



**Resonant
Collaboration**

Community Research

Children, young people,
and social harm: what
helps? Findings from a
rapid interpretive literature
review

Commissioned by the
West Midlands VRP,
delivered by Colin Michel
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BVSC Research

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Children, young people, and social harm: what helps?

Findings from a rapid interpretive literature review

Prepared for BVSC by Colin Michel and Ariana Markowitz

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Executive summary

This report shows that existing definitions of 'youth violence' tend to frame young people as the source of the problem, obscuring the structural, relational, and cumulative dimensions of the violence they experience. We conducted a rapid interpretive literature review on what young people feel helps and harms them. We can only answer those questions through young people's own accounts, so we selected 30 qualitative studies from across the UK that centre young people's voices and experiences. We organise our findings across five interconnected layers: young people's experiences (micro), their relationships with services (meso), the physical and digital spaces they inhabit (exo), the policies and systems that shape their lives (macro), and the accumulation of harm and help over time (chrono).

Findings

Young people navigate constant threats and uncertainty. They develop attuned survival strategies—hypervigilance, restricting movement, carrying weapons for protection—that are rational responses to the conditions they live in. Professionals frequently misrecognise these strategies as disengagement or aggression.

The spaces where young people could gather have been closed. Between 2010 and 2023, 1,243 publicly run youth centres closed. Beyond youth centres, young people describe feeling displaced in their own communities, with nowhere safe to go. They turn to substances, not because of moral failure, but because 'there's nothing to help distract teenagers or help us escape the pressures.'

Professional systems often reproduce harm. Young people encounter services characterised by inconsistency, broken promises, and lack of trust. They experience police as a source of harm rather than protection. The linking capital that should connect them to safety and opportunity is redirected toward risk management and surveillance.

Harm accumulates over time. The closure of youth centres, the loss of trusted workers, the dispersal of peer networks, and the accumulation of failed institutional encounters all pile up in young people's lives. Young people describe exhaustion, shame, and contracting hope.

What helps is relational, place-based, and sustained. Young people identify:

- Trusted adults who stay around and bring consistency
- Youth spaces where they can be together safely
- Peer connection with others who share their experience
- Communities that recognise them as people who matter

Where young people can see themselves moving toward a liveable future, they invest in connection. Where that forward orientation is repeatedly blocked, hope contracts, and with it the social capital through which healing becomes possible.

Recommendations

For the West Midlands Violence Reduction Partnership

- Shift commissioning toward sustained infrastructure: youth spaces, peer networks, trusted adult relationships, and community belonging
- Invest in long-term relational provision, not short-term targeted interventions
- Advocate for investment in recovering public space, targeting areas where young people identify harm as more readily available than opportunities
- Make representations to the Home Office about the racialised dimensions of enforcement

For BVSC

- Make the case that voluntary sector organisations are primary infrastructure through which young people access connection and support
- Advocate for longer funding cycles to promote organisational stability and prevent competition within the sector
- Support member organisations to articulate their work in terms of awareness, agency, hope, and mattering
- Use this evidence in national advocacy on dispersal policy, the Prevent duty, and support for young asylum seekers and care leavers

For the West Midlands youth sector

- Trust the evidence on relational practice: the significance of enduring support, the value of peer connection, and the protective function of youth spaces
- Recognise survival strategies as situated knowledge rather than defiance
- Create structured opportunities for peer connection and mutual aid
- Attend to the digital dimension of young people's social lives
- Hold the temporal dimension of harm and help in mind

Introduction: there goes the neighbourhood

This report presents our findings from a rapid interpretive review of literature about children and young people's experiences of social harm and safety. Existing definitions of 'youth violence' tend to frame young people as the source of the violence, obscuring the structural, relational, and cumulative dimensions of the harm they experience (*The role of systems of support in serious youth violence: evidence and gaps*, 2023; *Youth violence fact sheet*, 2024). But when young people face violence or are affected by violence, that violence does not operate only at the interpersonal level. Suggesting that it does individualises the harm whilst criminalising the young person. Privileging visible forms of interpersonal violence over structural causes of violence, moreover, drives an excess of enforcement-led responses and provides a justification to reduce relational, welfare, youth work, and community-led support (Allen, 2021; Billingham and Irwin-Rogers, 2022; Bond-Taylor and Ellis, 2025).

Indeed, youth workers and scholars point to years of cuts to youth services, the loss of community spaces, and the absence of affordable, informal places where young people can be together (YMCA, 2022; Keating *et al.*, 2024; de St Croix and Doherty, 2025; Khazbak, 2025). The gaps that we see where we live in London—of young people wanting to be together and adults perceiving them as a threat when they gather, of language that criminalises young people and language that contextualises social harm—extend across the evidence we examine here. Children and young people's experiences can guide us toward understanding what harm and help look like in their lives and what we can do alongside them to address the issues they face. Lived experiences tend to shift, invert, and bleed into each other, which reflects the complexity of real life. As Finlay and colleagues remind us, any discussion of harm involves thinking about its opposite (2026, p. 3): if children and young people express that they do not want to feel vulnerable or hopeless, what might that tell us about what they do want to feel?

We begin with an explanation of how existing definitions of 'youth violence' or 'serious youth violence' frame young people as the source of the problem and explain why we talk about 'social harm', which aims to foreground young people's lived experience, instead. Then, we walk through our methodology and justify our decision to focus on accounts by young people themselves. After situating our analysis in the space between materialism and affective theory, we proceed through five ecosystemic layers to explore how harm in children and young people's lives is produced, mediated, and sustained across environments and over time. Running through the report is the analytical thread of social capital, which we understand as a form of relational power. The uneven distribution of social capital drives the harm

and help that children and young people experience. We complete the analysis with a summary of the conditions that young people affirm are helpful and conclude with tailored recommendations for the West Midlands Violence Reduction Partnership, BVSC, and the West Midlands youth sector.

Speaking the same language: from ‘youth violence’ to ‘social harm’

A shift in focus requires a shift in language. In Skarlatidou and colleagues' work on how perceptions of knife crime differ between young people and police officers in London, for example, they find that, 'Regarding individual and contextual risk factors, both young people and experts identify the same concepts although they use different vocabulary to describe them' (2023, p. 954). Specifically, 'young people emphasize the negative effects of knife crime often in emotional tones (e.g., *“shattered families, blood, pain, tragic”*; *“bad experiences, no trust”*). In contrast, the concepts experts use mostly have a neutral affect (e.g., *“age,” “male,” “deprivation”*)' (2023, pp. 953–954; italics in original).

The World Health Organization (2024) defines ‘youth violence’ as:

violence that occurs among individuals aged 10–29 who are unrelated and who may or may not know each other. It generally takes place outside of the home. It includes a range of acts from bullying, both offline and online, and physical fighting, to more severe sexual and physical assault, gang-related violence or homicide. Youth violence results in deaths, injuries, disability, and long-term health consequences including mental health problems and increased health-risk behaviours, which can lead to chronic diseases. It is further associated with higher rates of school-dropouts, negative impacts on cognitive development and opportunities to contribute to their communities.

The UK government tends to use the term ‘serious youth violence’. There is no statutory definition, but a government research report by the Open Innovation Team defines it as ‘interpersonal harm through homicide, serious violent assault and/or robbery, where the victim(s) and perpetrator(s) are young people’. It adds that ‘children’ are aged 5–18 whereas ‘young people’ are aged 18–25 (2023, p. 21).

We avoid using both ‘youth violence’ and ‘serious youth violence’ because of their narrowing, skewing, and hyperbolic effects. Both terms imply that young people are the cause of most violence in society, that violence is associated with all young

people, and that young people are a distinctly violent population and therefore the primary source of violence (Billingham and Irwin-Rogers, 2022). These false impressions shift attention away from the conditions that produce violence in youth people's lives. 'Youth violence' and 'serious youth violence' also flatten the complexity in the experiences of victims and victimisers and obscure the overlap between them. In addition, following Holmes and Cooper (2025), we avoid defining young people by fixed age categories and recognise that cognitive, social, and neurobiological development continues into the mid-twenties. Instead, we understand young people as older children and young adults moving fluidly across developmental stages. Safeguarding needs and developmental capacities are stage-based over the course of each individualised transition to adulthood.

Building on Billingham and Irwin-Rogers (2022), we use the term 'social harm' to forefront children and young people's lived experience. Drawing on sociological and affective theory, we focus in particular on how past systemic injustices and personal traumas continue to 'haunt' a young person's present and future (Gordon, 1997). Haunting in this context is the palpable presence of the absence of social capital: the weight of withdrawn support, the ghosts of previous institutional failures, and the emptiness of spaces that used to be filled with life.

Though the WHO also lists 'risk factors within close relationships' and 'risk factors within the community and wider society', both definitions imply a universality of certain types of risks. In fact, systems intended to protect children and young people from harm can be selective and negative in their impact on specific, often racialised, groups. Policing practices such as stop-and-search disproportionately target racialised young people, with Black people being searched at four to five times the rate of White people in the UK (*Stop and search*, 2024). This disproportionality creates a self-fulfilling prophecy of higher arrest rates that justify more policing whilst ignoring the underlying social conditions that reproduce violence. By fusing policing with social care, health, education, justice, and community services, safeguarding frameworks can shift from promoting children's rights to protect them from harm toward a form of racialised surveillance. This shift can reproduce harmful dynamics at a multi-agency level, such as flagging Muslim youth under the Prevent duty (Abbas, Awan, and Marsden, 2023). The adultification of Black children means that they are viewed as less innocent and more threatening than other children, prompting institutional responses to shift from supportive care to punitive risk management (Dodzro and Goode, 2023; Armstrong, 2025). This process of 'unchildling' also happens through the UK's migration policies (Sirriyeh, 2025). For its part, the media over-reports street-level crimes committed by racialised groups, which drives

moral panic linking racialised young people to visible violence (Riddle *et al.*, 2023). As the recent events in Clapham showed, by focusing on visible behaviour and actions rather than systemic issues and structural factors, mainstream news reports and social media commentary reframe violence as a personal choice rather than a result of complex social conditions.

Finally, labelling certain types of violence as ‘serious’ suggests that other types of violence are less serious. That hierarchy affects how policymakers and communities themselves understand the cumulative weight of chronic violence. It can make violence invisible or routine, which shapes the allocation of funding and other resources. It may also impede efforts to remedy the impacts of violence and prevent its recurrence, whilst masking how chronic violence is a risk factor for acute violence (Baumann and Yacobi, 2022; Locke *et al.*, 2025). These structural and representational conditions produce children and young people's experiences of help and harm. The evidence we examine begins from there.

Finding our bearings: methods, scope, and limitations

We ground our work in two questions:

- **What do young people feel can help and harm them?**
- **What do they wish helping professionals did more or differently? What do they wish we did less?**

Given the breadth and heterogeneity of relevant literature, the two months we had to complete this work, and our focus on children and young people's feelings and experiences, we used Critical Interpretive Synthesis (Dixon-Woods *et al.*, 2006) rather than undertaking a systematic review. This means we followed an iterative process in which searching, selecting, reading, and developing concepts happened at the same time rather than in linear sequence (Boell and Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2015). We made a strategic selection of approximately 30 core resources, mostly peer-reviewed journal articles with a few pieces of grey literature and one book. All of it is robust, youth-centred research that offers deep, qualitative insights into the lived experience of social harm. Studies that centre youth voice provide the ‘thick description’ necessary to respond to our two core questions. While this sample size is sharply focused, it is robust enough to reveal recurring patterns of harm and help that we see across the UK context, ensuring we can translate broad evidence into a meaningful West Midlands lens without losing the nuance of the stories,

experiences, and feelings that children and young people share. For the full list of core literature and the rationale for including each piece, please see Appendix A.

The West Midlands is one of the most demographically diverse regions outside London, with significant Muslim, Black African and Caribbean, and Eastern European communities. It is also a region of pronounced spatial inequality, where areas of concentrated deprivation and limited opportunity sit alongside significant investment and regeneration. Several of the works we cite in this review are directly rooted in the West Midlands context: Robinson and colleagues on Dudley (2023); the Peer Action Collective's national research, which includes West Midlands voices (2023); Quarmby and Luguetti's sport-based programme in the region (2023); Woodger and colleagues on digital harms across the country, including in Warwick (2025); Allen's work on Muslim young people in Birmingham (2021); and Turner and Khan's work with young Muslims across England, including in Birmingham (2025). Where we draw on evidence from other UK contexts, mostly in England, the patterns young people describe are consistent across geographies, even as local conditions shape how those patterns are experienced.

To identify and organise the literature underpinning this report, we developed a tagging system in Zotero, a free, open-source reference management software. Our full reference list, which includes about 100 items, is available [here](#). We initially tagged the literature across several dimensions:

- Methodological approach: qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods
- Involvement of young people: do the researchers centre young people's experiences? Do young people speak for themselves?
- Geographic focus: including UK-wide, England, Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland, the Midlands, and international
- Publication date: distinguishing between pre-2021 and more recent work from 2021 onwards

Alongside this, we developed a working glossary to aid us in interpreting and applying key constructs consistently across the selected literature. The glossary enabled us to develop an additional layer of tagging covering three broad areas:

- Who the research is about: including children, young people, parents and carers, and the services that work with them
- What kind of social harm is happening: including gangs, different types of exploitation, deprivation, weapons, interpersonal and group violence, poor health outcomes, and identity-based violence

- The context where the research took place: including urban or rural neighbourhoods, physical contexts like education settings or housing estates, and abstract contexts like bureaucracy
- How children and young people's feelings and experiences are described and understood

We used the tags to reveal patterns and gaps across the literature, rather than to simplify complex and often overlapping experiences. To arrive at a manageable amount of literature for close reading and analysis, of the nearly 50 total tags, we selected five priority ones: 'CYP experience', 'emotion', 'qual', '2021+', and 'injury'. All the literature we read in depth has the first two tags since we chose to centre children and young people's experiences and how they felt about those experiences. Some of the work took a mixed-methods approach, which includes qualitative methods. This report cites some work published before 2021 if it helps provide context. We consider injuries to be physical, emotional, and/or moral. Physical injuries include weapons-related or fighting-related harm from group violence, street violence, criminal exploitation, and peer-on-peer violence; emotional injury stems from coercive violence and abuse; and moral injury involves having to do things that violate your beliefs. Coding for 'injury' allows us to identify harm as well as experiences that were ambiguous or positive. For the full list of tags, please see Appendix B.

We found that youth-centredness was uneven across our corpus of literature. In some of the research we cite here, young people speak directly and at length about their experiences. Other studies use young people's data to illustrate the perspectives and arguments of the authors. We distinguish between what young people themselves say and what researchers interpret or conclude on their behalf. This distinction matters because our core questions ask what young people feel can help and harm them and what they wish professionals did differently. We can only answer those questions through young people's own accounts.

The theoretical frameworks we apply to the evidence are interpretive tools and have not emerged directly from young people's accounts. Young people in this review describe specific affects, views, and experiences: fear, exhaustion, shame, the desire to matter, the relief of being in safe spaces, the weight of foreclosed futures. Our frameworks name the structural and affective conditions that produce those experiences. Analytical frameworks shape what we see in the evidence, and we have tried to make ours visible rather than leaving them implicit. Appendix C outlines possible follow-on work to pick up loose ends, address the limitations of our work,

and validate our findings, including how young people could be involved in translating this work into practice.

Quality over quantity: methodological choices

Our prioritisation of qualitative, youth-centred methods is an ethical and epistemological choice. Commissioners and funders operating within national government frameworks are frequently asked to produce quantifiable outcomes that demonstrate what works, for whom, and at what cost. We take a different approach: the outcomes that young people want—trusted relationships, safe spaces, peer connection, community belonging, and the sustained accumulation of hope—do not lend themselves to quantitative measurement, which the UK government itself has acknowledged for more than 60 years (Doherty and de St Croix, 2025). In this review, we set out what children and young people say they need and why. This qualitative evidence complements quantitative evidence, and both are essential for designing effective services (Markowitz and Warren, 2025). In the words of a policy manager in London (Doherty and de St Croix, 2025, pp. 942–943):

...the thing that I spent quite a lot of time looking for was one kind of killer stat...that magic study that you find, that says, 'OK, actually this is actually the most effective way to increase young people's wellbeing, or protect them from violence'...Um, I don't think that really exists.

Young people often experience formal measurement tools, including standardised questionnaires, impact frameworks, and outcome scales, as intrusive and boring, even emotionally triggering. Their reactions can disrupt the relational conditions under which they feel able to be forthcoming about their lives (de St Croix and Doherty, 2025). According to a youth worker in a Northwestern city, 'It sometimes seems a shame to have to translate life and experiences and great conversations and stuff into something that answers a question' (de St Croix and Doherty, 2024, p. 496). Instead, gaining meaningful insight into children and young people's experiences of harm and help requires methods that are creative, responsive to young people's needs, and seek to build trust. Our methodological focus draws from what young people themselves say they need to feel heard (de St Croix, 2022; LPAC, 2025). It also reflects the demands of our core questions, which ask about young people's feelings and experiences, rather than about frequency, prevalence, or representativeness.

When working with children and young people in precarious or harmful situations, verbal and written methods can be inadequate or unsafe due to trauma, linguistic diversity, and the specific assemblage of relationships, environments, and prior experiences a child or young person brings to any given encounter. Multi-modal and arts-based approaches offer entry points to access embodied and hard-to-articulate experiences as part of a relational ethics of care, including incorporating ongoing exchanges about consent (Johansen and Winther, 2025; Markowitz and Warren, 2025; Smith *et al.*, 2025). Arai and colleagues (2021) find that children who endured trauma often struggle to articulate experiences verbally, with their readiness to communicate depending on specific contextual conditions rather than an inherent expressive capacity. Armstrong (2025) raises a related concern: professionals routinely misread silence and withdrawal among girls as disengagement, which suggests that methods relying primarily on verbal participation may underrepresent the experiences of the most harmed.

Recognising the limits of standard interview formats, Finlay and colleagues (2026) offered participants a toolkit of methods to choose from, and Barker and colleagues (2022) used go-along interviews and photo elicitation. The latter also reflected on how their positionality shaped the people, places, and information they could access. Tunåker and colleagues (2025) embedded themselves as both support workers and researchers in youth homelessness hostels. Their continued presence over time allowed for the slow building of trust that develops through stable relationships. Their methodology also recognised that LGBTQ+ young people experiencing homelessness endure layers of stigma that leave them reluctant to identify as either homeless or LGBTQ+ in formal research contexts. The young people most harmed are frequently the least reachable through conventional research methods, which is one reason our review prioritises evidence-based work invested in relational, creative, and time-intensive approaches.

Even where research involves young people in co-creation, the logic of the process can reproduce the frameworks it appears to challenge. Garbutt and colleagues (2026), for example, co-created a VR film with young people about knife crime, but designed the work as an intervention intended to change participants' attitudes and behaviour rather than understanding the conditions that produce them. When young people described carrying a knife as necessary and inevitable given poverty and a lack of safety—'...you're in debt with money and that's your life on the line. You need something to protect you if you get what I'm saying' (2026, p. 11)—the authors treated this as a limitation rather than something worth listening to. We are not

criticising co-creation, which has genuine value, but exposing what happens when the questions researchers ask foreclose the answers that matter most.

A spectre of grief: social capital and hope

Putnam's three-part typology of social capital (2020) offers a vocabulary for tracing the uneven distribution of connection and access across children and young people's experiences. He uses the term 'bonding capital' to describe the dense ties within groups that provide belonging and solidarity; 'bridging capital' to refer to the connections through which people access new opportunities and relationships; and 'linking capital' to name the vertical relationships between ordinary people and powerful and resourced institutions. Overall, social capital is a measure of civic participation, a resource that communities accumulate or lose. But this framing treats social capital as separate from the power relations that produce and distribute it. Instead, following Bourdieu (1986), we understand social capital as a form of relational power embedded in class, race, gender, and institutional authority—which is to say, it is produced through the same structural conditions that produce social inequalities. Drawing on Hage (2003, 2025), who builds on Bourdieu, we centre the distribution of social hope: the belief that all of us are moving toward liveable futures and that the connections and opportunities we need to get there are within reach. Where social capital is withdrawn or denied, hope contracts; social capital and hope are within the same relational field.

These frameworks come from different intellectual traditions. Bourdieu was a materialist who argued that social capital is produced through practice and embedded in structures of class, race, and institutional power. Gordon's haunting framework draws on psychoanalytic and literary theory to focus on what is sensed and carried rather than what is visible or countable. Hage bridges these traditions by casting the distribution of hope as a material condition shaped by access to resources and futures, and a felt orientation toward the world. We blend these frameworks because the evidence requires it. What young people describe is material—service cuts, youth club closures, uneven police enforcement—and affective—felt echoes in bodies, relationships, and expectations long after the immediate conditions change. A materialist framework might explain the conditions but miss the weight, and an affect theory framework might name the feeling but obscure its structural causes. Bringing them together means we can hold them both.

In the literature we review, children and young people describe the absence of connections to help and opportunities, with resources often redirected toward community surveillance and risk management (Armstrong, 2025). The spaces where social bonding might have occurred in the past have either been closed or are precarious, degraded, or unsafe (Robinson, John and Joyce, 2023). The institutions that might previously have extended linking capital are now absent or harmful (Khazbak, 2025). Public servants exacerbate the decline of social capital through public divestment. When young people describe the loss of places built for them or their lack of trust in the police force that is profiling them, they are describing the consequences of living in a world that has been organised around their exclusion from society (Skarlatidou *et al.*, 2023; Smithson, Khan, and Westwood, 2024; Khazbak, 2025). Young people thus mourn the withdrawal of social capital. Haunted by seen, heard, and felt absences that shape how they understand what harms and helps them, they describe their desire for the restoration of the relational and material conditions in which trust, connection, and hope can be rebuilt. Taking their lead, we argue for the recovery of social capital, recognising that conditions which are actively produced can be actively restored.

Harming, haunting, and helping: a multiscalar systemic analysis

Our review reconceptualises young people's experiences through five interacting systemic layers: micro, meso, exo, macro, and chrono. This scalar approach shows how harm is produced, mediated, and sustained across environments and over time. For example, across our selection of literature, young people refer to fear, withdrawal, self-protection, silence, and violence as ways that they respond to harm. Professionals frequently misrecognise these survival strategies and their responses pathologise and criminalise young people within exo- and macro-level systems.

The five layers are interwoven, reflecting the evidence about how children and young people experience harm as produced at the macro level, mediated at the meso and exo levels, and felt at the micro level, sometimes at the same time. Macro-level policing policy, for example, means that children and young people feel the impacts of stop-and-search at the micro level, which shapes their relationships with the police at the meso level. Youth spaces are physical infrastructure at the exo level and a key site to cultivate and sustain trusting adult relationships at the meso level. We move outward from young people's immediate experience because that is the direction in which the evidence travels, from the views and experiences of children and young

people via their relationships and environments, to the social policies and histories that produce those experiences.



Micro: weathering storms

In everyday life, young people navigate threats, instability, and uncertainty. They develop attuned survival strategies that reflect the need to stay safe in contexts where safety is not guaranteed, including hypervigilance, scanning for danger, and restricting their mobility (Allen, 2021; Dodzro and Goode, 2023; Skarlatidou *et al.*, 2023; Storrod, 2024). Many young people avoid unfamiliar places, travel in groups, or withdraw socially, particularly in response to gendered and racialised threats in public space (Smithson, Khan, and Westwood, 2024; Wenham and Jobling, 2024).

Children and young people describe feeling unsafe in places where they live, travel, and spend time. Though this feeling varies between communities, geographies, and personal and communal histories, young people largely characterise the experience of violence as universal and unavoidable. ‘I feel that [youth violence] is an experience that everyone has had, is having, or will have’, explains a 19-year-old in London. ‘And yeah, I really feel like it’s inevitable I’ll be real’ (PAC, 2023, p. 46). In Dudley, a 17-year-old says, ‘There are lots of gangs. I’m constantly scared to turn corners’, while a 15-year-old describes the bus station and market at weekends as places where ‘there are always fights’ (Robinson, John, and Joyce, 2023, p. 49). In hostels, intended as places of protection, young people portray the reality plainly:

'Most of the boys that I knew had at some point been robbed, or had their doors kicked in, and this is in the hostel' (Harding, 2019, p. 13; see also: Bracewell, Larkins, and Stanley, 2022).

Girls, young women, and gender-diverse youth face specific gendered and environmental risks: 'What makes me feel unsafe?' asks a young woman in London, 'Probably walking alone, but at night. Because, well, my main reason is because of the men out there' (LPAC, 2025, p. 13). Also in London, young Muslim women question whether to remove their hijab to avoid being identified as Muslim after the Southport riots: 'And that's a scary thing to have in this country as well. Like, do you want to sacrifice your safety, or do you want to sacrifice your religion?' (Turner and Khan, 2025, p. 12). An 18-year-old LGBTQ+ person in Stourbridge alters his appearance when he returns home from work: 'I have to change how I dress to be safe. I wear a hoodie and cover-up to avoid attention' (Robinson, John, and Joyce, 2023, p. 51).

To combat feeling unsafe, young people seek to move with care, reduce their exposure to harm, and trust people and places selectively. A young person affected by group violence in the Northeast underlines these goals: 'There are certain places you don't wanna go. It's not like you're scared, it's not like that or something, but you go in their place, that's where they chill, that's where you're gonna see 40 of them' (Walker, Oswald, and Soppitt, 2025, p. 12). Young people in London describe never going out alone and avoiding unfamiliar areas as a matter of course (LPAC, 2025). Defensive survival practices, including weapon-carrying, are framed as necessary protection rather than aggression. As one young person explains (Barker *et al.*, 2025, p. 57):

I really had to carry a knife because I'd been threatened, like saying 'if we see you next time we'll stab you'. Every single night I go training and when I come back they definitely see me so one day when I went training I took a knife with me and put it in my bag for protection...it kind of made me feel safer 'cos when I confronted the guy he pulled a knife and I stepped back and I pulled out mine so I was as guilty as he was. If he stabbed me, I was going to stab him as well.

Alongside feeling unsafe, children and young people specify what it costs them over time to live with constant awareness of the possibility of harm. They chronicle recurring exhaustion, feeling worn down by the mundane work of staying safe and managing harms they cannot control. Access to youth spaces is a balm: 'Once you enter this building, all the worries and any safety concerns...kind of goes out the

window', explains a young person in London (LPAC, 2025, p. 19). The relief exposes the emotional labour of vigilance that everyday life demands of young people.

Young people who experience parental substance misuse refer to the 'never ending roller coaster' of navigating chronic unpredictability in their family home (Muir *et al.*, 2023, p. 7). Children as young as 8 learn to read parental moods as a survival skill: 'It's important that I am good and [do] not make dad angry' (Muir *et al.*, 2023, p. 8). Children experiencing domestic abuse describe sitting outside rooms waiting for the violence inside to end and learning to spot signs of imminent danger (Arai *et al.*, 2021). A 16-year-old in Dudley affirms that: 'I need a place for peace and quiet. Home is not always a good place to be' (Robinson, John, and Joyce, 2023, p. 60). In these accounts, children undertake significant emotional labour to manage conditions they did not create and cannot change.

Children and young people's labours to manage harm do not stay within the home or the immediate harmful encounter. Instead, harm travels with children and young people into their social lives, shaping what they feel able to say, to whom, and under what conditions. Shame is a recurring presence in the evidence, functioning both as a personal feeling and a social force. Children whose parents misuse substances report concealing their home situation from friends, performing normality at school whilst guarding their secrets: 'I didn't really like to talk to my friends about it... it was embarrassing, who wants to admit their families are alkies?' (Muir *et al.*, 2023, p. 13). A 6-year-old finds the only available listener: 'I talk to the bird. She's a friend. I tell my secret to the bird. I only whisper it to her' (Muir *et al.*, 2023, p. 13). Children yearn to be seen as normal and capable, as people whose lives have meaning beyond the label their circumstances have given them (Billingham and Irwin-Rogers, 2021).

Sometimes, the social bonds through which children and young people can experience belonging, and through which help might otherwise arrive, are foreclosed by conditions that make help most necessary. For young people caught up in gang activity, for example, reputation functions as both a shield and a trap: 'Walking away from conflicts you can "lose your image" which can make you more likely to be targeted for more violence' (Walker, Oswald, and Soppitt, 2025, p. 7; see also: Storrod, 2024). Young people who have experienced sexual abuse in adolescence describe a sharper version of the same dynamic: when peers breach confidentiality, the consequence is permanent withdrawal from the only relationships that felt safe: 'They have said things [to other people] that I've told them before. So, I sort of just keep everything to myself' (Warrington *et al.*, 2023, p. 8).

Silence, concealment, and emotional shutdown are trauma responses that enable endurance in unsafe environments (Armstrong, 2025; Turner and Khan, 2025). These strategies reflect situated knowledge about harm, safety, and lack of support, with young people demonstrating detailed awareness of risk and how to navigate it (Skarlatidou *et al.*, 2023). A supportive response would require recognition of young people's behaviours as rational and contextually intelligent survival reactions, validating their experiences of harm.

Meso: enduring erasure

The micro layer shows children and young people negotiating and navigating harm in their immediate social environments. At the meso layer, these strategies come into contact with professional relationships and service systems that are supposed to offer young people protection from harm, welfare, and opportunities to flourish. The evidence instead points to misrecognition: the strategies of negotiation and navigation that enable survival at the micro level are frequently treated as evidence of disengagement, aggression, or criminal intent, triggering punishment or neglect at other levels (Armstrong, 2025).

Girls caught up in or at risk of crime describe their silence and withdrawal in response to environments that have repeatedly failed to hold what they share with care, with professionals misreading that silence as problematic behaviour rather than a reasoned response to repeated harm. In the words of a 17-year-old victim of sexual assault: 'I tell them all to leave me alone but deep down inside alone is what I am afraid of most. I push people away to protect myself from being let down' (Armstrong, 2025, p. 2). Children and young people who have learned to manage harm meet service systems that require disclosure as a condition of eligibility for receiving help, and those requirements can produce further harm.

Running alongside their experiences of feeling unsafe, exhausted, and ashamed, children and young people experience the desire to matter: to be recognised as people whose needs will be met, and who can make a meaningful difference in the world (Billingham and Irwin-Rogers, 2022). Young people in the Northeast describe the initial pull of involvement in group violence in terms of what it offered them: brand-name clothing, money, the ability to provide for their families, and a reputation that could make them visible in a world that would otherwise render them insignificant. 'People think joining gangs is a glorious lifestyle, but it's not; It's not what you think it is at all. Once in it, you think "fucking hell!"' (Walker, Oswald, and Soppitt,

2025, p. 9). Girls who are exploited describe being targeted via this desire: those who exploit them offer love, friendship, and a sense of identity to fill the gaps left by family neglect and societal indifference (Havard *et al.*, 2023; Armstrong, 2025). The desire to belong can exacerbate exposure to exploitation.

Children and young people describe professional relationships characterised by inconsistency and the experience of being treated as a case instead of a person. Children in contact with Child Protection Services call out social workers who disappear or make commitments they do not keep: 'She's a counsellor and she's only seen me twice and then left me since then', complains a young victim of sexual assault. '[Professionals] just go "Oh yeah. I'll work with you", then they just leave straightaway' (see also: Wilson *et al.*, 2020; Armstrong, 2025, p. 13). Young people also worry that confiding in professionals might have consequences: 'Sometimes, there are teachers you can trust, but I wouldn't speak to teachers because you can't be sure where that info will go' (Robinson, John, and Joyce, 2023, p. 52). Young people in homelessness services describe related experiences, where the significance of a trusted worker is felt most keenly in their absence: 'There was a youth worker...then she left. Then I stopped going' (LPAC, 2025, p. 29).

Young people recount interactions with services that do not communicate with each other. In Dudley, parents and young people resort to piecing together information, including about SEND provision, through waiting room conversations and community social media because the formal systems for information-sharing are insufficient (Robinson, John, and Joyce, 2023). Similarly, a young person receiving mental health support in Greater Manchester notes that, 'I went through loads of counselling through CAMHS [Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services], two years of being passed pillar to post, pillar to post and I ended up straight back where I started' (Smithson, Khan and Westwood, 2024, p. 19; see also: Bentley, 2025; Appleton, Loew, and Mughal, 2022). Young people with care experience conceal their needs from the very services designed to support them, fearing with good reason that disclosure will trigger removal rather than care. According to a 19-year-old mum: 'I had depression and anxiety...I was scared to say anything because I am a care leaver, and I was scared they would take my son away, but I got through it' (Robinson, John, and Joyce, 2023, p. 26). Across these accounts, the linking capital that should connect children and young people to safety and opportunity is redirected toward risk management and surveillance.

Children and young people encounter professionals who are supposed to offer them help and protection, but who instead disbelieve, dismiss, and judge their views and experiences (Smithson, Khan, and Westwood, 2024, p. 16):

They (young people) want a chance to talk because we don't ever get a voice because adults, most of the time that we've tried to speak to, just think because we're young, we don't know what the fuck we're talking about. I've had more life experience than most of the adults.

Young people describe the police as a source of harm rather than protection: 'Police see you and they see gang. And these boys, they see me in the same way' (Harding, 2019, p. 13). Black young people describe racial profiling as a defining feature of their encounters with police: 'Yeah, but obviously I'm pretty sure you've heard for Black people it usually don't go well' (PAC, 2023, p. 52; see also: Skarlatidou *et al.*, 2023). In schools, young people depict staff responses to violence as slow, indifferent, or for show. A 13-year-old recounts that: 'I mean like I've seen people fighting and the teachers don't rush they just take their time slowly walk towards it, enjoy their walk and then sort it out' (PAC, 2023, p. 52). Children and young people in care describe a system that focuses on documenting failures rather than recognising strengths (Wilson *et al.*, 2020).

Systems often fail to recognise or respond to young people's lived realities. Institutional practices frequently reproduce dynamics of control, surveillance, and coercion, which young people experience as disorientation: unclear communication, inconsistent decision-making, and limited transparency (Khazbak, 2025; Finlay, Hopkins, and Benwell, 2026). Young people describe feeling acted upon rather than involved, and mistrust develops through repeated experiences of broken promises, high staff turnover, and lack of follow-through (Arai *et al.*, 2021; Muir *et al.*, 2023). Even well-intentioned interventions can replicate harmful dynamics when trust is not established, when trauma responses are misread as resistance, or when participation is superficial.

Professionals who sustain relational connections can repair harm: 'He is genuinely one of the few people that I can trust. Genuinely, I could leave my whole world with this man...' (LPAC, 2025, p. 25). The practical reach of trust is significant: 'When I was on the streets selling drugs he helped to make sure I got housed...' (LPAC, 2025, p. 26). What enables good practice is the quality of relationships: professionals who listen without judgment, let young people set the space, offer space for disclosure, and treat young people as people rather than cases (Arai *et al.*, 2021; de St Croix and Doherty, 2025). Yet, relational work cannot flourish without leaders who allocate time

for professional development and supervision, adapt structures for flexibility rather than proceduralism, and give practitioners authority to prioritise relationships over compliance (Michel and Billingham, 2025). The difference between harm and help in the meso layer lies in whether professionals show up with consistency and belief in young people's capacity to change and whether systems enable them to do so.

Exo: dwelling in dislocation

The unreliability of professional relationships and the fragmentation of service systems are produced within and compounded by the material conditions of the environments that young people inhabit. The absence of space is the accumulated consequence of austerity, privatisation, and spatial inequality: annual budgets for youth work dropped by nearly 75 per cent between 2010 and 2020 (YMCA, 2022) and 1,243 publicly run youth centres closed between 2010 and 2023 (Turner and Khan, 2025). Insecure and insufficient funding undermines collaborative infrastructures that might expand young people's access to support, with organisations that should work together instead competing to survive (de St Croix and Doherty, 2025; LPAC, 2025). Gentrification, divestment, de-industrialisation, and the withdrawal of public services produce a sense of dislocation and displacement. In Dudley, for example, parents know that there are new services to replace Children's Centres, but they are unsure of what they are or how to find them (Robinson, John, and Joyce, 2023). Disorientation mingles with the relational harms young people experience in their immediate lives, conveying to young people that the world is not made for them (Robinson, John, and Joyce, 2023; Keating *et al.*, 2024; Bond-Taylor and Ellis, 2025; de St Croix and Doherty, 2025; Khazbak, 2025; Turner and Khan, 2025).

The contraction of physical space is accompanied by the omnipresence of digital environments. Digital harms extend into other spaces and times where young people might otherwise feel safe. Black and racially minoritised young people describe algorithms pushing them racist content even after they change their preferences: 'It comes out of nowhere...I don't interest myself in things like this, but somehow, it's on my feed, so how can I avoid it? Then when you put "Not interested" you'll still show me it again' (Woodger *et al.*, 2025, p. 22). Young people highlight social media platforms as spaces where disputes escalate, where bullying follows them beyond school, and where there is no safe time or place: 'I couldn't do without a phone and would not know how to live without one, but I wouldn't use Snapchat, it's all about drugs, guns and causing fights' (Walker, Oswald, and Soppitt, 2025, p. 11). For other young people, the threat accompanies them day to day: 'I take with me everywhere

the feeling that I am hated, and it makes me sad, hurt and shameful and I am fearful' (Woodger *et al.*, 2025, p. 27).

For girls and young women, digital environments extend and amplify the sexual harm they experience offline: explicit images and videos are shared without their consent, damaging their reputations and generating abuse across multiple channels.

According to a 14-year-old girl in London: 'When my nude got shared on Twitter I was still a virgin, but people didn't believe me anymore and everyone asked me for sex in my private messages, it was horrible' (Storrod, 2024, p. 252). Young Muslim women describe how social media exposes them to extreme and distorting perspectives on race, religion, and gender that affect their mental health and their sense of safety in the world (Turner and Khan, 2025). Across these accounts, digital spaces reproduce and intensify harmful experiences in the everyday physical world. Young people who are already facing harm offline find that harm amplified online.

The exclusion and dislocation young people face online shape their relationships to the neighbourhoods and communities they inhabit. In areas undergoing regeneration and gentrification, young people feel displaced in their own communities. Spaces they use are demolished or repurposed to make room for amenities that will attract wealthier residents and boost property values. An adult resident of a London estate confirms the preference for young people's exclusion (Khazbak, 2025, p. 175):

We don't want [teenagers] hanging around just for the simple reason that if they hang around with nothing to do, the chances are there's going to be a problem...local people don't tend to want to walk through a group of 20 or 30 young people who are just standing around aimlessly doing nothing.

A young person on the same estate views the situation differently (Khazbak, 2025, p. 176):

I think the area was better before because there was stuff for young people to do. But now because there is nothing for young people to do, they're gonna get on the wrong path and do bad things. And do you know whose fault that is? The people that are in charge of the regeneration. They complain about young people getting involved in crime when it's their fault.

Outside of cities, young people depict deteriorating environments where there is little to do, nowhere to go, and the labour market requires leaving to access opportunities: 'It feels like a slow drawn-out death for the area' (Keating *et al.*, 2024, p. 1302). In Dudley, teenagers characterise their town as somewhere you want to pass through

rather than live in, in part because they are unable to keep themselves safe or well (Robinson, John, and Joyce, 2023, p. 58):

When you have something on your mind, you can always rely on going to the gym and working out; it helps. The gym isn't that affordable to access though; prices have gone up. And the gym equipment in parks is usually broken, so that's not an option.

Young people in coastal towns describe staying as a choice that is simultaneously valued and stigmatised, where family ties and place attachment are social resources even as staying is associated with personal failure and being left behind (Keating *et al.*, 2024). Young people without the financial means or confidence to go elsewhere find themselves in places that increasingly feel organised around their absence. A youth worker in the coastal Northeast reports that (Keating *et al.*, 2024, p. 1302):

Probably 9 out of 10 of the young people in this area would tell you that they want to leave. But then when you sort of start to dissect the demographics there, you immediately find out that probably at least half of them wouldn't have the financial backing to leave.

In rural Lincolnshire, young people from Eastern European migrant communities face racialised hostility and are cast as outsiders (Bond-Taylor and Ellis, 2025). Across geographies, young people share a sense that the places they live are not for them, and that the conditions that could enable them to build connection, find opportunity, and feel safe are structurally unavailable.

For young asylum seekers, the spatial dimension of harm is more acute still. Government dispersal policies send young people to unfamiliar places where they have no networks or integration support. The state is hyperactive in its control at the same time that assistance is unreachable: complex mechanisms of surveillance and compliance operate alongside a near-total absence of help, information, or human contact. This is 'ghost bureaucracy', in which the spectre of the state looms over every aspect of life but is nowhere to be found when someone needs assistance (Borelli, Poy, and Rué, 2023). Ghost bureaucracy dislodges the spatial and relational anchors of daily life (Finlay, Hopkins, and Benwell, 2026).

Also disorientating are public consultation processes that give the appearance of participation without its substance, accountability, or commitment to sharing power. In one regenerated London estate, local policymakers prioritised 'managing expectations' over community needs whilst developers treated consultations as branding exercises (Khazbak, 2025). Young people ultimately stopped attending

engagement events because their views were not acted upon. One young person names a consequence of that process: '[T]hey've come into our area and they are tryna make us feel like we don't belong here' (Khazbak, 2025, p. 175). The exo layer is characterised by both absence and misdirection of service systems, which are both present enough to exert control over young people's lives and absent enough to withdraw from them.

Macro: shouldering surveillance

At the macro layer, the conditions that produce harm in young people's immediate environments connect to the effects of policy and legislation. The state is most conspicuous in young people's lives through enforcement, and most unavailable in its provision of welfare and opportunity. Consequently, children and young people often describe the state as a source of harm.

The evidence pinpoints racialised and racist dimensions of state harm. Young people experience stop-and-search as humiliating and racially targeted (Skarlatidou *et al.*, 2023) and the cumulative effect of repeated encounters shapes how young people understand their relationship to the state and public space. A young person in Wrexham admits that: 'It'd be safer for you to go to jail than to come back out of that police station' (PAC, 2023, p. 52). The dynamic extends beyond policing into the places young people, especially teenagers, inhabit. According to a 17-year-old in Sheffield: 'They don't have many places to go because if they go to a park, then they're judged by five parents with young kids at the park... if they ran around in the street, then they're overseen by the police so it kind of feels like they might not have a place to go' (PAC, 2023, p. 48). Similarly, a 16-year-old in Dudley maintains that: 'Teenagers are judged wherever they go. Me and my friends, we're respectable but people look at us like we're going to cause trouble. It would be nice to have somewhere where we don't have to think about feeling judged' (Robinson, John, and Joyce, 2023, p. 56).

The Prevent duty expands racialised surveillance into education, where expressions of faith or cultural identity can trigger systemic scrutiny. Rather than adopting welfare-based approaches toward Muslim young people, statutory responses are often framed through a narrow counter-extremism lens, diverting attention from the broader social and economic conditions affecting their lives (Turner and Khan, 2025, p. 26). Muslim young people describe schools and universities that have shifted from being places of learning to places of monitoring, reinforcing scholarship that

concludes that, 'schools have become sites of control, where teachers are expected to identify potential radicalisation under the Prevent strategy, turning classrooms into spaces of suspicion' (Turner and Khan, 2025, p. 9; see also: Abbas, Awan, and Marsden, 2023).

For Black girls and young women, adultification compounds their vulnerability. Professionals read them as aggressive rather than vulnerable, impeding their recognition as children in need of support (Armstrong, 2025, p. 21; see also: Akel and Iyere, 2023). As a result, the criminal justice system becomes more familiar to children than the welfare system. As one 17-year-old young woman reflects: 'there was a time before I went in, that I wanted to go to jail...it needed to happen, basically' (Barker *et al.*, 2025, p. 61). Racialised young people experience the state's enforcement mechanisms as surveillance and control.

What runs through these accounts is children and young people's deeper sense that they are growing up inside systems that were designed for other people. For young asylum seekers, there is a dramatic rupture when they turn 18, when access to education, independence, and support is withdrawn overnight by systems that treat adulthood as a bureaucratic category rather than a human condition (Finlay, Hopkins, and Benwell, 2026). In sum, young people experience routine police stop-and-search as racialised, schools as sites of surveillance under the Prevent duty, and an asylum system that treats them as risks and drains on the system whilst failing to offer sufficient and consistent assistance. A young person in Greater Manchester names this: 'Young people are mistreated by adults. There's injustice in schools, support services and on public transport' (Smithson, Khan, and Westwood, 2024, p. 12).

Chrono: killing time

Across the evidence, young people observe temporal accumulation. The harm of living within systems that have repeatedly failed to show up with care and consistently shown up with control piles up in their lives. The fear, exhaustion, shame, and misrecognition that characterise their immediate experiences shape what they expect from relationships and what they hope for from support and opportunities. According to a 15-year-old: 'I have no hope for the future because everything is going to stay the same because no one is going to listen to kids' (Robinson, John, and Joyce, 2023, p. 55).

Accumulation is spatial, institutional, material, and relational. The closure of youth centres removes the infrastructure through which peer connection and trusted adult relationships are built over time (YMCA, 2022). Dispersal policies sever the networks young asylum seekers have begun to form when their relocation to new places forces them begin again (Finlay, Hopkins, and Benwell, 2026). Digital environments that partially fill those gaps come with other forms of exposure and harm (Storrod, 2024; Woodger *et al.*, 2025). Each withdrawal compounds, and the cumulative effect is a landscape that becomes less and less navigable over time. The chrono layer is characterised by the compounding of conditions that were produced over time and that can only be addressed over time.

Children in long-term care describe their circle of friends growing smaller as years pass, and the number of trustworthy adults diminishing alongside it (Wilson *et al.*, 2020). Young people who experience parental substance misuse regret missing out on an ordinary childhood, of having been pulled into adult roles and responsibilities before they had the relational and emotional resources to carry them: 'I was showing how bad it was for me, and later, I started consuming alcohol and drugs at school' (Muir *et al.*, 2023). For young asylum seekers, the temporal dimension of harm is structured by policy: restrictive conditions block supportive transitions to adulthood, including education, employment, and independent living, which would otherwise build social capital over time. One young person describes losing access to everything upon turning 18 (Finlay, Hopkins, and Benwell, 2026, p. 12):

You can't go to uni, you can't learn to drive, you can't work ... I don't have a national insurance number... You just don't have that independence that you should have as an eighteen, as a twenty-something where you're like, 'What do I do with life?' There is no direction to it.

For young people with criminal records, the survival strategies of adolescence become the structural exclusions of adulthood: 'Little things like dealing drugs will stay on your record for life. When you're 30 and trying to get a job... the things you did when you were a teenager could affect that' (Harding, 2019, p. 23). A young person in Bradford names the weight of this accumulation on their health and wellbeing: 'I've gone home and had nightmares and night terrors, you know, I've had like sleep paralysis from these kinds of experiences. I believe it's contributed a lot to like my mental health over the years without a doubt. It's really a lifelong experience that you never forget' (PAC, 2023, p. 58).

What follows from this is that help must also build over time and across multiple dimensions simultaneously. Young people's accounts suggest that what is protective

is the accumulation of conditions under which social life becomes possible: places to go, people to go with, adults who stay, and communities that recognise them. They also need guidance. According to a 16-year-old (Robinson, John, and Joyce, 2023, p. 64):

I would like someone to help with getting work but also help with what to expect. How are you supposed to be at work? Is it okay to use your phone...how much can you talk, and how do you know when it's okay to go to the bathroom? Nobody tells you what's expected or how it all works, and it creates a lot of anxiety, especially for people like me, who are autistic, but maybe for everyone.

Haunting is the presence of an absence (Gordon, 1997), both what has been lost and what was expected to arrive and never did (Doherty and de St Croix, 2025). Young people are haunted by the youth centre that closed, the worker who left, the peer group that dispersed, the neighbourhood that became unsafe, and the unattainable futures that they imagined for themselves. Where young people can see themselves moving toward a liveable future, they invest in connection and tolerate difficulty. Where that forward orientation is repeatedly blocked, hope contracts, and with it the social capital through which healing and change become possible (Hage, 2003). What young people consistently describe wanting is the restoration of an ordinary life: a past that does not determine everything, a present that offers something worth being in, and a future that feels worth reaching for.

Conclusion: what helps? Agency, hope, and mattering

The evidence of harm in this review is accompanied by consistent accounts of what helps. Children and young people identify and seek out conditions where they can feel safe and establish trusting relationships. These accounts constitute evidence in their own right. Children and young people describe accessing relational support through trusted adults, peer groups, faith communities, youth spaces, and physical environments designed for them. Young people want connections across these different forms of support and opportunity, and the evidence suggests that the most helpful conditions are those where several are available over time.

Children and young people consistently express the significance of trusted adults and the benefits of a worker who stays around, bringing some consistency into their lives. When a trusted adult is present over time, young people extend trust to new services and opportunities through that existing relationship. LPAC peer researchers

(2025) describe this as ‘borrowed trust’, the relational pathway through which institutional connections become possible for young people whose experience of institutions was previously characterised by surveillance and disappointment.

Youth spaces matter as provision and as physical and social infrastructure through which bonding capital builds over time. As we describe at the start of this report, what we saw in Clapham and Tulse Hill made clear how the disappearance of these spaces has forced young people into places where they are demonised and surveilled (PAC, 2023; Khazbak, 2025) and into activities that they themselves know are not in their best interest. A 16-year-old in Dudley concedes that: ‘There’s nothing to help distract teenagers or help us escape the pressures a bit...so we turn to drugs, vaping and alcohol’ (Robinson, John, and Joyce, 2023, p. 56). A young person in London finds respite in access to outdoor play: ‘If I didn’t have the Adventure Playground to go to, I would just be wandering the road, getting myself into trouble’ (LPAC, 2025, p. 18). For Muslim youth, spaces with an awareness of and responsiveness to faith and identity provide community and belonging (Thompson and Shuker, 2023; Turner and Khan, 2025). For young people from Eastern European migrant communities in rural areas, youth spaces are the only possible place to connect in settings where racialised hostility shapes public life (Bond-Taylor and Ellis, 2025).

Children and young people say that peer connection is one of the most useful forms of support. Young people who have experienced sexual abuse, care-experienced young people, those whose parents misuse substances, and those harmed by group violence all recognise the value of talking to others who share their experience (Brett, 2025). A 16-year-old survivor of sexual abuse explains how peer support can become a form of mutual aid (Warrington *et al.*, 2023, p. 7):

The more people I tell the more I feel comfortable about what’s happened and the more I can empower other people to feel better, because sometimes people do not tell anyone, and if they listen to someone else’s story they think, ‘That could be me, I could be helping other people.’

Where peer support is sustained, young people describe rediscovering capabilities they had been told they did not have. They highlight being seen as capable as an experience that helps them, but services too rarely create the conditions for this.

Digital solidarity is one dimension of what helps that service systems may not sufficiently recognise and often do not support. Black and racially minoritised young people describe online communities as spaces of affirmation and collective

resistance when supportive offline spaces are hostile or absent (Woodger *et al.*, 2025). For young LGBTQ+ people experiencing homelessness, online networks can provide the only consistent form of community available (Tunåker, Matthews, and Shelton, 2025). Treating digital environments primarily as sources of harm can miss their function as social infrastructure for young people whose access to offline connectedness is constrained. Storrod, a former youth worker, reminds us that, in the case of technology-facilitated gender-based violence, abusive gender dynamics are the cause of this violence, not social media. She adds that young people benefit from ‘supported but loosely supervised spaces’ online and offline where they can learn to build healthy and fulfilling relationships (2024, p. 257).

Across these different forms of support—trusted workers, youth spaces, peer connection, and digital community—young people emphasise that what enables them to flourish is the continuity of relationships, recognition of their capabilities, and enduring experiences that show them they matter. A participant in an after-school programme for care-experienced young people in the West Midlands describes the transformation that comes from being seen as capable: ‘It made me, like, I realise now I can do this stuff. Like the maths stuff, I couldn't do it in school and got bored but I've done it here’ (Quarmby and Luguetti, 2023, p. 285).

These accounts of help share common features: they create the conditions in which children and young people can develop awareness of their situations and act on them (Michel and Billingham, 2025). Children and young people want somewhere they feel like they matter, and someone to whom they matter. These factors sustain the forward momentum so that hope becomes possible. The evidence suggests that the sustained accumulation of relationships, spaces, and opportunities is what makes social life possible. This requires investment in accumulation rather than in single interventions designed around specific needs and harms.

Recommendations

For the West Midlands Violence Reduction Partnership

The WMVRP's public health approach to violence reduction is consistent with the evidence in this review, which suggests that the conditions that reduce violence in young people's lives are relational, place-based, and temporal. To move forward on these priorities, we recommend that the WMVRP:

- Consider shifting commissioning investment toward the sustained infrastructure of relational support: youth spaces, peer networks, trusted adult relationships, and community belonging (PAC, 2023; Quarmby and Luguetti, 2023; LPAC, 2025; Turner and Khan, 2025).
- Consider shifting commissioning toward long-term relational provision instead of short-term targeted interventions (Harding, 2019; Wilson *et al.*, 2020; Muir *et al.*, 2023).
- Advocate for investment in the restoration of public space and youth provision, prioritising areas like Dudley where young people describe environments that offer so little that harm becomes the most available option (Robinson, John, and Joyce, 2023; Keating *et al.*, 2024; Khazbak, 2025; Turner and Khan, 2025).
- Ensure that commissioning frameworks draw out the experiences of young people whose needs are often made invisible by institutional categories, including LGBTQ+ young people, young asylum seekers, disabled youth, and young people from Eastern European migrant communities (PAC, 2023; Bond-Taylor and Ellis, 2025; Tunåker, Matthews, and Shelton, 2025; Finlay, Hopkins, and Benwell, 2026).
- Introduce this evidence into policy conversations about what a public health approach to violence reduction requires of policing and counter-terrorism policy (PAC, 2023; Armstrong, 2025; Turner and Khan, 2025).

For BVSC

The evidence in this review makes clear the value of the voluntary and community sector in the West Midlands, and BVSC's role in advocating for and supporting that sector. We recommend that BVSC:

- Make the case to statutory partners and commissioners that voluntary sector organisations are often the primary infrastructure through which young people access connection, belonging, and support (PAC, 2023; de St Croix and Doherty, 2025; LPAC, 2025; Turner and Khan, 2025).
- Advocate for longer funding cycles and greater organisational stability for member organisations, recognising that the 'borrowed trust' depends on workers remaining in post over time (Harding, 2019; Wilson *et al.*, 2020; de St Croix and Doherty, 2023; LPAC, 2025).
- Support member organisations to articulate what they do in terms of awareness, agency, hope, and mattering and to push back on the output and

outcome language that commissioning frameworks often require (Billingham and Irwin-Rogers, 2022; Doherty and de St Croix, 2025; Khazbak, 2025).

- Make the case for community-specific youth support, LGBTQ+ youth support, and community-led commissioning of provision as distinct offers that require dedicated resources (PAC, 2023; Bond-Taylor and Ellis, 2025; Tunåker, Matthews, and Shelton, 2025; Turner and Khan, 2025).
- Convene conversations between voluntary sector organisations, statutory partners, and the WMVRP about what a relational, place-based, and temporally sustained approach to violence reduction could look like in the West Midlands (Billingham and Irwin-Rogers, 2022; Robinson, John, and Joyce, 2023; Keating *et al.*, 2024; Walker, Oswald, and Soppitt, 2025).
- Bring this evidence to national conversations about dispersal policies, the Prevent duty, and the hard cut-off at 18 for young asylum seekers and care leavers, including submissions to government, responses to consultations, and engagement with parliamentarians (Armstrong, 2025; Turner and Khan, 2025; Finlay, Hopkins, and Benwell, 2026).

For the West Midlands youth sector

The evidence in this review reflects and affirms what youth workers and community organisations in the West Midlands already know about what helps young people.

We recommend that the sector:

- Trust the evidence on relational practice (Harding, 2019; PAC, 2023; Quarmby and Luguetti, 2023; Warrington *et al.*, 2023; LPAC, 2025).
- Recognise young people's strategies for survival as situated knowledge and develop practice that responds to what those strategies are conveying (Wilson *et al.*, 2020; Arai *et al.*, 2021; Armstrong, 2025; Barker *et al.*, 2025).
- Create opportunities for peer connection and mutual support within services (Muir *et al.*, 2023; PAC, 2023; Quarmby and Luguetti, 2023; Warrington *et al.*, 2023).
- Attend to the digital dimension of young people's social lives, developing practice that supports online solidarity networks and recognises digital environments as social infrastructure (Storrod, 2024; Tunåker, Matthews, and Shelton, 2025; Walker, Oswald, and Soppitt, 2025; Woodger *et al.*, 2025).
- Hold the temporal dimension of harm in mind (Harding, 2019; Wilson *et al.*, 2020; Muir *et al.*, 2023; Finlay, Hopkins, and Benwell, 2026).

- Make the case to funders and commissioners for the value of what the sector already does, which the evidence base supports (Billingham and Irwin-Rogers, 2022; PAC, 2023; de St Croix and Doherty, 2025; LPAC, 2025).

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Appendix A: selected literature

All of our core literature, apart from Harding's article which was published in 2019, met all of our priority criteria: CYP experience, 2021+, emotion, qual/mixed methods, and injury. We made an exception for Harding because we were seeking to fill a gap concerning young people's experiences with homelessness.

Author(s), date	Title	Inclusion rationale
Allen, 2021	Young, Brummie, and Muslim in the problematised city: Investigating identity and belonging among Muslim youth in Birmingham, England	Interactions between harm and place, importance of Muslim youth in West Midlands, creative methods, West Midlands
Arai <i>et al.</i> , 2021	Hope, agency, and the lived experience of violence: A qualitative systematic review of children's perspectives on domestic violence and abuse	Social capital, systematic review
Armstrong, 2025	Invisibilised: Girls caught up in, or at risk of, crime	Gap in understanding and provision of specialised services for teenage girls
Barker <i>et al.</i> , 2025	Children and young people's accounts of involvement in serious violence in the UK: Systematic review and meta-ethnography	Gap in understanding and provision of specialised services for teenage girls
Barker <i>et al.</i> , 2022	Ties that bind: Young people, community and social capital in the wake of the pandemic	Social capital, interactions between harm and place, creative methods
Billingham & Irwin-Rogers, 2022	Against youth violence: A social harm perspective	Seminal text on social harm affecting young people in the UK
Bond-Taylor &	Rural marginality and violence	Gap in understanding of

Ellis, 2025	affecting young people: Experiences from an English county	rural youth experience
de St Croix, 2022	Re-imagining accountability: Storytelling workshops for evaluation in and beyond youth work	Critical evaluation, creative methods
de St Croix & Doherty, 2025	Listening to practice: Valuing the informal in youth work evaluation	Critical evaluation, creative methods
Finlay <i>et al.</i> , 2026	Disorientation and asylum-seeking youth: Examining the emotional and embodied impacts of the UK asylum system	Gap in understanding needs and experiences of young people seeking asylum, creative methods
Garbutt <i>et al.</i> , 2026	Using virtual reality to enable emotional engagement around knife crime in young people	Creative methods, digital methods
Harding, 2019	Escaping the trap: Supporting homeless young people affected by youth violence and criminal exploitation	Gap in understanding homelessness and exploitation, social capital
Johansen & Winther, 2025	Ethical and methodological possibilities and challenges in conducting qualitative research with children in asylum centers	Gap in understanding needs and experiences of young people seeking asylum, creative methods
Keating <i>et al.</i> , 2024	Movers, returners and stayers: The role of place in shaping the (im)mobility aspirations of young people in coastal towns	Gap in understanding of rural youth experience, interactions between harm and place
Khazbak, 2025	Why mixed communities regeneration fails to improve the lives of low-income young people	Interactions between harm and place
LPAC, 2025	Built on trust: The role of youth	Social capital, interactions

	spaces and trusted adults in reducing young people's exposure to violence	between harm and place, youth-led peer research
Markowitz & Warren, 2025	Stepping out of line: Moving through vulnerability with children in transition	Critical evaluation, creative methods
Muir <i>et al.</i> , 2023	A systematic review of qualitative studies exploring lived experiences, perceived impact, and coping strategies of children and young people whose parents use substances	Substance use, systematic review
PAC, 2023	Leading research, driving change: Youth insights and solutions from the Peer Action Collective	Interactions between harm and place, youth-led peer research, West Midlands
Quarmby & Luguetti, 2023	Rethinking pedagogical practices with care-experienced young people: Lessons from a sport-based programme analysed through a Freirean lens	Gap in understanding of specialised services young people with care experience, focus on sport, West Midlands
Robinson <i>et al.</i> , 2023	Growing up in Dudley: A qualitative exploration of underrepresented needs and experiences	Interactions between harm and place, focus on parents and carers, West Midlands
Skarlatidou <i>et al.</i> , 2023	Understanding knife crime and trust in police with young people in East London	Comparison between the experiences of young people and police officers
Smithson <i>et al.</i> , 2024	Young people's engagement with the Greater Manchester Violence Reduction Unit's strategy	Interaction between violence reduction strategy and young people's experience
Storrod, 2024	'It started with a nude': Gangs and	Gap in understanding and

	technology-facilitated sexual violence	provision of specialised services for teenage girls, interactions between online and in-person harm
Tunåker <i>et al.</i> , 2025	Researching LGBTQ+ homelessness and building social justice in the UK & the US: methods, ethics, recruitment	Gap in understanding LGBTQ+ youth homelessness
Turner & Khan, 2025	Muslim youth futures: Our voice, our vision, shaping our society	Importance of Muslim youth in West Midlands, West Midlands
Walker <i>et al.</i> , 2025	The role of 'place' in understanding the drivers of serious youth violence: An examination of identity, territorialism and community	Interactions between harm and place
Warrington <i>et al.</i> , 2023	'Letting you share when you need to share': Navigating the potential and precarity of friends and peers for UK young people after sexual abuse in adolescence	Peer support
Wilson <i>et al.</i> , 2020	Children's experiences with Child Protection Services: A synthesis of qualitative evidence	Interaction with Child Protection Services
Woodger <i>et al.</i> , 2025	Youth, race and social media - Project report	Digital harms, West Midlands

Appendix B: full list of Zotero tags

This appendix contains the full list of 47 tags that we used to organise and select literature, including five priority tags highlighted in yellow.

2021+	employment	LGBTQ+	radicalisation
adolescence	England	Midlands	religion
Child Protection	exploitation	migration	Scotland
children	extremism	mixed methods	sexual exploitation
Children's Services	gangs	Northern Ireland	substance use
criminal exploitation	gender	parents+	systematic review
CYP experience	group violence	place	UK-wide
deprivation	health	police	Wales
disability	housing	pre-2021	weapons
domestic abuse	injury	qual	young people
education	international	quant	youth services
emotion	interpersonal	race	

Appendix C: building on this evidence

Translating these findings into policy and practice requires further work beyond the scope of our review, which we undertook from 19 February until 13 April 2026.

WMVRP and BVSC's roles as convenors and advocates position both organisations to drive regional and national shifts that could translate this evidence into sustainable, measurable changes in practice. Both organisations could:

- Bring this evidence base to national and regional policy conversations about the Prevent duty, dispersal of and support for asylum seekers, and youth sector funding
- Commission follow-up research in partnership with the wider public sector
- Document how the voluntary, community, faith, and social enterprise sectors implement relational practice, helping to turn the wisdom of good practice into evidence
- Convene conversations between statutory and voluntary sectors to build accountability for data infrastructure

We recognise that this review documents the conditions that young people need, but does not specify how to achieve those conditions within current resource constraints. To advance our recommendation to invest in sustained relational infrastructure, **implementation plans** could include:

- Identifying quick wins that could be delivered within current resources and major investments that would require capital investment
- Mapping current spending on youth provision in the West Midlands
- Costing the restoration of public space and youth infrastructure by priority
- Modelling resource allocation and new investment scenarios
- Developing transition plans for moving from short-term targeted interventions to long-term relational support provision

This review advocates for relational, place-based, temporal approaches to reducing violence in young people's lives. Additional work to **gather and analyse alternative evidence, including from creative and community-led approaches**, could demonstrate to statutory partners that relational approaches are another category of evidence-based work. Ways to deepen understandings of when and how different approaches work include:

- Working alongside commissioners as they seek out robust and innovative research support and evaluate research proposals
- Synthesising further evidence about help and support, including peer support, mutual aid, and group work

- Building bridges between enforcement, community safety, and welfare systems

Young people make clear that standardised outcome measures feel intrusive and that the conditions they need—trust, connection, belonging, hope—do not lend themselves to quantification. Work to **co-design participatory outcome frameworks with young people** could:

- Establish routine data collection on relational conditions through the creation and refinement of alternative feedback mechanisms
- Create longitudinal evaluation systems that track young people's wellbeing and flourishing over time without feeling like surveillance

Our work reveals patterns but does not tell commissioners what proportion of young people experience social harm, which groups are most affected, or how our findings vary across the West Midlands. **Complementary quantitative work focused on scale and generalisability** could establish:

- The prevalence of experiences of social harm across geographies to determine which communities need targeted investment
- Demographic or harm-specific variations
- Whether patterns hold across urban, suburban, and rural areas, currently a gap in the literature about social harm which primarily focuses on young people in cities
- Baseline data against which to measure change over time

Addressing additional questions could refine our understanding of how we might interrupt existing **patterns and sequences** to mitigate cycles of social harm. Further longitudinal or quasi-experimental work could clarify:

- Temporal sequencing: what precedes what in young people's experiences?
- Support points: where do we need to change our systems?
- Flourishing factors: what conditions support practitioners to support young people and how can they be cultivated?

Finally, though our work treats young people fluidly across developmental stages, policy and practice often require **age-specific guidance**. Disaggregating our findings by age bands (5–11, 12–16, and 17–25) could clarify:

- How needs, experiences, and helpful conditions vary across age groups
- What trusted adult relationships, peer connection, and mutual aid develop and change across developmental stages
- Which transitions require new or more specialised support