up to 3 options; percentages may exceed 100%.

Agreement That Safety Messages Lead to Safer Choices

Participants were asked how much they agree that the messages and campaigns they have seen about violence make them more likely to make safer choices. The largest group neither agreed nor disagreed (48.7%), suggesting ambivalence about the impact of current messaging. A combined 39.1% agreed or strongly agreed, while 12.2% disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Table 25.

Response	N = 115	Participants (%)
Neither agree nor disagree	56	48.7%
Agree	33	28.7%
Strongly agree	12	10.4%
Disagree	10	8.7%
Strongly disagree	4	3.5%

Appendix 2

Focus Group activity: messages I see and hear a lot and ones that have stuck with me

At the start of all the focus groups, we asked the young people involved to think about any messages they had heard, seen or been made aware of through any means (social media, the news, peers, family, teachers etc.) and to document these on yellow post it notes. We then asked them to think about the messages they'd heard that actually *stuck*. They wrote these on purple post it notes. We used the discussion as a warm up to some of the deeper discussion topics, and we also felt the data gathered was really valuable.

Image 1: Messages about safety and social harm I see or hear a lot – a summary of the post it notes generated from all four focus groups for this topic:

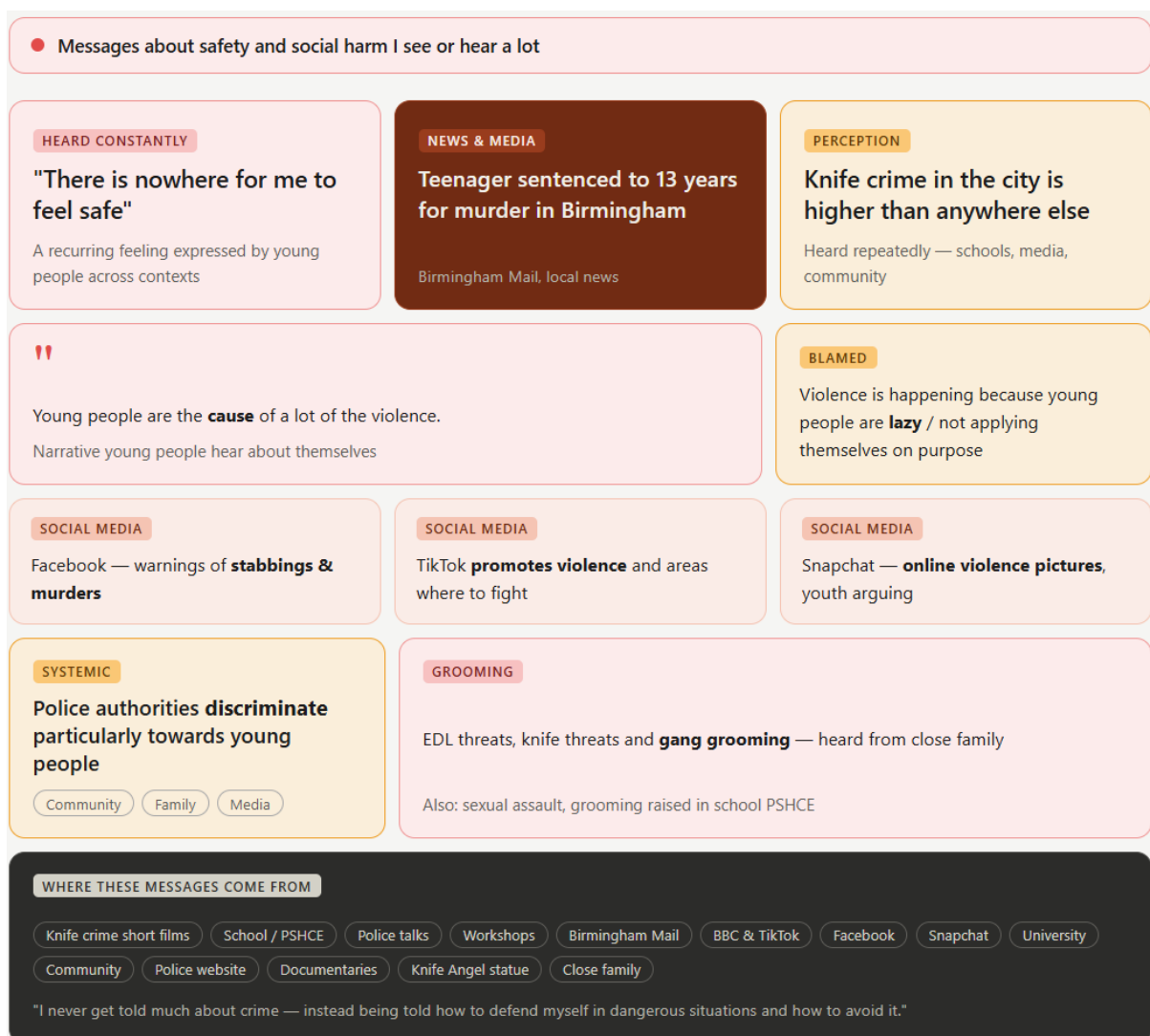


Image 2: Messages that have actually stuck with me as a young person – a summary of the post it notes generated from all four focus groups for this topic:

