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Final report: Digital Spaces
and the Transition from Online
to Offline Harm

Commissioned by the West
Midlands VRP, delivered by
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community researchers

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Digital Spaces and the Transition from Online to Offline Harm

for Children and Young People (16-25 years) based in the West Midlands

Introduction

This report presents findings from a qualitative research study exploring young people's experience of online harm and its escalation into in person violence. Drawing on 45 interview transcripts, the study captures how young people describe, in their own words, the ways digital platforms shape their relationships, conflicts and everyday lives.

For policymakers and commissioners, understanding these experiences is critical. Online harm is not confined to digital spaces but is closely intertwined with young people's offline environments, including education, social networks and community safety. The findings highlight both the mechanisms through which harm escalates and the gaps in current support systems, providing an evidence base to inform more effective responses across services, education, and digital governance.

Methodology

To capture experiences of communities across the West Midlands, a community research (CR) approach was employed. This involved working in collaboration with individuals who have direct experience of issues being explored, or strong connections to the communities involved, to support the design, delivery, and analysis of the research.

In total, 16 community researchers were recruited. Their familiarity with local contexts was a key strength of the approach, enabling them to build trust and rapport with participants and support engagement from individuals who may otherwise be less likely to take part in the research.

The project 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 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.

While the project aimed to represent the full breadth of the West Midlands Combined Authority area, geographic coverage was uneven in practice. Most 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. 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 responded to our community researchers when it came to organising an interview.

Despite these challenges, the methodology was still very community-engaged, with community researchers involved from the outset in shaping the research design. This included a collaborative topic guide development activity, where CRs worked together to identify key themes and co-produce the wording of the interview questions.

The topic guide explored four key areas. The first focused on online lives and digital spaces, looking at relationships with social media and its interaction with offline lives. The second focused on negative and harmful online experiences, including the types of negative experiences young people face online. The third then looked at how online harm leads to offline harm, looking at experiences of escalation of online harm into real life violence. The last section addressed responses to harm and what support would be beneficial.

A semi-structured interview approach was agreed as the most appropriate method, allowing for consistency across interviews, while also providing flexibility for participants to share their experiences in depth. In total 45 semi-structured interviews were conducted with young people (please refer to the demographics report for full details). Community researchers led the data collection process, drawing on their local knowledge and relationships to the topic to facilitate open and meaningful discussion.

Following data collection, community researchers reviewed transcripts and identified initial codes across their interviews. These were developed further during a collaborative analysis workshop with a BVSC researcher, where themes were refined across the full dataset. Themes were then cross checked by experienced researchers to ensure consistency and reduce potential bias.

Findings

This project examined the experiences of young people with online harm and its escalation into in-person violence. Drawing on analysis of 45 interview transcripts, the project explored how digital platforms including TikTok, Snapchat, and Instagram intersect with the physical lives of young people, and how conflicts that originated online transition into real-world consequences.

The central research question guiding this report was: How do young people experience online harm and escalation into in-person violence? The findings presented here are drawn exclusively from the interview data and are organised around six key themes emerging from participants' accounts.

Six overarching themes were identified across the interview transcripts, each capturing a distinct dimension of young people's experiences of online harm and its consequences.

1. The Nature and Spectrum of Online Harm

Participants reported encountering a wide range of harmful online experiences. A particularly prominent form was image-based abuse, including the creation of 'bait pages' designed to expose private chats or unflattering photos known as "muggies". The leaking of private or nude images was described as an extreme form of harm that spreads like wildfire and is frequently used as a tool for blackmail and humiliation. Alongside this, cyberbullying and the targeted spread of false rumours were widely reported, including trolling, mean comments, and the use of "indirects". These are subliminal posts designed to insult without naming someone directly. Many participants also spoke about the impact of social comparison, with constant exposure to curated 'perfect' lives and beauty standards leading to internalised insecurities, low self-esteem, and what some described as toxic relationships with food and body image.

1.1 Image based abuse and digital humiliation

Anonymous exposure, "muggies" and distorted imagery

Participants described how images are used in online spaces to target, expose and humiliate young people, often with serious consequences that extend beyond the digital environment. A key mechanism for this was the use of anonymous accounts, commonly referred to as "bait pages", "baitout pages" or "mug accounts", which are set up to publicly share private content.

"So, like in sixth form someone's private photo was shared around without their permission, this was on snap I think... maybe not everyone will have extreme situations but there are defo situations where people screenshot other people's snaps and post them on bait pages or spams".

"In year 11, there must have been something we call a baitout page. So, they'll be an anonymous Instagram page and a snapchat page and they were embarrassing people and posting things obviously something someone wouldn't want posted. When these videos were posted, they had stopped the kid from going to school for weeks".

These pages were often described as being linked to specific schools or local communities on platforms like Instagram and Snapchat and were viewed as being used to expose individuals by posting private messages, images, or in more extreme cases, personal information such as home addresses or details about family members.

"There was an incident where uh there was an Instagram page made of a guy in our university and they were uploading photos him, his address, and his parents, siblings and uh like basically his personal information. When he found out the people behind the account, he confronted them in real life, and it became a physical fight".

Alongside this, participants frequently referred to "muggies"- unflattering or sneaky photos taken without someone's knowledge or consent. These were described as often being captured in everyday settings, such as classrooms or social situations, and shared in group chats to encourage collective mockery.

“So online this guy posted mugs, mugs meaning like pictures... like sneaky pictures of someone else...”

“It happened all the time, I see it at uni in our student social areas, where people spread rumours that are false to ruin someone or make fun of someone’s embarrassing photos from seminars or lectures posted into group chats... I’ve been on the receiving end and in the beginning, it really affected me and my self-confidence”.

In some cases, participants noted that images were manipulated using editing tools or AI to exaggerate features and turn someone’s appearance into a joke.

“In my first year of university it happened a lot where like through Instagram and social media even Snapchat they would take girls photos and you know, change them and whatever”.

Participants also described more serious incidents where vulnerable moments were recorded and shared, such as someone crying or being in a school toilet, leading to immediate and ongoing bullying.

“I think someone recorded him crying... and posted on their story, and then it went around everywhere... I think he became depressed, he was depressed for ages like I think it affected him pretty badly”.

Leaking nude images

The leaking of private or nude images was consistently described as one of the most extreme forms of online harm due to how quickly and widely content can spread. Participants noted how once shared, images can circulate rapidly through group chats and social media, often being passed on by peers in a way that normalises or even encourages the behaviour.

“A big one is sharing and leaking nudes. That is a really harmful thing because a picture can spread like wildfire. Everyone can see it with a click of a button... my cousin’s friend sent nudes to a boy, and he leaked it on his story. Everyone saw and they would target her in school, bully her, and mock her. She would not come into school for weeks”.

These images were seen as sometimes being used as leverage, for example as a way to control someone in a relationship or to escalate conflict between individuals or groups.

“If you are in a friends with benefits situation and you share nude pictures and then you want to break up, that person can use those nudes against you as a trump card to expose you to everyone including your family”.

“One of my classmates got exposed. Her nudes were shared with everyone. Her family and friends found out. People she was close to started bullying her, calling her disgusting names. She was in a friends with benefits situation... I told the tutor

everything that was happening to her, then the tutor called the police... when the police investigated, they asked why he did it. He said he didn't want her to leave him and used that trick to keep her".

Participants also highlighted clear gendered differences in how the sharing of nude images is experienced and responded to among peers. They noted that girls are often subjected to sustained bullying and derogatory labels, while those responsible for sharing the images may face little to no social consequences.

"They'd say she was a slag and desperate. There was nothing towards the boy, they literally praised him for it".

"This girl got her nudes leaked and obviously like people were bullying her over it... she responded to it saying how at the end of the day that was a private thing between her and the guy so it's the guys fault for leaking it, but then it kinda spun back on her and for some reason everyone was there just still targeting her"

1.2 Online conflict and indirect aggression

Participants described how online conflict often unfolds through indirect, fast moving and highly public forms of communication, which can quickly escalate into harm. A common starting point here was described as the use of "*indirects*", subliminal posts or stories, typically shared on platforms like Snapchat and Instagram. These posts were described as being designed to insult, mock, or threaten a specific person without naming them directly.

"Indirect posts or indirect comments are a very young people thing to do and sometimes, most of the time, it makes a situation a lot worse".

"They would target her in class with indirects. I've seen girls bawling their eyes out and sitting in the toilets by themselves".

Alongside this, the spread of rumours was described as a key way of damaging someone's social status. These rumours were described as often being highly personal, relating to relationships, accusations of snitching, or aspects of someone's identity.

"Some people love to spread rumours and commenting mean things under TikTok comments. It's like trolling them which is not nice".

It was noted that once something was shared online, it can circulate quickly and widely, making it difficult for the individual to challenge or correct what was being said.

"If there's a rumour spread online or on social media, people in school might or might not know and it might reflect your social status".

"I've heard of cases where a false rumour about someone was circulated on social media, leading to embarrassment and distress for the individual involved. The rapid

pace of online sharing can make it difficult to control the narrative or correct misunderstandings and the person affected might feel powerless or overwhelmed”.

Group chats were identified as another key space where conflict intensifies. On platforms such as WhatsApp and Snapchat, participants described situations where large groups “gang up” on one individual, sending repeated negative messages. What might start as “petty beef” was described as quickly escalating.

“Like people on Snapchat or anything on social media, they will like add you in groups and then they will like tell their friends to like kind of bully you as well”.

“When I was in school, yeah there was a huge group chat that led to everyone getting into an argument and that led a kid in my school getting bullied for being a type of way”.

“So, you get automatically added into a group chat. And then, the messages that were sent were absolutely horrible, disgusting. Some may say racist...”

1.3 Social comparison, beauty standards and the false reality

Participants described how the curated nature of social media often creates a false reality that young people internalise, with significant impacts on self-esteem, body image and overall wellbeing. Across platforms such as Instagram and TikTok, young people noted how they were constantly exposed to what is presented as perfect bodies, lifestyles, and achievements. This was widely seen as creating unrealistic standards with many noting that people tend to share only the best parts of their lives, such as appearance, holidays, or success, which subsequently leads to others feeling that they are not good enough in comparison.

“For girls, and from what I’ve seen is comparison, you see all these bodies and what society will class as uh perfect and seeing that constantly will impact you a lot. Some of it might not even be real but it can still have like a detrimental impact on you”.

“It lowers self-esteem when young people see online like perfect lives and money and um things like portrayed in an unrealistic way”.

Participants highlighted how these standards are often not only unrealistic but, in many cases, unachievable. It was noted that images are frequently edited, filters or altered using AI based apps, shaping a version of appearance that does not reflect reality.

“Beauty standards... when people use AI to edit themselves like photoshop... it gives people a negative perception of how they should look”.

These pressures were seen to directly influence how young people view their own bodies and relationships with food. Participants highlighted how exposure to certain body types, particularly skinny ideals, can lead to immediate behavioural changes including restricting food intake or attempting to lose weight quickly. In some cases,

this was described as developing into a toxic relationship with food, where young people adopt extreme or unhealthy eating habits in an effort to match what they see online.

“People, especially children and those from 18 to their mid-20s, always believe the lies, especially regarding body image. That really affects their mental health. They suddenly decide to cut the healthy balance of food and no longer have a healthy relationship with food. They might start eating just one slice of bread, then one pea, then one cabbage. It becomes very toxic”.

Beyond appearance, participants also described how comparison extended to lifestyle and material wealth. It was recognised that often posts represent only a small snippet of someone’s life, and as a result showed people appearing to have a perfect lifestyle, even when in reality sometimes people were experiencing difficulties at home.

“A lot of people only post the best parts of their lives. Perfect photos, perfect body, fun trips, and it can make you feel like you are not good enough which can really affect someone’s confidence...”

“Young people say I wish I had that love, but you don’t know the reality behind that couple, they might be faking their love for clout or views or money”.

Influence culture was seen to play a key role here, with young people reporting feeling pressure to present a particular image or persona online that may not reflect their real circumstances.

“I think it’s very common to be performative and make up an entire online persona”.

Exposure to high end products, clothing and lifestyles were seen as creating a sense of financial inadequacy, particularly for those from lower income backgrounds. In some instances, this pressure was described as influencing behaviour, including attempts to obtain items seen online in ways that reflect the high level of intensity of this comparison.

“I think some young people might look at it and think like oh look I want to be like them, but they’re not. And then they might try to be like them, but they’re not.”

“There was once a girl in my school, and she wasn’t from like a high-income home, but she liked the makeup influencers and the outfits and then she wanted it, but she didn’t have the money, so she started stealing from shops”.

The impact of these dynamics was described as cumulative and long term. Participants spoke about a gradual erosion of confidence with social comparison contributing to low self-esteem, anxiety and constant self-evaluation. Over time, these experiences were seen to shape how young people view themselves and their value, with some suggesting that these feelings can persist and influence later life, impacting relationships and overall wellbeing.

“They stopped smiling, they stop being so giddy, they stop socialising as much, and they keep to themselves”.

2. The Interconnectedness of Online and Offline Worlds

A prominent theme across the interviews was that the boundary between digital and physical life is effectively non-existent for young people. Because most online interaction occurs within existing social circles consisting predominantly of peers from school or college, digital disputes carry immediate real-world relevance.

Participants also described the impossibility of switching off from online harm, with conflicts following them into their homes and continuing into the early hours of the morning. Unlike older generations who may view online interactions as separate from 'real' life, young people experience them as continuous.

2.1 The dissolution of digital and physical boundaries

Participants consistently described the idea of an “online world” versus “real life” as a false distinction. Instead, the two were seen as fully connected and constantly in sync with a very thin, or in many cases non-existent, boundary between them. It was perceived that what happens online is not separate or less important, but part of everyday life.

“The things that happen online is still real life and just because it’s on your phones and they can be turned off or whatever its still real. And it’s like... like it affects people so much it’s not fake and it’s all real”.

This was reflected in how social media and digital platforms are embedded within daily routines. Participants described these spaces as functioning like a digital “pin board” where key aspects of life, such as university work, social planning, and everyday communication are organised and carried out. As a result, online activity was viewed as not something that sits alongside offline life, but something that actively shapes and structures it.

“I’m a university student so both worlds definitely affect one another... Social media or the online world is like a pin board, it’s where we post about events for uni or talk on WhatsApp...”

Consequently, it was viewed that young people are the same person both online and offline, highlighting how digital actions carry the same weight as physical ones.

“I think a lot of people get de-attached from reality and think of online and offline as two different worlds... you actually come to realise that you’re the same person online and offline and like things will come back to you if you do something mean online or something disrespect, it can affect you in real life as well”

Alongside this, it was noted that the emotions experienced through digital interactions, such as stress, anxiety or sadness, were described as real and immediate, often carrying over into day-to-day experiences. In this sense online spaces were viewed as an extension of everyday life where social interactions, plans and routines are organised and played out.

“The boundary between online and offline life is very thin, especially for young people and teenagers. These kinds of experiences online whether positive or negative can have an impact on their emotional wellbeing, confidence, relationships and their physical safety as well”.

2.2 Social circle overlap and immediate relevance

Participants explained how the impact of digital interactions is shaped by the strong overlap between online and offline social networks. Rather than engaging primarily with strangers, young people emphasised that most of their online communications took place with people they already knew in real life, such as classmates, peers or others in their local area.

“For me they are completely connected... like all the people I interact with online are people I know in real life”.

“Most of the people I interact with online are from my local area, university or previous schools. I follow a few public pages, footballers, influencers, but most interactions are with people that I already know”.

Because of this, online activity was seen as carrying immediate real-world relevance. Disagreements or “beef” that began in digital spaces were not viewed as being contained there but instead were seen to have direct consequences within everyday environments. Likewise, instances that happened offline similarly continued to play out in online spaces.

“In school, people get into beef and they say things online, it escalates, and then in real life there’s confrontation and fights”.

Conflict was often described as moving in a continuous cycle between online and offline spaces. For example, a disagreement might begin in person, shift into group chats, where others become involved, and then return to physical settings with increased intensity.

“They started beefing and pushing each other, like in real life, in the PE lesson. Then it carried on social media, and it got worse, and then like next time they saw each other... they were scrapping, but most if dispersed through social media even though it started in real life”.

As a result, online experiences were seen to have tangible impacts on everyday life. Participants described how situations that began online can affect how individuals feel, behave, and engage in other areas of their lives, including education and social activities. For some this was seen as having the potential to lead to withdrawal, reduced confidence, or changes in how they present themselves, with impacts that extended beyond the immediate situation.

“If someone’s getting bullied online in a group chat, it can affect them mentally. In real life, it can make them feel unloved and like make them feel depressed if anything”.

2.3 Social media's inescapable nature

Participants viewed online harm as something that is difficult to escape, in contrast to more traditional forms of bullying that may be limited to specific times or places. Rather than ending when a young person leaves school or college, online conflict was seen to continue across the day and into the night, making it feel constant and ever present.

“You can’t leave it at the school gates. It’s in your pocket in your bedroom at 3:00am”

A key issue raised in this regard was how this removes any clear sense of personal space. Participants described how conflict can follow them into spaces that would otherwise feel private, such as the home or bedroom. In some cases, this related to staying active in group chats for extended periods, which was seen to impact rest and the ability to switch off.

“If I am chatting, I might be talking to friends from 1:00am until I finish talking to you at 6:30am... in the group chat we started at 1:30am, we didn’t sleep, we talked, laughed, made video calls, and then we streamed movies. When I realise I hadn’t slept it was clear it didn’t give me my personal space”

This was closely linked to a sense that it is not easy to simply log out. Participants perceived online presence as central to maintaining social connections and awareness, meaning that stepping away can feel like a risk in itself. As a result, young people described feeling consumed by ongoing situations, with difficulties concentrating on schoolwork or everyday tasks due to the constant nature of online engagement.

“You’re probably going to stop spending time to do your work and you’re going to be on your phone or whatever you’re using the social media on”.

2.4 Generational differences in perceptions of real life

Participants described a clear disconnect between how young people and older generations understand digital interactions. Many felt that adults, such as parents and teachers, tended to underestimate the seriousness of online harm, often dismissing it rather than recognising its wider impact.

“It’s so dismissive of young people. Their offline and online lives aren’t separate. Their friendships, reputation and identity all live across both. So, the harm is completely real. People also underestimate how permanent it feels.”

This difference in perception was linked to the role that technology plays in young people’s lives. Having grown up with social media and digital communication, participants viewed these spaces as central to their lives. In contrast older generations were seen as more likely to view online and offline worlds as separate, which can lead to a lack of recognition of how closely the two are connected.

“Because young people are so reliant on the online world in comparison to the older generation not being too reliant on it because they never grew up with it, whereas, I

think because we've had it from the get go, we rely on it a lot, and obviously that influences a lot of our decisions in the real world"

As a result, participants emphasised the need for greater validation of their experiences. They highlighted that because their social lives and sense of self exist across both online and offline spaces, harm experienced digitally should be taken just as seriously as harm that occurs face to face, with similar levels of understanding, empathy and response.

"Just extend the same empathy to online experiences you would give offline ones. It shouldn't be different just because it happened on a screen".

3. Drivers and Mechanics of Escalation

Several specific social dynamics were identified as drivers of escalation from minor online disagreements to serious conflicts. A central factor was the role of bystanders and peer groups who instigate conflict, share screenshots of arguments, and 'stir the pot' for entertainment. This transforms private dispute into a public and uncontrollable situations.

Compounding the instigation is the pressure young people feel to protect their reputation when conflicts play out in front of a mass online audience. Participants described an intense need to back themselves up and avoid appearing weak. Miscommunication also plays a significant role, as the absence of tone and non-verbal cues in digital messaging means that neutral comments are frequently misread as aggressive, sparking conflict where none was intended.

The escalation pathway, shown below, demonstrates how this plays out, in the experience of the young people interviewed:

THE ESCALATION PATHWAY



3.1 Bystanders and adding fuel to the fire

Participants highlighted the role of bystanders as a key factor in how situations escalate, particularly where peers become involved for their own entertainment. Rather than helping to de-escalate conflict, peers were often described as stirring the pot or adding fuel to the fire and subsequently encouraging situations to intensify.

This was particularly evident when peers egged people on, pushing individuals to respond or escalate rather than resolve the issue. Participants described how this

dynamic can shift situations from something relatively minor into something much larger as the presence of an audience increases pressure to react.

“The adding fuel to the fire thing, when other people encourage the bad behaviour and egg people on just to escalate situations”.

“Situations escalate with the involvement of other people, and I think situations can be resolved with the exact opposite”.

The sharing of screenshots was also identified as a major driver of escalation. Private conversations were seen to quickly become public when messages were screenshotted and shared on platforms such as Snapchat or within large group chats. Once circulated, these interactions tended to gain wider attention, making situations harder to control and increasing the sense of exposure for those involved.

“A situation can escalate depending on a few things. One big factor is how many people get involved. The more people join in, share messages or take sides, the bigger it can become... basically, attention, reaction and support all affect whether it stays small or becomes serious”.

“Like on snap you see people posting screenshots of arguments on their stories and cussing them out even more on their stories”.

Bystanders were also described as playing an active role through ganging up behaviours or publicly taking sides. This was seen as having the potential to amplify tensions and create an environment where individuals feel pressured to continue engaging in the conflict, even where they might otherwise choose to disengage.

“I was in year nine and these group of girls in a group chat ganged up on this other girl...”

3.2 Reputation management

Participants explained how online conflict is closely tied to reputation and social status, particularly. There was a strong sense that once something becomes visible to others, individuals feel pressure to respond in order to protect how they are perceived.

*“The involvement of other people. If you know your friends are spectating and your friends are around, or even people that you know, you’re going to be more inclined to do something back because you don’t want people to think you’re a p***y”.*

*“If loads of people see it then they will feel the need to respond and not make themselves look like a p***y”.*

A key concern was the fear of looking weak. Participants explained that ignoring comments or stepping back from a situation is often not seen as a neutral choice but as something that can damage reputation. As a result, young people may feel they have to back themselves and respond to maintain their standing among peers.

“Two girls were fighting online and because of peer pressure, one had to respond so she didn’t look weak. They ended up having a physical fight”.

“I feel like young people especially don’t want to feel disrespected. They don’t want their pride to feel hurt so they’re going to retaliate nine times out of ten”.

“I guess some people don’t want to seem weak in front of other people”.

This was seen as being largely driven by the public nature of online conflict. When interactions take place in front of a wide and often active audience, participants described a heightened sense of pressure around how they are perceived by others. In these contexts, disagreements are no longer between two individuals, but become something that is watched, commented on and judged by peers. This increases the threat to both ego and social status, making it more difficult to ignore or deescalate situations.

“Peer pressure. People around them, their friends, they’ll be like, oh, I wouldn’t let that slide. They they’ll be like, oh, I can’t let that slide. Then they’re not going to respect me”

Taken together, these dynamics were seen as contributing to ongoing back and forth exchanges, where messages or indirect posts escalate over time, drawing more and more people in and as a result prolonging conflict resolution.

“If you had Snapchat, you see people posting indirects on their story. They say something mean about someone and then that person responds on their story too and it starts an argument”.

“People tease or post things on their story and it’s like back and forward. If the people are in the situation or both in college then it will kick off basically”

3.3 Digital miscommunication and the absence of tone

Participants highlighted how the mechanics of digital communication itself can contribute to conflict, particularly due to the absence of tone, facial expressions and body language. Without these cues, messages were often described as open to interpretation with neutral or even joking comments frequently read as rude or aggressive. This was seen as often leading individuals to feel disrespected, even where no harm was intended.

“You don’t know what people are saying, how the tone of their voice is on the internet”.

“Tone of voice and body language isn’t there... a message might come across as insulting or aggressive when really it was maybe just a joke or just said the wrong way”.

It was perceived that as a result of this, misunderstandings can escalate quickly. Participants noted how messages perceived as rude were often met with immediate defensive or hostile responses, rather than attempts to clarify meaning. This could

then turn relatively minor interactions into larger conflicts within a short space of time.

“Because you’re texting online you can’t really see the person... so, you can’t see their facial expressions, or you’re not really making eye contact over anything. You can’t hear the tone of the voice... so any message can be interpreted in a good way or a bad way. So, it could be something completely normal, and then one person can see it as a bad thing... they might respond in an argumentative tone and then that could lead to an argument just because of a misunderstanding”.

This was further intensified by the way people communicate online. Participants noted that individuals may be more direct or confrontational behind a screen than they would be face to face, which can heighten tensions and increase the likelihood of escalation.

“I feel like online brings a different kind of bravery since behind the screen... they can snap back harder online, causing someone else to snap back harder, and just causing that kind of dispute back and forth”.

4. Transition into Physical Violence

The interview data reveals a clear and recurring pathway from online conflict to in-person violence. Group chat arguments frequently led to participants 'linking up' at specific locations or postcodes to resolve disputes physically, often involving groups rather than individuals. The severity of these outcomes should not be underestimated: multiple participants noted that initially minor online arguments had escalated into gang-related violence, knife crime, and stabbings.

Within educational settings, online harm also manifested as in-person shaming in school hallways, social exclusion, being singled out by peers, and incidents of being 'jumped' outside school hours.

4.1 Link ups and group escalation

Participants highlighted how group chats can function as a key space where conflict escalates and becomes more organised. A common pattern identified was the idea of a “link up” where disagreements that begin in smaller or semi-private chats build over time, eventually leading to one person sharing a postcode or specific location to continue the situation in person.

“In the group chat they gave him like one of the sides, gave the other side a post code to link up to sort it out in person, and they linked up and carried on from there”.

These situations were rarely described as involving just two individuals. Instead, participants highlighted how conflict often becomes collective with others joining in, taking sides, increasing the intensity and scale of the conflict.

“In a group chat where people just had a little issue with each other, and it started off just on text, but then next time when they saw each other, it ended up in a big fight with groups of people”.

“It’s better for two people to have a straightener than for it to be a 30 v 30 and a massive brawl”.

This was again described as being underpinned by the pressure to maintain reputation, with participants describing how when disagreements were visible to others, there was an increased pressure to respond in person.

“I think once news spreads it’s hard to back down from what you have said and you have to stick to what you were saying. So, if you were threatening people and their mates you gotta stay on that and show that you can back yourself”.

4.2 Extreme harm and knife crime

Participants raised significant concerns about how quickly situations escalate into serious offline harm. Several participants linked online disputes directly to organised or group based and gang related violence.

“Most kids these days they like mug each other off enit and then they might post like something bad about someone... then that led to them chilling in like big groups in person then like everyone splits off into different groups and then they start beefing each other and it starts like gang wars”.

For many participants, this escalation was perceived as being due to inspiration from media or anime, which presented gang violence as fun or as a mechanism to gain status.

“People show fights online, like the blue and red gangs... they take inspiration from the anime Tokyo Revengers. They think its fun to cosplay, but they decide to bring it into real life as a crime. They form gangs and engage in violence”.

This was seen as contributing to the encouragement of carrying weapons, in particular knives. Several participants recounted incidents where young people had begun a dispute digitally and then engaged in serious violence.

“I was with these people, and they started a group chat because they were in different gangs and that different areas and postcodes, they must have started beefing, one day one of them got into a fight enit then one of them got stabbed because they was all carrying knives enit”.

“A friend told me that his mate was involved in some gang violence group chats, where they were like arguing over where they lived and soon, it just got like... it came to the real life perspective, it didn’t end well because like people got stabbed and knives were involved and yeah”

Participants described how often, this process of entering into serious violence was not a long journey, but instead was something that happened quickly. In these accounts, escalation was often described as rapid and difficult to control, with serious consequences occurring in a short space of time.

“It’s just small things they beef over in a group chat and within seconds next thing you know someone’s died or stabbed and in hospital all because of what? A couple of posts where people send shots to each other?”

4.3 Manifestations within educational settings

Participants reported that online harm often manifests into physical harm within educational settings, shaping everyday experiences in schools, colleges and universities. Situations that began online were seen to carry directly into these environments, creating a wider atmosphere of tension, hostility and fear.

One of the most immediate impacts described was in person shaming following online exposure. Participants described how in instances where messages, images or “muggies” had been shared online had led to public humiliation in school spaces. This included peers shouting names, staring, or making comments in corridors and classrooms, reinforcing the visibility of the situation and making it difficult to move on from.

“When they saw those girls on campus... they were shamed and words were thrown at them... in like student hubs they would stare at them and make remarks”.

“People were screaming her name in the stairway and saying you did this, you did that”.

“Colleagues began to treat her differently, some made inappropriate comments or jokes and others stared or pointed at her in the corridors”.

Online conflict was also linked to social exclusion. Participants recalled how individuals often became singled out within their peer groups, with friendships shifting or breaking down as others distanced themselves or took sides. This was seen as often resulting in young people feeling isolated within environments they attended daily, with some describing feeling alone or unsupported as a result of situations that had originated online.

“The saddest thing I’ve seen is that people’s friends have snaked them and it’s just sad when they come back and they are alone.”

“She also experienced social exclusion with form friends distancing themselves either out of embarrassment or fear of being associated with the situation”.

A further concern highlighted by participants was how online information can be used to organise offline encounters around school spaces. Participants described fears of being targeted outside of school hours, with reference to individuals waiting at school gates or nearby locations following information shared online.

“People will literally come into school, or like someone would wait outside the school after school and you’d walk out of the school and get jumped or something”.

“It was online, all the arguing and that, and then the person ended up getting jumped by the two girls, because someone on social media told them where they were going”.

“People started telling other people that this kid had spoken about someone’s girlfriend and then other people got involved, and there was just loads of people waiting for him after school, and then he got jumped”.

In some instances, this had led to serious violence, involving weapons.

“They came to her in our school, they came outside at home time, and they brought a knife as well, and then they were like, like started biting her and they like scratched her with the knife on her arm”.

5. Impact on Mental Health and Behaviour

The consequences of online harm on young people's wellbeing were described as profound and lasting. Participants reported feelings of extreme anxiety, depression, and worthlessness, and in several accounts online bullying was identified as a direct contributing factor to self-harm and suicidal ideation. Behavioural isolation was a common response, with victims describing how they withdrew from social life, refused to attend school, and engaged in what participants called 'bed rotting', which is remaining in bed and disengaging from daily activities as a way of avoiding peers and the situations associated with their harm.

5.1 Emotional distress and worthlessness

Participants described significant impacts on mental health following experiences of online harm, with many reporting ongoing feelings of anxiety, stress and overthinking. As noted previously, these responses were often described as persistent rather than temporary, with young people feeling in a constant state of anxiety, unable to switch off or exit the impact of online harm.

“It can make people feel embarrassed, stressed or anxious. In some cases, it can affect their confidence or mood for a while... it can cause them to feel distracted or disconnected from their daily life”.

For some, these experiences were described as escalating into more severe emotional distress. Participants spoke about feelings of sadness, low mood and loss of confidence, with some describing feeling unloved, hated, or unworthy following incidents of online harm.

“I think you feel left out. I think you feel lonely. I think you feel hated. I think you feel unworthy... I genuinely think unworthy”.

Particularly strong impacts were described in relation to harm targeting appearance or identity. In these cases, participants highlighted how repeated exposure to negative comments or images could contribute to low self-esteem or more deep-seated insecurities.

“It most definitely can affect their feelings and even more so their mental health especially if there are already like underlying issues... it can make it worse”.

“It might make them feel like self-conscious about themselves and this can lead to negative mental health”.

Over time this was seen to shape how individuals viewed themselves, with some describing longer term effects on confidence and sense of self.

“Like people or girls having low self esteem and confidence they might not want to take part in social activities like PE or going out”.

5.2 Self-harm and suicidal ideation

In several accounts, participants identified online harm, particularly sustained bullying and the leaking of private images, as contributing factors to self-harm and suicidal ideation. These experiences were described as having a cumulative emotional impact, where ongoing exposure, public visibility and a lack of escape intensified feelings of distress.

“She found a group of people who seemed to want her around until basically it was all a cruel joke and online, they made accounts of her and edited photos of her and it really damaged her, even till this day I don’t see the same baby sister I saw before. She is a lot more reserved and has very bad trust issues all the time. She was having very suicidal thoughts and as her family we were so worried about her and honestly still are”.

“Sometimes they just self-harm. They start to think oh they’re not good enough, like they don’t belong so they just start to self-harm, or they might even begin overthinking and become suicidal and self-isolate from other people”.

Participants spoke about how these situations can lead to individuals internalising harm, with some describing young people turning to self-harm as a way of coping with overwhelming emotions. This included references to behaviours such as cutting, as well as intrusive thoughts about harming themselves. In some cases, participants shared how individuals experience persistent negative thoughts, including what were referred to as death threats directed at themselves.

“If you bully them, if you keep on bullying them to the point where it’s got to where they just want you to stop and they start blasting out crying, they’ll start wanting to give themselves death threats in their own mind. They’ll start thinking to themselves, ah I don’t want to do this, so they’ll start harming themselves with knives on their arms and cutting up themselves”.

“My brother kept everything to himself and I was worried. Then I saw cuts on his hand and realised he was self-harming”

Some participants referred to real world cases where sustained online harassment and public exposure were understood to have contributed to suicide. These accounts highlight the seriousness of online harm and the need to recognise its potential impact on mental health and wellbeing.

“I did see a girl that was like constantly bullied in school by people she thought were her friends and then she ended up killing herself... so that just shows how serious these things are”.

5.3 Withdrawal and bed rotting

Participants described behavioural isolation as a common response to online harm, with many young people withdrawing from social interactions as a way of coping.

This often involved stepping back from friendships, avoiding communication, or deactivating social media accounts in an attempt to escape ongoing negativity. While this was sometimes seen as a protective response, it was also described as leading to further isolation.

“They’ll like become quieter and just isolate themselves from everyone”.

“They might feel less confident in themselves and cautious or they might just deactivate their accounts”.

“They might become more withdrawn from everyone, like they might not feel like you know being online and speaking to their friends is a safe space anymore”.

This withdrawal was frequently described using the term “bed rotting”, where young people remain in bed for extended periods and disengage from everyday activities. Participants explained that during these periods, individuals may stop participating in routines, such as socialising, or engaging in hobbies that they previously enjoyed. In more severe cases, this disengagement extended to basic self-care, including eating, showering, or brushing their teeth.

“It affected them so much they wouldn’t eat, they wouldn’t even sometimes shower or even brush their teeth...”

“It might make them like not want to eat and just end up getting skinny, ending up bed rotting”

“They became very withdrawn and depressed and like not themselves and not speaking to their friends, like no one even their family, they would just stay in their bedrooms the whole time”

This behaviour was understood as a way of avoiding both online and offline interactions linked to the harm they had experienced. While participants noted this offered short term relief, it also was seen to deeper feelings of isolation and disconnection over time.

“With me, when that girl kept doing that, I was like so emotionally drained, I wouldn’t eat, I wouldn’t talk to anybody, I would literally just be in my room all the time. It also affected my ability to socialise as well because I was just scared...”

“It can make them feel like they’re outsiders and not accepted... they give up on things and can get depressed, and they may stop caring about the world”.

5.4 Educational disruption

Online harm was consistently reported to have far reaching consequences for young people’s engagement with education, affecting attendance, academic performance, and their overall experience of school environments. As noted previously, this was often related to harm not being confined to digital spaces, and instead because these harms frequently spill over into everyday life. As a result, these harms often shaped how safe, able, and willing young people feel to participate in education.

Attendance

One of the most immediate impacts is school or college avoidance. Participants noted how young people often responded to severe online incidents, particularly

image-based abuse or the spread of viral rumours, by withdrawing from education altogether.

“Some people get their pictures shared around without their permission and then people make comments about it... they don’t come into college and then catch up with the lessons or work at home which is just long”.

“You hear stuff like people getting some images like leaked. You know them personal ones, and then they might not come into college as it has affected them a lot.”

“When these videos were posted, they had stopped the kid from going to school for weeks, I think it’s a serious impact”.

This withdrawal was seen as being largely driven by a fear of public humiliation, with many young people perceived to anticipate that peers will be laughing or judging them based on online content. As a result, even entering the school environment was seen as a source of acute anxiety, leading some to remain at home for extended periods.

“I guess it can just make you feel embarrassed or upset, like wherever you go to school or uni, college, wherever you are, you’re going to feel like that when something negative spreads online, I feel like a lot of people are judging you”.

“The person felt really embarrassed and upset. They didn’t even want to come to school the next day because they thought everyone would be laughing at them, It made them feel lonely and insecure”.

In certain cases, this avoidance was compounded by concerns about physical safety. Incidents involving group chat disputes or ongoing “beef” were seen to create a perception that attending school or travelling home would be unsafe, with fears of being confronted or jumped.

“After the fight the girl seemed traumatised... she would be scared of going home in case she would see the same people, she would hide behind people and run home because she was scared of it happening again”.

Where absence becomes prolonged it was noted that this can escalate into formal consequences, including instances where parents faced legal action due to persistent non-attendance linked to bullying.

“When I didn’t want to come in in the mornings, they sent my mom to court because I got bullied”.

Engaging with learning.

Alongside disrupted attendance, online harm was viewed to significantly affect young people’s ability to engage with learning. Participants described how the psychological impact of online abuse often consumes a young person’s cognitive capacity, leaving little room for concentration or academic focus. Many young people

were described as becoming “distracted” or “disconnected” in class, “constantly thinking” about online interactions of overanalysing negative comments.

“I mean consumed... you’re probably going to stop spending time to do your work and you’re going to be on your phone or whatever you’re using the social media on”.

“And anything that is happening online with them will eventually create a mess in their own life. They won’t be able to grow in their own life, won’t be able to achieve what they wanted because they are focusing on an online problem a lot.”

This persistent mental preoccupation was seen as making it difficult to engage with lessons or complete homework. In more severe cases, the emotional toll was seen as leading to a complete loss of motivation. As a result, some students consistently fell behind academically, unable to keep up with the lessons while managing their own mental health.

“It has a huge effect on someone’s emotional state, and also affecting their ability to keep up with their work...”

Extreme institutional outcomes

For some, the impact of online harm was seen to become so pervasive that it resulted in permanent separation from their educational setting. Participants recalled cases where moving schools was the only viable way to escape ongoing harassment or a damaging digital footprint.

“I’ve seen someone literally lose all their smile or even move schools because of it”.

In a more extreme situation, there was an account of a young person feeling compelled to relocate entirely to avoid community wide shaming.

“She couldn’t like do anything, couldn’t continue her studies, due to which she needed to move to some other country”.

At the same time there were also examples of institutional responses targeting those responsible for harm with perpetrators being excluded, suspended or permanently removed for sharing harmful content, issuing threats, or participating in “baitout pages”. In some instances, this resulted in transfers to alternative or behavioural education settings.

“I think they got kicked out, I don’t know what the specific term is, excluded, suspected, one of those, but they were told they can’t come back and were sent to one of those behavioural schools to manage stuff”.

“I don’t think there was an actual physical fight but because the threats were so severe this person was removed from school and put into like one of those special, I don’t know if it’s a special school or if it’s a school that manages behaviour”.

5.5 Lasting behavioural shifts

Beyond immediate emotional distress and educational disruption, participants highlighted how online harm often led to deeper, more enduring changes in young people's behaviour, identity, and ways of relating to others. These impacts were described not as short-term reactions, but as gradual and sometimes lasting transformations that reshape how young people see themselves and engage with the world.

"The quiet everyday mental health toll. Honestly the anxious phone checking, dreading school, withdrawing from things you loved, that slow erosion of confidence that doesn't always look like a crisis from the outside, but it's really significant".

Participants frequently referred to a noticeable shift in personality following experiences of online harm. Young people who had previously been described as confident, expressive, or outspoken, were said to become markedly more quiet and reserved. This was often characterised with a loss of vitality. In some accounts, this change was described as a form of emotional withdrawal, where the young person shuts down and disengages from their usual ways of interacting.

"There was this guy in a year below us and he was playing with my mates in a game, and they were just like bullying him and stuff, and then, like, in school, like his... in school his emotions, they basically were like grey and dull and a bit weird".

Alongside these changes in demeanour, many young people were described as developing a heightened sense of self-awareness and caution in their everyday lives. Participants noted that, following online incidents, individuals could become increasingly conscious of how they present themselves, both online and offline. This was seen as often manifesting as a form of social guardedness, where young people carefully monitored what they said and did in anticipation that it could be used against them.

"They will be hyper aware of what they post or what they do in person in case people will say something or do something to them to be hurtful".

"If you see bad things, it might like scare you a bit, and you might become more rigid and a bit more like closed off".

This heightened alertness was seen to extend into public and social settings, with some young people feeling persistently uneasy or on edge when interacting with others.

"If the situation was really bad I wouldn't know how someone would get over it like, I uh just feel like it would be a haunting experience that would follow them in every path they take".

Participants emphasised that these behavioural changes can extend well beyond the initial incident, shaping longer-term patterns of trust and relationships. Experiences

of betrayal or public humiliation online were described as leading to ongoing difficulties in trusting others, with some young people becoming more guarded or hesitant in forming new relationships. These insecurities were often seen as difficult to overcome, influencing how individuals navigate social interactions into later life.

“You can isolate yourself. You’ll be like, oh I don’t trust people anymore, you have trust issues. You have commitment issues. You don’t think people take you seriously”.

6. Support Systems and Barriers to Help-Seeking

While most participants indicated they would turn first to friends or family when experiencing harm, significant barriers to accessing adult support were identified. Young people expressed concern that disclosing harm to parents would result in their phone being confiscated, removing their primary means of social connection.

School-based support was viewed with similar distrust, with participants describing teachers as frequently condescending, unhelpful, or liable to breach confidentiality, which deterred young people from seeking help through formal channels.

In terms of prevention, participants pointed to the need for early intervention, better staff training to recognise behavioural changes, and greater platform accountability through measures such as ID verification and stricter content moderation.

6.1 Preference for informal support

Participants consistently highlighted a strong preference among young people for seeking support through informal networks when experiencing online harm. Friends, siblings, and cousins were typically described as the first point of contact, forming an immediate and accessible source of support. These relationships were valued not only for their emotional closeness, but also for their shared understanding of digital environments, which was seen as essential when navigating complex online interactions.

“Honestly, for a lot of young people, the first part is to call a friend, someone their own age who gets it, who they can show the messages and just have someone say that’s not okay”

Emotional support within these networks was seen as highly significant, with participants noting that simply knowing others understand their experience can reduce feelings of isolation and reinforce a sense of being cared for. Even small acts, such as a private message to check in, were described as having a meaningful impact in counteracting the effects of public online harm.

“Even just one person privately checking in on someone being targeted can completely change how isolated they feel”.

In addition to emotional support, peers were described as playing an active role in responding to online harm in practical ways. Participants referred to instances where

friendship groups worked collectively to identify anonymous perpetrators behind “bait pages” or similar accounts, effectively acting as informal investigators.

“My group of friends are just like... they just want to find out who the culprit is, and that’s on determined on being detectives and everything and finding out who it is”

Peers were also often the first to notice signs that someone may be experiencing harm, such as sudden withdrawal from online platforms or changes in behaviour. In some cases, groups coordinated collective responses, including reporting harmful accounts in an effort to prompt action from social media platforms.

“Like, you know how you get all your friends to report a certain account so it gets banned?”

6.2 Parental barriers and fear of phone policing

Participants identified parental responses as a key barrier to young people disclosing experiences of online harm. A dominant concern was the fear that parents would respond punitively, particularly by confiscating phones or restricting access to digital devices. Given that these devices were viewed as central to young people’s social lives, this response was widely perceived not as protective, but as a form of punishment for being a victim.

“Parents are the obvious answer, but it’s genuinely complicated. Some young people have brilliant relationships with their parents, and they’re the first people they go to. But there’s a lot of worry that their parents will overreact, take their phone, blame them, or just not really understand what’s happening. So even in loving families there can be this hesitation”

This dynamic was often framed as a form of “phone policing”, where parental intervention is experienced as controlling rather than supportive. Participants suggested that such responses can undermine trust and discourage future help seeking, as young people may feel misunderstood or unfairly blamed.

“People need to understand what the individual is going through. If you take their phone away, they might think you are acting like the police. People need to understand a young person’s concerns and their words.”

To address this, participants emphasised the importance of parental approachability. Effective support was described as requiring parents to listen calmly, avoid immediate judgement, and resist reacting with blame or restriction. Creating a space where young people feel heard and supported, rather than monitored or punished, was seen as essential to encouraging open communication about online harm.

“Parents just need to be approachable. If young people weren’t scared of losing their phones or being blamed, they would have come forward so much earlier”.

6.3 Distrust of school-based support

Participants expressed a notable lack of trust in school-based support systems, often viewing formal responses as ineffective and lacking empathy. While schools are positioned as key safeguarding environments, many young people perceived them as ill equipped to respond meaningfully to online harm.

“Sometimes you feel that the teachers don’t listen to you as much so that’s not very helpful man”.

“Teachers care not as much as they should. Care too much about their own rules”.

A common concern related to how school staff engage with young people experiencing harm. Participants described some responses as condescending, with teachers perceived to “know better” despite lacking a clear understanding of the specific platforms, dynamics or context involved. This disconnect was perceived as leaving young people feeling misunderstood and reluctant to seek help.

“Adults need to do better at listening. It’s a common occurrence where they actually think they know better even if they’re not part of the actual incident which can be very condescending”.

There was also widespread frustration with what was seen as dismissive or overly simplistic advice. Being told to just ignore it was frequently cited as unhelpful, particularly given the persistent and public nature of online harm. Participants emphasised that such responses failed to address the ongoing impact of harmful content or interactions.

“I think the unhelpful support is to just say oh ignore it. Ignore them. Because you can’t really ignore a bully, they’re gonna keep bullying”.

In some cases, attempts to normalise the experience, such as suggesting that all young people go through this, were described as minimising and invalidating, especially for those experiencing significant distress.

“My sister was told all young people go through this at your age, you’ll be ok, but to her that was the worst thing you could say and she came home crying”.

Concerns about confidentiality further contributed to this distrust. Many participants feared that reporting an issue within school could lead to a loss of control over the situation, with private matters becoming more widely known.

“I’d say schools, they need to have people that are more open to be able to speak to so not people that would just go off and tell your parents, it needs to have some sort of trust and connection that you can speak to someone without it being shared to outside sources”

This risk was perceived as being closely tied to social consequences including being labelled negatively by peers, which could result in further exclusion or escalation of harm.

“So if you go to a teach for support, people might look at you as a child or as someone that cannot defend themselves”

6.4 Prevention and early intervention

Participants emphasised that existing approaches to preventing online harm are often insufficient, particularly where they rely on one-off interventions such as assemblies or awareness sessions. These were widely described as easy to ignore or disengage from, with limited lasting impact on behaviour or understanding. Instead participants called for a more sustained and embedded approach that reflects the realities of young people’s digital lives.

“If its in secondary school, school assemblies don’t help because there’s a bunch of assemblies on bullying but nobody cares”.

A key area identified for improvement was the need for enhanced training for school staff. Participants highlighted the importance of equipping educators with the skills to recognise early warning signs of online harm, particularly where these may present as subtle changes in behaviour. Indicators such as a student appearing more withdrawn, zoned out, or experiencing a noticeable loss of confidence were seen as critical signals that may otherwise go unnoticed without appropriate awareness and training.

“I guess teachers can get trained on how to pick up on behaviours from children, or lecturers can be trained on how to pick up certain things.”

“Like how can we prevent something from escalating too much? I think if there are people who are trained in monitoring changes in behaviour it can really help I think”.

Beyond schools, participants also raised the role of social media platforms in preventing harm. There was a strong call for greater accountability, particularly in relation to anonymity and the creation of harmful accounts. Suggestions included stricter verification processes to reduce the prevalence of anonymous or duplicate accounts often associated with targeted abuse. Participants felt that limiting the ability to operate multiple or untraceable profiles could act as a deterrent to harmful behaviour.

“I’d say for online platforms, they should be more strict, and they should also require a lot more data. Like to open a social media account I’d say you have to put your ID in there, so you only have one so that you can’t be reckless online and be throwing about comments put under a fake name or a fake account that doesn’t include your name... and you only get one if you get banned, then you don’t get another one... I think that would make people much less keen to be negative on the internet”.

In addition, participants emphasised the need for more responsive and effective moderation systems. There was a clear expectation that platforms should act more quickly and more consistently when harmful content is reported, rather than allowing it to remain visible and continue causing harm. Some participants suggested that

stronger regulatory frameworks may be necessary to ensure platforms take greater responsibility for user safety.

“I think social media platforms, I think they should have, like, a sensor or something, where if something is being said multiple times, or someone’s getting bullied online, they should just ban their account”

“But what would be most effective overall, I genuinely think it’s platforms being held legally accountable because right now there’s not enough consequence for them when things go wrong, the moment that changes, everything else follows, the design improves, the reporting gets faster, the defaults get safer”.

Discussion

The findings presented in this report paint a picture of a generation for whom the digital and physical worlds are inseparable. The interview data makes clear that online harm is not experienced as a distinct or contained phenomenon; rather, it permeates young people's daily lives, following them into their homes, their schools, and their social relationships.

A particularly significant finding is the speed and scale with which online conflicts can escalate. The role of bystanders (i.e. peers who share screenshots, amplify arguments, or actively encourage confrontation) emerges as a critical driver of escalation. These dynamic transforms what might otherwise be a private disagreement into a public, reputation-threatening event, creating pressure on young people to respond in ways that can lead to serious physical violence.

The interconnectedness of online and offline social circles is central to understanding why digital harm translates so readily into in-person consequences. Because most young people interact online with people they already know, any conflict in digital spaces is simultaneously a conflict within their existing social world. The absence of a meaningful boundary between these spaces is a defining feature of young people's lived experience that adults may not fully appreciate.

The mental health implications identified across the data are considerable. From anxiety and depression to social withdrawal and, in extreme cases, self-harm and suicidal ideation, the toll of sustained online harm is significant. The behavioural responses described by participants (e.g., school refusal, isolation, disengagement) further compound the impact, creating cycles that are difficult to interrupt without timely, appropriate support.

Barriers to help-seeking represent a critical gap in the current response to online harm. The data suggests that young people are not simply reluctant to seek help; they have substantive, experience-based reasons to distrust the adults and institutions theoretically positioned to support them. Addressing this requires more than awareness campaigns; it demands a genuine shift in how schools, families, and platforms engage with young people's online experiences.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and discussions within the report, the following recommendations are proposed to address the transition from online to offline harm among young people:

1. Bridge the Generational Understanding Gap

Validate Digital Experiences

Policymakers, educators, and parents must stop viewing "online" and "real" life as separate entities. Harm experienced digitally should be treated with the same level of empathy and seriousness as face-to-face harm.

Acknowledge Social Realities

Adults need to recognize that for young people, digital platforms are central to identity, reputation, and social survival; therefore, dismissive advice like "just ignore it" is ineffective and invalidates their lived experience.

2. Reform Educational Support and Safeguarding

Enhance Staff Training

Move beyond generic anti-bullying assemblies, which are often ignored. Instead, train educators to recognize subtle behavioural changes—such as withdrawal, "bed rotting," or a sudden loss of confidence—as early warning signs of online harm.

Prioritize Confidentiality and Trust

Schools must create safe, non-judgmental spaces where young people can report issues without fear of being labelled a "snitch" or having their private information shared with outside sources without consent.

Address Physical Safety Around Schools

Because online disputes often lead to "link ups" or being "jumped" near school gates, educational institutions should work on safety plans that extend beyond the school gates and school hours.

3. Foster Supportive Parental Engagement

End "Phone Policing"

Parents should avoid punitive responses, such as confiscating phones, when a young person discloses harm. Because digital devices are primary means of social connection, taking them away is perceived as punishing the victim and discourages future help-seeking.

Encourage Approachability

Parents should be encouraged to listen calmly and resist the urge to react with immediate judgment or blame, focusing instead on maintaining open lines of communication.

4. Demand Platform Accountability and Regulation

Strengthen Verification and Moderation

There is a strong call for social media platforms to implement stricter ID verification to reduce the prevalence of anonymous "bait pages" and duplicate accounts used for targeted abuse.

Ensure Legal Consequences

Platforms should be held legally accountable for harm occurring on their sites. This shift is seen as the necessary driver for improving safety by design, speeding up reporting processes, and making safety the default setting.

5. Improve Mental Health Interventions

Target the Impact of Social Comparison

Support services should address the "false reality" of curated online lives, which contributes to deep-seated insecurities, body image issues, and toxic relationships with food.

Early Intervention for High-Risk Harm

Specialized support is needed for victims of extreme harm, such as the leaking of private images, which is a primary driver of self-harm, suicidal ideation, and educational withdrawal.

6. Methodological Recommendations for Future Research

Extend Project Timelines

For future community research commissioned by the Violence Reduction Partnership (VRP), the timeline should be significantly longer. This would allow for proper recruitment and training of inexperienced young researchers while maintaining rigorous ethics and pastoral support.

Ensure Geographic Diversity

Future studies should intentionally diversify recruitment networks to ensure findings represent the full breadth of the West Midlands, rather than being predominantly Birmingham-based.

Conclusion

Online harm emerged as a serious and deeply embedded part of young people's everyday lives, with clear links between what happens online and what happens in person. The findings show that digital harm can move quickly into offline consequences, including conflict, violence, educational disruption, and significant impacts on mental health and wellbeing.

Participant's accounts also highlight that young people often face barriers to seeking formal support, with many placing greater trust in friends than in schools or other adults. Overall, the findings point to the need for earlier intervention, better informed support, and stronger accountability from digital platforms to prevent harm from escalating and to ensure young people feel safe, heard and supported.