Knife Crime Thematic Review

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Co-Authored by a Young Person with Lived Experience

Safer Together November 2022

This review would not have been possible without the contributions of the children and families impacted by exploitation and knife crime. As the review author, I wish to extend a special thank you to them for sharing, with such bravery and candour, their lived experience and perspectives so that other children and families may benefit from the lessons outlined within this review.

A special and heartfelt thank you is extended to the co-author of this report, Kairo Williams. Kairo, referred to as Child K throughout this report has been stabbed on two separate occasions, nearly resulting in the loss of his life. His insights and perspectives have been invaluable at steering this report and ensuring the themes within in it and the recommendations made, are pertinent and have relevance to the lives of children.

Despite the trauma that he has endured, Kairo is committed to turning his pain into purpose, to help other children and prevent further loss of life. He is an inspiration; and talking extensively with Kairo is perhaps one of the most humbling moments in my career.

But let us not forget, that some children impacted by knife crime could not contribute their voices to this review, because they are now longer alive to share their views; their lives having been tragically cut short by youth violence.

 I offer my sincerest condolences to their families, friends and loved ones, and my thoughts are also with their communities, in which their loss will be felt and reverberate for many years to come.

Child Z.

Child R.

Child K.

This review is dedicated to you.

Contents

Phase 1:

1.1 : Demography and local context

Wolverhampton is a city and metropolitan borough in the West Midlands in England. The city has a diverse demographic. 35.5 % of the population are of non-white British heritage, with a further 16.4% of the population being born outside of the UK. Wolverhampton is a city that has a younger population than the England average (25.6% of the population are aged 0-19) and is currently one of the most densely populated local authority areas in England; home to approximately 265,600 people. The city has the second-highest proportion of Sikh residents in England.

Total recoded Crime (TRC) for the city has risen over recent years and crime rates presently sit above the England average. The rates of children who go through the Youth Justice System and who are sentenced to custody, are significantly higher than the England average.

Wolverhampton, along with Birmingham and Sandwell, is one of the most deprived Local Authorities in the country. Whilst levels of deprivation have risen in recent years, there has been a decrease in the number of children living in poverty. However, given the current economic climate, the numbers of children and families impacted by poverty and disadvantage may increase. There are strategic plans in place within the city, such as the *Children, Young People and Families Strategic Plan (2020-25)* which aims to ensure that that there is a multi-agency approach to tackle the causes and effects of disadvantage and to support families impacted by the current cost of living crisis.

The number of children receiving formal support has incrementally decreased across all areas of Children's Social Care over the last 5 years, which may be indicative of the efficacy of various early intervention and prevention strategies.

As of the end of March 2021, 547 Children and young people were in care, 243 had a Child Protection Plan and 715 had a Child in Need Plan.[1]

1.2 : Review Purpose and Aims

This review was initiated and commissioned by Wolverhampton Safeguarding Together (WST) in direct and prompt response to leaders' recognition of increasing concerns regarding local levels of Serious Youth Violence (SYV).

Between April and June 2022, there were two incidents of children[2] being killed and a further incident of a child being seriously injured as a result of knife crime. (This

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[1] Wolverhampton Exploitation Profile. January – December 2021.
[2] This review will use the term children, not young people, in recognition of their legal status and vulnerabilities.

incident has been categorised as an attempted murder). These cases form a central part of the review process and are detailed in more depth within **Phase 2** of this report.

The above-mentioned deaths and incident involving serious injury resulted in Rapid Review Processes[3] being initiated for all three of these cases. A decision was made in consultation with the National Panel[4], that given the shared nature and proximity in terms of time of these incidents, a thematic review that seeks to identify patterns and shared themes should be initiated in place of individualised Local Child Safeguarding Practice Review Processes[5] (LCSPR).

The purpose of this Thematic Review was also to determine whether there were any patterns in the children's experiences, which could further inform and improve safeguarding responses, future planning and service design.

Thematic Review of Systemic Responses to Exploitation

In 2019, City of Wolverhampton Council commissioned a *Whole Systems Review of Exploitation* which has since resulted in several strategic and operational changes being made to improve how the system prevents, identifies and responds to all forms of Child Exploitation. A second review of exploitation which serves as an important opportunity to explore the impact and efficacy of the improved strategic and operational responses made in direct response to the previously commissioned review, has been written in tandem with this review process. Due to the links and cross-cutting themes that often exist between exploitation, knife crime and serious youth violence, it is recommended that these reviews are read together.

1.3 Review Methodology and Design

This review aims to be strengths-based and "systemic", meaning that whilst it seeks to identify and understand areas of weaknesses, it simultaneously aims to highlight areas of strength which should be further embedded to enhance further developments and the efficacy of systems and processes.

Therefore, the methodology of this review has been carefully designed collaboratively with commissioners, to provide a systemic and contextual focus of not only the cases that form an essential and fundamental part of this review, but also provides additional assurance that current systems and processes are robust and effective in keeping children and communities safe from harm.

It should be noted, that at the time of writing this review, there were ongoing legal proceedings, and therefore where certain pertinent facts and circumstances have

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[3] Rapid reviews are a form of evidence synthesis that may provide more timely information for the purposes of learning and decision making compared with standard systematic reviews

[4] The National Panel is an independent panel that commissions reviews of serious child safeguarding cases.

[5] A child safeguarding practice review (CSPR) should take place if child abuse is known or suspected, and a child has died or sustained potentially life-threatening injury.

been withheld from this report, this is to prevent prejudicing any legal and criminal processes.

Given that this review encompasses two violent deaths of two children and serious injury to another, considerable care has been taken to exclude any identifiable information that could potentially be a catalyst for any further violence or retaliatory incidents. However even with carefully co-ordinated attempts to retain anonymity, these cases were high profile, and therefore careful consideration should be given to this when considering plans for publication and dissemination.

The review also observed the profound impact the deaths and serious injury inflicted on these children have had on not only the practitioners that that knew them, but the whole system. As such, it is recognised that this review may be triggering and upsetting to those that have cause to read it.

Methodology

This review involved analysing the Rapid Review sample which sought to understand the common features that exist in the lives of young people that increase the propensity of knife crime and serious youth violence.

This was achieved by conducting "a deep dive" analysis of documented records, speaking to the agencies and professionals that knew the children at the centre of this review, and, where safe and appropriate to do so, their families

Additionally, case information and the contextual histories of the perpetrators[6] of knife related incidents were sought and subject to analysis, to ascertain deeper insights and understanding of the motivations and underpinning drivers of Serious Youth Violence (SYV) and knife crime.

The Contextual Safeguarding Framework was applied to all aspects of the review, to ensure that children's experiences of violence, abuse and harm in both inter-familial and extra-familial contexts, such as school, communities and peer groups were fully explored.[7]

The review process was fully supported by senior leaders from across all agencies involved in the review process **(Annex A)** who agreed that the review would seek the involvement of children, parents, front line practitioners and the community.

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[6] The review recognises the complexity of the victim/offender overlap but uses the term "perpetrator" to distinguish the individuals that inflicted the life ending or serious injury from the children subject of this review process.

[7] Firmin, C (2017).

1.4 Terminology

Knife Crime - Throughout this review, the term *knife crime* is used. For context and for the purposes of this review, knife crime is referring both to the use of knives against children either to threaten or to wound them, and to refer to instances when children may have been carrying or using knives for a broad range of purposes.[8]

Serious Youth Violence (SYV) - The term Serious Youth Violence (SYV) is also used within this review and is used to refer to incidents committed against, and perpetrated by, children which results in serious injury, harm or death.

Co-Offending Peer Group (Gangs) - This review also explores the links between knife crime, serious youth violence and gang affiliation and involvement. There is a multiplicity of definitions of the term "gang". However, this review defines a gang as; "*A relatively durable, predominantly street-based group of young people who: 1) see themselves (and are seen by others) as a discernible group; 2) engage in criminal activity and violence; and may also 3) lay claim over territory (not necessarily geographical but can include illegal economy territory); 4) have some form of identifying structural feature; and/or 5) be in conflict with other, similar, gangs.*"[9]

It is recognised that there is considerable controversy and debate about the use of the term gang, as this term often evokes prejudicial and inaccurate beliefs and therefore may impact the way a gang exploited child is viewed. Therefore, in place of the term gang, the term **co-offending peer group** will be used.

Perpetrator – The term perpetrator is used in this review to describe someone who has committed a crime or a violent and harmful act.

Child Exploitation – Occurs when an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, control, manipulate or deceive a child, young person (under the age of 18), or adult and exploits them a) through violence or the threat of violence, and/or b) for the financial or other advantage of the perpetrator or facilitator and/or c) in exchange for something the victim needs or wants. The victim may have been exploited even if the activity appears consensual. Exploitation does not always involve physical contact; it can also occur through the use of technology. Children can be exploited in a variety of ways, however most commonly children and young people are exploited for sexual and criminal purposes.

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[8] Safeguarding children and young people in education from knife crime: Lessons from London. Ofsted (2019)
[9] Dying to belong. The Centre for Social Justice (2009).

1.5 Review Authors

An Independent author, Nikki Holmes, was commissioned to lead all aspects of the review and author this final thematic report.

The author is an accredited Independent Reviewer and independent safeguarding consultant, with extensive expertise in children's safeguarding and has undertaken several national review processes.

The author began her career in policing and has extensive knowledge of, and experience in, the field of Child Exploitation and Serious Youth Violence (SYV).

Kairo Williams is the co-author of this review. He has contributed his lived experience to shape the review process. His perspectives and insights have been invaluable in ensuring that the themes explored within this review are pertinent to the lives of children and assist in facilitating a greater understanding of the drivers of serious youth violence.

Kairo's case is also systematically reviewed as part of the rapid review sample and where his case is explored, he is referred to as Child K throughout the body of this report.

1.6 : Terms of Reference and Key Lines of Enquiry

Terms of reference were agreed with members of the One Panel.

Agencies were asked to identify any significant information that fell within the scope of this review. Pertinent historical information is included in this report where it has been determined that information is important in contributing to the final analysis and recommendations. The full Terms of Refence are provided in **Appendix B**.

1.7 : Methodical Challenges and Limitations

Given the sensitive nature of the topics encompassed by this review, there was a propensity that children and young people approached to participate in interviews for the purpose of the review, may be triggered and re-traumatised.

This thematic review was built upon understanding the direct experiences of children and their families derived from agencies case notes, records and management information systems. Due to time constraints and limitations, if data and information was not readily accessible, there was limited opportunity to undertake additional data collection and interrogation.

It must be acknowledged that there are always challenges when speaking directly with children about knife-carrying. For them, talking openly about their experiences, may be a cause of considerable concern, raising the possibility of undesired police attention, potential legal implications and even reprisals. These factors may in turn result in inhibitive and self-preservation effects, despite assurances of anonymity.

This review was time limited, and time parameters resulted in the review only being able to focus on a limited cohort of children. The ability to engage with a wider cohort of children was in part overcome using surveys, created specifically for this review to capture the views of as many children as practicable.

The survey created was shared with schools, social care and youth offending teams to attract a diverse range of responses. The survey yielded a positive response. A total of **929** responses from children were received which provided valuable insights into the issues being explored. The findings from this survey are threaded throughout this review, and an overview of the full survey findings have been provided to commissioners to facilitate further insights and learning.

Commissioners and strategic leads are aware of the importance and centrality of children's lived experience and views, and so are advised to continue consultation with children beyond the scope of this review. They are also advised that this review is preliminary and should therefore be utilised as a catalyst for further research and systemic evolution which matches the pace of the ever-evolving exploitation and serious youth violence landscape.

1.8 Local and Regional Context

It is perhaps easy to assume, given the recent death of two local children and the serious injury inflicted upon a third child, that SYV and weapon carrying is pervasive in Wolverhampton. This view may particularly be fuelled by the proximity in terms of timeline of these incidents' occurrence.

However, the reality is, that Wolverhampton is simply facing the same challenges as many cities, and that the issues of SYV as set out in this report, are underpinned by a multiplicity of complex factors *or drivers* that are found regionally and nationally.

Therefore, the assumption that Wolverhampton is a "dangerous city" is a harmful narrative, and practitioners at both strategic and operational levels should make concerted and co-ordinated efforts to challenge this discourse.

The reason being is that this review has found that one of the many drivers that underpin and propel youth violence, is the very fear of it, which leads children to believe they are unsafe, that weapon carrying is endemic and that therefore the only way to protect themselves from harm, is to resort to weapon carrying themselves. The opposite is true. The only way to reduce the threat of knife crime and SYV, is for young children to commit to not carrying a knife.

The survey that was carried out as part of this review process returned **929** responses from young people aged between 11-18. The findings of the review challenged some of the common beliefs that children have about the extent and pervasiveness of weapon carrying on our streets. Most participants (63%) had not been impacted either directly or vicariously by knife crime, and 84% of respondents had never

carried a knife, compared to just 13% who admitted to doing so. Those that did resort to carrying a knife all did so for protection.

And yet, the fear of knife crime and feelings of unsafety are an issue for children in the city. Over half of all respondents reported feeling significantly to seriously worried about knife crime in their local area and the overall feelings of safety of children in Wolverhampton is decreasing[10]

Understanding and responding to children's feelings and perceptions of safety is therefore critical and working in collaboration with children is a vital part of the response to this complex issue.

Whilst for the reasons aforementioned, it is vital to put the issue of weapon carrying into context, this review does not seek or intend to trivialise the seriousness of this issue. One life lost is one life too many and acts of violence do not just impact singularly on victims, but their families, their loved ones, their peers, and entire communities. Additionally, the lives of children who perpetrate offences that are weapon assisted, (often as acts of spontaneity, without the realisation of how easy death can be inflicted) are changed forever, along with the lives of their families.

Knife crime and acts of SYV therefore create shockwaves that are felt for years to come. And so here is the vicious cycle that must be broken.

The review hopes that the exploration of the many factors identified that may be inextricably linked to SYV and knife crime, provide further valuable insights and foundations for the partnership to feel confident and well placed to tackle this issue head on, and take additional steps to create a city where their children feel safe from harm.

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[10] Wolverhampton Health Related Behaviour Survey 2022.

Phase 2: Case Analysis

2:1 Rapid Review Sample

This chapter of the review is focused on the findings of **Phase 2** of the review process which is focused on the deep dives of the three cases of children who were tragically killed or subjected to serious injury between April -June 2022 (Rapid Review Sample)

A brief overview of the Rapid Review Sample provided by is highlighted in the table below:

Child	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Cause of serious injury(SI) /death (D)	Date of Incident/Death
Z	15 years	Male	White/Black Caribbean	Stab Wound (D)	May 2022
R	16 years	Male	Asian	Stab Wound (D)	June 2022
K	15 years	Male	White/Black Caribbean	Stab Wound (SI)*11	April 2022

Whilst undertaking the deep dives, it was sought to identify if there were any identifiable shared themes across these in the Rapid Review Sample and pertinent commonalities in children's histories, service engagement, and contexts.

It is worthy to note that whilst **Child R** shared some characteristics with **Child K** and **Child Z,** the circumstances of his death were unique, in so far as it would appear that he was an unintended target, and his death resulted from a case of mistaken identity.

2. 2 Shared Characteristics

Analysis of the rapid review sample found that:

- **All children were male**
- **All were aged 15-16 years at the time of their death or being subjected to serious injury**
- **All were non-white (two children were from Mixed White and Black Caribbean grounds and one child was Asian)**
- **All children had previous exposure to violence in extra-familial contexts.**
- **All children had previous or current involvement with children's services**

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11 *This incident has been recorded by West Midlands Police as an Attempted Murder.

- **All children had been impacted by family dysfunction**
- **All children had been impacted by "hidden harm" namely exposure to domestic abuse, parental substance misuse or parental ill mental health.**
- **Two children were of Child In Need (CiN) status at the time or their death or being subjected to serious injury.**
- **Two children had lived in or had links with other local authority areas**
- **Two children had CAMHs involvement**
- **Two children were not in mainstream education**
- **Two of the children been identified as being at risk of Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE).**
- **Two of the children had known or suspected links with local co-offending peer groups.**
- **Two children were known to use cannabis**

2.3 Gender

The Office for National Statistics (2019) reports that from 2007–8 to 2017–18 around 200 young men died each year as a result of coming into contact with a sharp instrument (this figure peaked at 222 in 2017–18 and was at its lowest at 116 in 2014–15). Over that same time period, the figures for (predominantly) young women being killed by a sharp instrument were stable at around 60 deaths per year. [12]

This supports the widely adopted view that SYV and knife crime are gendered issues, where males are more likely to be victims and perpetrators of knife crime.

In the Rapid Review sample, all victims were male, and the perpetrators of the crimes that lead to their death and injury were also male, aligning with common discourse. Yet, despite gender being a shared characteristic of the sample, the review found no evidence of the role of gender being considered nor explored.

Whilst local, regional and national quantitative data sets highlight the link between SYV, knife carrying and gender, critical questions need to be asked about *why* a relationship can be found between gender and incidents of SYV. A good place to start is to understand the concepts of hypermasculinity, and gender stereotypes.

Boys, like girls, often feel compelled to behave in accordance with clearly defined gender roles. We understand how these concepts feeds into Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) but are less well sighted on how gender socialisation can be attributed to other forms of harm.

One question to consider is "is there a metonymic relationship between weapon carrying and normative masculinity"? For example, do boys resort to weapon

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[12] Gendered objects and gendered spaces: The invisibilities of 'knife' crime. Cooke, E (et al) 2020.

carrying as they have been conditioned to internalise that, as a male, they should be "strong" and able to keep themselves safe in harmful contexts?

A culture shift is required to challenge the simplistic associations between knife crime and individual pathology, and to understand the complex social structures and the ways that such structures impose on children dependent on their gender. Engaging boys in critical conversations that explore how, due to gender socialisation society can marginalise them and enact violence against them, may be useful in deconstructing stereotypes and hypermasculinity, which may be inextricably linked to SYV and knife crime. [13] **(Recommendation 4.2)**

That said, it is noted that female weapon carrying is under-explored, and there is a need to also consider the female-centric discursive and educative strategies that are required, and care must be taken to not overlook female experiences. (Holtzworth-Munroe, 2005; Firmin, 2009). **(Recommendation 3.1)**

2.3.1 Fatherless homes and SYV

One additional key finding from the review that may also give weight to the argument that gender norms and SYV are linked, is the absence of consistent father figures in the lives of both victims and perpetrators.

All three victims at the centre of this review were either from fatherless homes or had episodes in their life where their father was not consistently present.

Whilst lone parents and single mothers can be, and often are, supportive, protective parents, the Prison Reform Trust found that over 76% of the male prison population in England and Wales grew up in fatherless homes.

The absence of father figures and positive male role models may particularly impact on boys, who, shouldering the pressure of gender stereotypes and norms, adopt the position of "man of the house". This may manifest in them feeling the need to provide if economic deprivation is a factor and protect siblings and other family members from harm. If the father figure has left the family home because domestic abuse and violence was a factor, the child may normalise and be somewhat desensitised to violence in other contexts.

Additionally, those growing up in fatherless homes, may seek strong, male role models beyond familial environments, falling prey to exploiters and co-offending peer networks. **(Recommendation 2.4)**

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[13] 'You're Either In or You're Out': School Violence, Peer Discipline, and the (Re)Production of Hegemonic Masculinity. Men and Masculinities Stoudt, B. G. (2006).

2.4 Ethnicity, Intersectionality and Adultification.

All three cases involved male victims in a similar age group and from non-white backgrounds. Two children were from mixed white and black Caribbean backgrounds, and one child was of Asian origin.

It is imperative that factors such as race, intersectionality and adultification[14] are considered when seeking to understand the often-intersecting issues of knife crime, Serious Youth Violence and exploitation, and the lived experience of children from ethnic minority backgrounds.

Both national statistics and academic literature highlight how young people from black and other minority groups are disproportionately represented in incidents of Serious Youth Violence and child criminal exploitation (CCE) cases.

The common discourse widely perpetuated by the media, professionals and the public, and perhaps cemented by the over-representation of black and ethnic minority groups in affiliation with co-offending peer groups and knife crime are "black- on black issues".

This is of course, a dangerous oversimplification. Any child from any ethnic background may be impacted by SYV, and as such, educative strategies and awareness campaigns must take care not to simply target and focus on certain ethnic groups and communities, which may lead to further labelling, stereotyping and marginalisation.

That said, exploring the disproportionate representation of non-white children in incidents of youth violence when this occurs, and exploring how factors such as ethnicity and intersectionality intersect with SYV, and knife crime is crucial. **(Recommendation 1.1)**

There is a need to reposition focus, and rather than seeing ethnicity as a reliable predictor or risk indicator of SYV, understand how being from ethnic minoritised groups may result in children from those communities being locked in positions of disadvantage,[15] and experience social exclusion; factors that are much more reliable deterministic risk indicators of Serious Youth Violence and victimhood.

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[14] '*The concept of adultification is when notions of innocence and vulnerability are not afforded to certain children. This is determined by people and institutions who hold power over them. When adultification occurs outside of the home it is always founded within discrimination and bias*.' Adultification bias within child protection and safeguarding – HM Inspectorate Probation (2022)

[15] Is Britain fairer? The state of equality and human rights. Equality and Human Rights Commission. (2018)

2.4.1 Wider Cultural Contexts

Rapid Review Case Analysis

The concept of adultification is not a new phenomenon and the concept has been critically explored in several highly publicised Child Safeguarding Practice Reviews, most recently that of Child Q.[16]

Such reviews have galvanised conversations that have centred on the harms directly associated with adultification, resulting ultimately in *the rights of children not being upheld, potentially leaving them more at risk of harm, due to a dereliction of safeguarding duty* (Davies, J).

There was no evidence of any of the children within the rapid review sample being racially profiled or labelled due to their ethnicity. However, this is not sufficient to conclude that practitioners had a sufficient understanding of or considered the impact of adultification and intersectionality.

Child Z:

In the case of Child **Z**, it was found that despite there being a multiplicity of risk indicators of involvement or affiliation with co-offending peer groups, the decision was reached that; *"[There was] no intelligence that linked Child Z to being involved in a gang or being exploited."*

Child Z was identified to be eager to fit in and observed to use "gang language". Z was reported to; "*ask people if they are involved in a gang and if they carried weapons".* These observations did not exist in silo, but rather were coupled with additional evidence such as substance use, missing episodes and exclusion from mainstream school, all further risk indicators of exploitation.

There was no evidence of practitioners exploring the reasons that underpinned Child Z's desire to feel a sense of belonging or if his search to belong was in some way linked to his multi-racial identity.

It should be considered therefore, that in a quest to avoid adultification and racial profiling, *the needs [and vulnerabilities] of black children and those from ethnic minoritised backgrounds may be overlooked and erased.* This may increase the propensity of children ultimately being left to safeguard themselves, and not being afforded the care and protection they require to keep them safe from abuse and harm. (Davies, J) **(Recommendation 1.1)**

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[16] Local Child Safeguarding Practice Review Child Q March 2022. https://chscp.org.uk

2.5 Deprivation and Socio-economic issues

There exists compelling evidence highlighting the positive correlation that exists between social isolation, deprivation, poverty and SYV, Knife Crime, and exploitation.[17]

Social inequalities can profoundly impact on a child's vulnerability, which in turn may increase the propensity for exploitation, and exposure to violent crime. Deprivation is frequently synonymous with limited opportunity and increased exposure to, or threat of, criminality, violence and harm. This can lead to children living in deprivation or crime hotspot areas, feeling they are disconnected from the communities that they live in, being de-sensitised to violence that may be commonplace and normalised in certain community contexts, and resorting themselves, to violence as a means of protection, or to retain feelings of self-worth.

Therefore, there is a need to change and widen the lens in which we commonly view knife crime and SYV. Rather than seeking to understand these complex, multi-faceted issues by exploring individual pathology and individual criminogenic risk factors, there is a need to understand the social contexts being navigated by children and the macro factors that influence their lived experience.

The MacPherson Report [18] highlights the need to recognise how factors such as deprivation, poverty and harmful community contexts is needed, and how overlooking structural and undermining the importance of these factors can lead to an oversimplified understanding of knife crime; *"(Knife) crime is often the visible manifestation of deep-seated patterns of inequality and social exclusion. Policing our way out of social problems, therefore, seems misplaced when the emphasis should be on improving 'dangerous places', not hunt for dangerous people."*

Therefore, living in areas blighted by economic deprivation and criminality may in turn increase the propensity of children being exposed to community violence. Research has demonstrated how exposure to community violence can lead to children experiencing emotional, social and cognitive issues which in turn result in these children being further locked in positions of disadvantage.

For example, children, traumatised by what they have witnessed might have difficulty regulating emotions, paying attention or concentrating at school due to being in a state of "survival mode" and hypervigilance. Trauma responses may be misinterpreted as behavioural issues, resulting in exclusions from education, resulting

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[17] Our generation's epidemic: Knife Crime. British Youth Council. Youth Select Committee (2019)
[18] The Macpherson Report: Twenty-two years on (2021)

in further marginalisation and disadvantage;[19] A dangerous, corrosive cycle which systems must find ways to disrupt and break.[20] **(Recommendation 1.2)**

2.6 Previous Exposure to Violence, Adversity and Trauma

As highlighted in previous research pertaining to knife crime, it is important to remember that; "*knife crime does not exist in a vacuum and children who are victims or perpetrators may also be experiencing multiple vulnerabilities".*[21]

There are numerous ways that a child can be exposed to trauma and adversity, both within and beyond the contexts of their homes. Therefore, the review attempts to explore the impact of exposure to harms in a variety of contexts.

The deep-dive analysis did indeed highlight that a unifying feature was that three children within the Rapid Review Sample, had identified vulnerabilities, and or, previous exposure to violence, childhood trauma and adversity in both interfamilial and extra-familial contexts.

2.6.1 The intersection between intra-familial and extra-familial contexts (cumulative harm)

All three children had lived in homes where there had been family discord that resulted in parental separation. There was evidence of contextual safeguarding approaches being applied to understand all three children's exposure and experience of extra-familial harm, but little evidence to suggest that the interplay between extra-familial and intrafamilial experiences was sufficiently explored and understood.

Whilst it is important to avoid adopting and perpetuating the "*dysfunctional family stereotype*" it is important to recognise that family instability may result in children spending more time away from the family home, in contexts where they may be at risk.

"*The thing is, it is not just what happens on the streets but what has happened at home. For me, I didn't get that love and understanding at home, so I spent more time on the streets trying to find that love. And then what happens is that people know what you are looking for and exploit the need for love and belonging. They will give it you and then want something back. So, we need to be thinking about home too."* Child K

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[19] Children and adolescents exposed to community violence: A mental health perspective for school psychologists. School Psychology Review, 29(1), 86-101.

[20] Living in an unsafe community can have a corrosive effect on child development. 7 Mazza, J. J., & Overstreet, S. (2000).

[21] Safeguarding children and young people in education from knife crime: Lessons from London. Ofsted (2019)

Therefore, the simplistic identification of background vulnerability factors is insufficient. Instead, what is required is a detailed assessment and understanding of how the vulnerability factors identified, and early childhood experiences may add weight of influence to certain extra-familial contexts accessed and inhabited by the child.

Even when a child has been appropriately safeguarded and identified familial risks responded to, care should be taken to not assume that issues presented in previous environments and historical contexts are resolved and therefore unrelated or not related to current presenting issues. As such, risk assessments should always consider the intersect that exists between familial and extra familial contexts, even when concerns in the family environment appear to be historical and identified issues responded to.

Exploration of the perpetrator profile provides some additional evidence to support this view. One of the alleged perpetrators in the case of Child R, had no previous criminal history or footprint and was not known to professionals until he was arrested and charged with the offence of murder. However, it has since been recognised that there is a history of family dysfunction, and issues of concern related to his father and his criminal history. Whilst his father was not, at the time of his arrest, a present feature in his life, this case perhaps indicates how previous exposure to harm and adversity can manifest and cumulate in SYV later in adolescence.
(Recommendation 2.1)

2.6.2 SYV: The impact on family and peer networks.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the review heard evidence of how incidents of SYV and knife crime had a profound impact on the families of both victims and perpetrators.

In the case of Child K, his younger brother was a witness of his stabbing; "*I think me being stabbed had a bigger effect on my little brother than it did me as he watched it all. I feel a lot of guilt about that and have had to make sure that he was okay. I was worried for a while that they (the perpetrators of the attack) would come after him. So, we had to move away for a bit.*"

Similarly, it was identified how in the aftermath of the death of Child R, significant threats were made by the community towards the family of one of the alleged perpetrators, requiring police action to ensure the safety of the family who are now considering moving out of area.

The peers and whole school communities are also impacted adversely and traumatised by incidents of SYV. One teacher told us how the death of Child R, "*rocked the school and entire Sikh community to the core.*"

Therefore, it is vital that there are clear strategies and plans put in place which recognise and respond to the wider impact of SYV if incidents occur to provide

safety planning where required for siblings, peer and family members. Additionally, assurance must be provided to schools and communities impacted, to address the feelings of being unsafe that may manifest in further incidents of weapon carrying and incidents of SYV. **(Recommendation 4.2)**

2.6.3 The "Peer Paradox"

One of the most significant findings of this review is that all children who were killed or in the Case of Child K, seriously injured because of SYV, knew the perpetrator(s). They were not victims of offences committed by strangers, but in the case of Child R and Child Z, they were killed by children that they not only knew but had, at least at certain points of their lives been in friendships with.

This finding highlights the influence of peer relationships which may be particularly salient at the beginning of adolescence. The contextual safeguarding framework that has been so well embedded locally, recognises that peer relationships often exert a greater influence over children than the relationships with their parents and care givers and therefore, understands that peer relationships should have a central focus of all safeguarding activity with young people subjected to extra-familial harm.

Whilst the review has seen clear evidence of peer mapping, to scope and understand a child's network, there is less evidence of practitioners understanding and unpicking the complex and frequently shifting dynamics of peer relationships and how such changes in dynamics can have a direct impact on a child's perception of safety and risk of harm.

Rather than adopt a binary view of peer relationships, as being either negative and maladaptive or positive and pro-social, there needs to be an understanding of the complex nature of peer dynamics, and recognition of the fact that peer relationships can be simultaneously harmful and supportive, presenting us with a "*peer paradox.*"[22]

Therefore, there is an opportunity and need to build upon and strengthen existing mechanisms that facilitate peer mapping to understand peer relationships and the dynamics or peer groups from both a risk and strengths perspective.[23]

This approach to peer mapping helps to better understand the individual needs of the child that are being met by peer networks of concern, but perhaps not elsewhere. Additionally, exploring peer dynamics in a strengths-based way, enables practitioners to focus on enhancing protection and safety around a peer group as

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[22] Peer paradox: the tensions that peer relationships raise for vulnerable youth. Sanders, J et al. (2014).

[23] Working with peers: Developing safeguarding practice to work with peer relationships - from defining peer groups and peer mapping to peer assessment. Contextual Safeguarding Network. (June 2022)

opposed to severing ties and connections which may lead to further marginalisation and feelings of disempowerment. **(Recommendation 2.2)**

2.6.4 Corridor Culture: A Potential Indicator of risk.

Whilst or many children, school provides a structure and space that fosters feelings of safety, it must be recognised that for others, their first experience of, and exposure to harm, may be at school in the context of bullying or harmful sexual behaviour. For others, that may have had previous exposure to trauma, abuse and adversity within their families, their school experiences may add an additional layer of harm and vulnerability.

It is evident from undertaking a deep dive of the rapid review sample, that problematic peer networks that resulted in the cumulation of violence and serious harm in community contexts were formed in schools. Therefore, a focus on schools is needed to understand the factors that play out in school settings that may serve as a catalyst for violence and also the role that schools have in preventing SYV and knife carrying.

 The term corridor culture is used to describe acts of hostility and bullying that occurs in school settings, often in places and spaces such as corridors where there is a convergence of children from different year or peer groups, and limited oversight or presence of teaching staff.

Whilst the links between bullying and emotional and mental health are well recognised, the increased propensity of SYV and bullying are frequently less explored. In the case of Child Z, there had been a previous incident in the school toilet between him and the perpetrator of the act of SYV that would ultimately claim his life just months later. Whilst the school raised concerns about this incident and steps were taken to quash tensions between the boys, at the time there appeared to be little consideration or exploration of how the tensions between them could potentially escalate beyond the school setting.

"I think these incidents have been a real wake up call for schools and made us recognise that we need to be professionally curious about our children's lives beyond the school gates." (School practitioner).

Similarly, the child that perpetrated the act of SYV that claimed the life of Child R, was also known to him, and had forged a friendship with him at the school they attended together.

Therefore, where schools identify any issues of concerns related to bullying, problematic peer relationships and peer relationships where there appears to be any aspect or element of power imbalance, they should actively seek to map and understand the contexts and dynamics of peer networks. The support of multiagency partners should be sought, where necessary, to understand the influence of potential problematic peer networks beyond the school environment.

2.6.5 The role of social media in inciting violence

Peer mapping should also consider the role of social media in development and influencing of peer relationships, given that online spaces have become one of the primary ways in which children communicate and interact with one another.

"The problem now, is that kids used to know just a handful of people, but now because of social media their sphere of influence is much greater. That can pose a huge issue." (YOT practitioner)

Social media is frequently used to glamorise and incite violence through live streaming and sharing violent images. It can also facilitate the sale of weapons that children would not ordinarily be able to legally purchase or obtain. Many of the social media platforms commonly utilised by children are largely unregulated, and therefore not protecting children from exposure to violent and harmful content.[24] In fact, algorithms may result in children being bombarded with a slew of violent material even if they have unintentionally clicked on a violent video or image.

Children's responses to the survey created to support this review process, found that 55% of respondents reported that they had been exposed to videos and online content involving knives or depicting knife related incidents. This means that even children who are not on any professional's radar are still exposed to violent worlds and are perhaps even more susceptible to harm due to the lack of professional involvement and therefore reduced opportunity to talk openly with trusted professionals about what they have been exposed to.

Therefore, there is a need to recognise that it is not just children who are unsafe due to the contexts they are navigating and are at risk of being victims and/or perpetrators of weapon assisted violence, but also children who *feel unsafe;* their perceptions and feelings of safety being compromised by the online worlds they have been exposed to. A child's perception of safety is important, as feeling unsafe may increase the extent to which children feel the need to carry a knife for self-protection.

Contextual safeguarding frameworks advocate that online platform and spaces should be considered as an "extra-familial context" and yet, in all the records reviewed, there was no exploration of children's online world or a sufficient focus on their social media footprint.

2.6.6 Social Pressures and "respect"

"Social media plays a big role in violence. An argument can start and then it blows up online. The thing is, that things get said online but Wolverhampton is a small place. If you see that person face to face, which you probably will, then you won't want to back down. Respect and saving face are a big part of it." Child K

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[24] Fixing Neverland. crestadvisory.com

Social media provides a platform that provides an accessible space where children can air their grievances publicly, often cumulating in humiliation and disrespect. This in turn may result in retaliatory acts of violence due to the pressure for children to protect their perceived status and reputation. [25]

2.6.7 Social Media and Narcissism

There is an academic evidence base which highlights Childrens prolific use of social media with narcissism. (Panek et al, 2013). Constant posting of imagery and material is often done with the sole intention of gaining likes, validation and attention. Gangs may also post violent content such as Drill videos for the same purpose, to achieve notoriety and status.

The link between social media use and narcissism is perhaps overlooked but should be considered, as narcissism in the context of social media use, may limit a child's ability to develop healthy and mutually beneficial relationships. (Alloway et al, 2014) and may also be indicative of their need for belonging, attention, recognition and validation not being met elsewhere in any other context of their lives. **(Recommendation 1.3)**

2.7 Time of Incident

When examining the Rapid Review Sample, it was noted that there were some commonalities in the time of day the incidents of SYV occurred in each of these cases. All incidents analysed were committed during April- June and therefore in daylight hours.

Child	Time of Incident[26]
Z	16:07
K	16:10
R	20:37

The highly publicised murder of Birmingham school boy Dea-John Reid, who died from a single stab wound to the chest in May 2021, sent shockwaves around the nation. The CCTV released by West Midlands Police showed the 14-year-old schoolboy running from his attackers in the immediate moments before his death. The public were arguably less shocked that another child had been killed because of knife crime, but rather that this incident occurred in broad daylight, and was witnessed by many members the community. And yet the killing and injury of children in daylight hours is far from an anomaly.

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[25] Social Media as a catalyst and trigger for youth violence. Catch 22. (Jan 2017).

[26] The time of incident refers to the recorded time that the incident was first reported to the emergency services. The incidents reviewed as part of the Rapid Review Sample all occurred between April, May and June and therefore within daylight hours.

There is in fact, a growing body of research[27] which has highlighted the propensity of harm typically between the hours of 4pm and 6pm; a window of time when children are typically navigating their way from school to home, or perhaps converging with peers in public spaces, largely away from parental or professional gaze.

Harm does not just happen in the dark. Therefore, it is imperative that practitioners reframe how they commonly perceive risk of harm as being directly correlated with the hours of darkness.

There is, therefore, a real need to continually monitor and analyse the location and times of incidents linked to SYV and to directly engage with young people to understand where they do not feel safe and what they need to help them feel safe in certain places and spaces. Further exploration should also be given to potential seasonal trends, an emerging theme that has been observed by some practitioners.

Whilst increasing police presence in certain locations and spaces may appear a sensible solution to provide community assurance, this approach is too simplistic and likely to be wholly insufficient, particularly in communities where there is a fear or distrust of the police. In fact, some children and young people, particularly those from black and ethnic minoritised communities who may have been subjected to hyper-criminalisation, may in fact feel even more unsafe by increases in police presence.

Furthermore, research into weapon-carrying suggests that children who had little or no trust in the police and authorities were more than twice as likely to carry a weapon and that children living in communities affected by crime and disorder may not perceive the police as being able to protect them from harm.[28]

Any incident of SYV is devastating. But incidents of SYV that are committed in day light hours, in community spaces with high footfall, presents an additional layer of complexity and harm.

SYV committed in this context, often witnessed by many, can lead to an element of contagion. Those who have witnessed violence may be more inclined to resort to weapon carrying as a means to keep themselves safe from being harmed. Furthermore, repeat exposure to violent incidents can lead to an element of de-sensitisation and normalisation, and almost an acceptance that SYV is merely part of the social fabric of certain communities. **(Recommendation 3.2)**

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[27] A study carried out by the Centre for Trauma Sciences at Queen Mary University of London, retrospectively analysed data on all patients aged under 25 presenting to the emergency department of a large trauma centre in London from 2004 to 2014 after deliberate stabbing. It concluded that children under the age of 16 were most at risk of being stabbed at the end of the school day.

[28] 11 Brennan (2018) 'Knife crime: important new findings could help us understand why people carry weapons' (Accessed at https:// theconversation.com/knife-crime-important-new-findings-could-help-us-understand-why-people-carry-weapons-101755)

2.8 Cannabis Use

Substance use is identified as a risk factor for involvement in SYV in the Home Office's Serious Violence Reduction Strategy, due to the often-inextricable links that exist between drugs and the exploitation of children that often cumulates in SYV.[29]

The links between substance misuse and gang affiliation are also well researched. Research carried out by the Children's Commissioner in 2019 found that 81% of gang associated children have substance misuse issues, meaning that this cohort were 34% more likely to be drug dependent than other cohorts of children known to the criminal justice system.[30]

Therefore, substance misuse in children should always be considered as a risk indicator of exploitation and associated SYV. Exploiters will often use drugs as a means of "entrapment" forcing children into situations of "debt bondage" which is used as a form of coercion and control.

Children who have poor social emotional and mental health and those that are neuro-diverse may be more inclined to self-medicate with substances to manage their emotions, unpleasant feelings and anxiety. This increases the propensity of this vulnerable cohort of children being coerced into drug dependency and being forced into exploitative worlds to "pay back" the debt bondage they have had bestowed upon them.

Yet despite the well evidenced links between substance misuse, exploitation and SYV, there is often insufficient strategic focus on children who misuse substances. The Children's Commissioner report "Still Not Safe"[31], found that only half of Local Authorities had a Public Health Drug Policy in place for children. There is not currently a policy in place in Wolverhampton which provides a strategic focus on substance misuse in children. **(Recommendation 4.3)**

2.8.1 Prevelance: England and local contexts

In England, between April 2020 and March 2021, there were 11,013 children under 18 in contact with specially commissioned drug and alcohol services. [32] The most commonly used substance by under 18's was reported as cannabis (89%), whilst 41% percent of children reported as having problems with alcohol.

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[29] Home Office (2018) 'Serious Violence Strategy' (https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/serious-violence-strategy)
[30] https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/CCO-Gangs.pdf
[31] Still Not Safe: The public health response to youth violence. The Children's Commissioner. (2021).
[32] Young People's substance misuse treatment statistics 2020 to 2021: Report. Office for Health Improvement and Disparities. (2022).
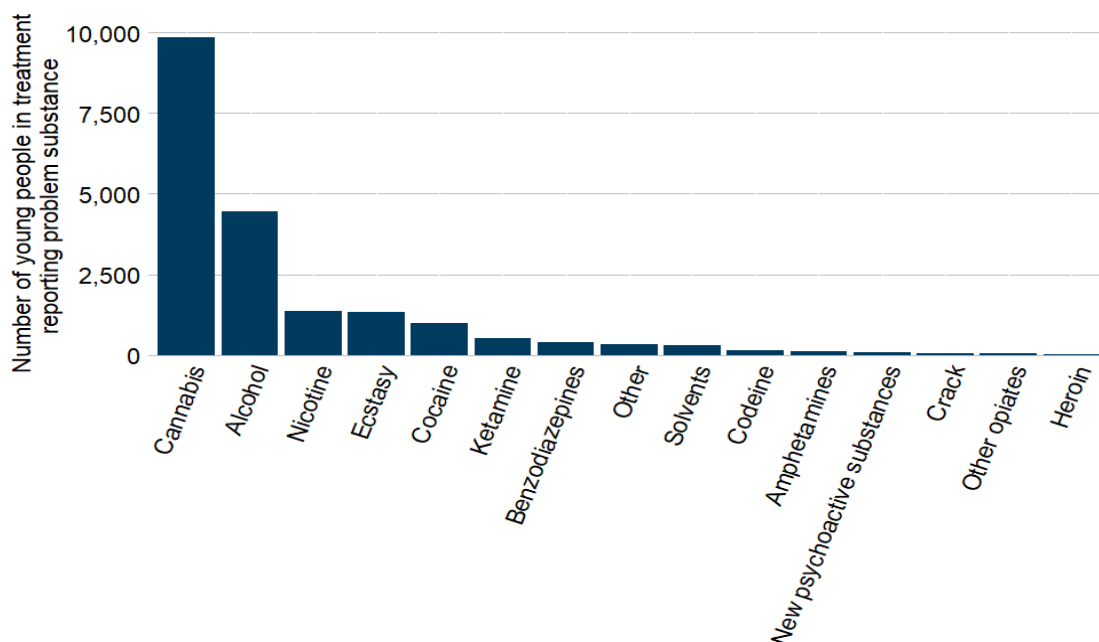
Primary substance used by children under 18 (England) April 2020 – March 2021

In Wolverhampton, there is a commissioned specialist substance misuse service, 360, that provides specialist support and intervention for children (under 18) to support them to address and reduce or cease their substance misuse by providing psycho-educative support and interventions.

Data submitted to the National Drug Treatment Management System (NDTMS)[33] for the reporting period January to September 2022, demonstrates that the Wolverhampton profile aligns with the England context, as locally cannabis is the primary substance of choice of children with identified substance misuse issues.

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[33] The National Drug Treatment Management System collets person level and patient identifiable data from drug and alcohol treatment providers to support the development of a national substance misuse profile.

Substance Misuse Profile (Under 18). Jan - September 2022

30	
25	
20	
15	
10	
5	
0	

Cannabis   Alcohol   Cocaine   Other

Primary substance   Secondary substance   Tertiary substance

[34] NDTMS submission. Substance of choice (Under 18s) – Wolverhampton 360 Jan-Sept 2022

The exploration of national and local contexts highlights the prevalence of the use of cannabis in children which has arguably led to cannabis use being widely normalised and, in some cases, accepted. Normalisation of cannabis may in turn result in professional apathy, and the interplay between cannabis use, exploitation and the propensity of harm not being fully considered and explored.

"There are worse things that a young person could do [than use cannabis], but I know that people use it to help cope with stuff, but most of the time it doesn't help long-term, and makes everything worse." Child K.

2.8.2 Accessibility of treatment

The review also found that despite the local prevalence of cannabis use and cannabis use being a present theme in many of the cases reviewed, (as part of this thematic review and the thematic review of exploitation that was written alongside it), there were comparatively low numbers of children and young people accessing specialist treatment and intervention. Between January and September 2022, a total of 26 children under 18 were accessing specialist support. During the same reporting period in 2021, a total of 30 children were in receipt of specialist support from the commissioned 360 service. The numbers of children accessing specialist treatment should be carefully monitored, as nationally there has been a large decrease in the number of children accessing drug treatment. PHE figures show that numbers of children in treatment have dropped by 41% from 2013/14 to 2019/20.2.[35]

The review identifies that in addition to the support provided by 360, substance misuse advice, support and intervention is provided by other sources and routes, for

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[34] National Drug Treatment Monitoring System data provided by the 360 service, Wolverhampton. Jan-September 2022.

[35] Still Not Safe: The public health response to youth violence. The Children's Commissioner. (2021).

example, school nursing, health professionals embedded within the Youth Offending Team, and from provider organisations such as Power2. However, this may mean that the support available is inconsistent and inequitable.

Whilst intervention can only be provided to children and young people who consent to treatment, further assurance should be sought to ensure that the current commissioned offer is sufficient to address levels of identified need, and that there is a systemic focus on cannabis use as a potential driver of SYV.

Rapid Review Case Analysis

Cannabis was highlighted as a feature in the lives of both **Child Z** and **Child K**. In both cases there was little evidence of their cannabis being viewed as a significant risk indicator of exploitation.

For example, in the case of **Child Z,** it was noted in a MACE meeting held on 14th December 2021, that; "*Z was using cannabis and it was unclear as to where he was getting this from"[36].* In fact, despite this information being unknown, in December 2021, professionals reached the decision to end his MACE plan*,* recording that he was *"no longer deemed at significant risk"* as there was "*no evidence of grooming or exploitation"*. This would suggest that **Child Z's** cannabis use was not perceived as a significant risk indicator of exploitation.

Child K was also known to misuse cannabis. Yet, despite his known links with individuals also known to be affiliated with co-offending peer groups, and his known exploitation risks, there is insufficient evidence to suggest that his cannabis use had been fully explored and therefore the role that cannabis had in his exploitation, having been acknowledged and considered.

There was evidence of **Child Z** being referred for substance misuse intervention; support which he was reticent to receive.

The review acknowledges that interventions to address substance misuse centre on the child's consent and engagement, however the system needs to ensure that non-engagement does not mean that further sources of support and intervention and support are not explored. There should be persistent efforts to provide support and intervention via other routes if specialist intervention is not accepted, for example through the commissioned school nursing service.

There must be consistent exploration of cannabis use and how cannabis is being sourced and funded by children. Additionally, cannabis use should be considered as a risk indicator due to the fact that the effects of cannabis are likely to cause significant disruption in a child's life, for example by increasing the likelihood of

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[36] MACE review meeting – Child Z

school exclusion and potential criminalisation. Both factors have well evidenced links with exploitation and increases in extra familial harm.

2.9 Quantifying the risk of the "unknown"

Both **Child Z** and **Child K** had been referred to MACE due to their identified exploitation risks. However, MACE intervention had ceased prior to their respective death and non-fatal stabbing.

MACE records reviewed for both cases demonstrated good, consistent multi-agency involvement and effective sharing of information. Risks and gaps in contextual knowledge were highlighted and shared. Yet there appeared to be a disconnect in how practitioners understood the cumulative sum of the risks that had been identified. This was particularly pertinent in the case of **Child Z.**

2.9.1 Unknown co-offending peer network affiliation

An area of commonality that existed between some of the perpetrator profiles and the case of Child Z was that there were question marks regarding their affiliation and membership with local co-offending peer networks.

The tangible absence of evidence to identify clear co-offending peer group membership appeared to be seen as a factor that diminished levels of risk, rather than recognising the risks potentially associated with a child having links with multiple co-offending peer groups. No clear alignment with one specific network or group may not necessarily mean that a child is not at risk of harm but may indicate that the child is "*freelancing*".

Freelancing is a term that is used to describe a child or an adult that may have links to (and with several different) co-offending peer groups and networks. This may increase their risk of coming to serious harm, as many co-offending peer groups and networks exist in opposition of each other, and that child may not benefit from the protection that clear and definitive co-offending peer group may afford them. This should be recognised and reflected in risk assessments and safety planning. **(Recommendation 2.3)**

Rapid Review Case Analysis - Child Z:

Child Z was referred into the MACE panel due to escalating concerns relating to exploitation. Two MACE meetings were held to discuss Child Z. The first meeting was chaired on 1st November 2021, and the second and final meeting was held on 14th December 2021.

Professionals reached the consensus at the first meeting in November 2021, that Child Z was at significant risk due to his cannabis use, his missing episodes, his suspected affiliation with known co-offending peer networks, his suspected neuro-divergence, and his fixation with knives.

The level of risk at the second MACE meeting held just 6 weeks after the initial meeting, deemed that **Child Z's** risks had decreased significantly, so much so, that it was decided that MACE intervention was no longer required.

Yet, it would appear that many of the issues that had been identified at the first MACE meeting, were still factors for **Child Z** at the point that MACE intervention ceased. For example, although he was reported as being present at home more, which was clearly viewed as a protective factor, a new missing episode was reported just 2 days prior to him being closed to MACE**. Child Z's** mother still had concerns that he was associating with peers that were known to the police and shared that she suspected that he was dealing cannabis.

Although it was recorded in the minutes of the meeting that there was no evidence to support Mum's concerns, there arguably was. Child Z's mental health and wellbeing worker informed the panel that "*Recently a group of girls were hanging around and one female was walking towards Child Z and asking if he had his other phone on him or had any 'bud' (cannabis) Child Z looked uncomfortable and said he didn't have another phone and said he didn't know what she was talking about. No other information was shared or heard around this".* Possession of additional mobile phones is often synonymous with drug supply and criminal exploitation, and yet there was no further exploration of this concern.

This review concludes that by December 2021, **Child Z's** risks had actually increased. He had been the subject of a school exclusion, had presented with a new injury to his thumb which required stitching, and his mental health had deteriorated and declined. It was shared at the meeting that Child Z had discussed how he was due to move house, and that his new home was fitted with cameras "*over the back door, he said he can see people coming in and out of the house.* There appeared to be insufficient further exploration of this, and whether Child Z was concerned that he may be targeted and subject to harm. There also appeared to be no consideration of how he may be hypervigilant due to fear, and that this may have been underpinning his low mood.

It was also recorded by practitioners how Child Z appeared to be reticent to talk about the future, a red flag of exploitation that is often overlooked. Many exploited

children report feeling so trapped in exploitative contexts that they have little hope and optimism.

Given that that he was still awaiting a neurodevelopmental assessment, and his cannabis use had not been addressed, as well as other risk factors that remained static, it is unclear how his vulnerability to harm could have diminished so significantly in such a small window of time.

2.10 Contextual Safeguarding – the weight of parental voice

Child Z's mother was an active contributor to meetings. She shared that she had been informed that a friend had, "*heard that [Child Z] was threatening people with knives, he threatened to rob them and that he had been beaten up by someone"*. Child Z denied this, although was complaining with pain in his arm which could have been the result of physical injury.

However, the concerns identified by Child Z's mother did not appear to increase levels of risk ratings, or prompt further exploration by statutory partners.

Whilst the review recognises how the system and current processes consistently seeks to include and capture the voices, views and wishes of parents and caregivers, it is less convinced that information and intelligence provided via these sources are given the same weight, consideration and exploration as information provide by key statutory partners. (**Recommendation 3.3)**

2.11 Education and awareness raising.

The responses of the survey with children identified that they would value education and awareness raising around issues such as knife crime. However, only 55% of respondents had received any educational input. Most respondents who indicated that they would value education and awareness raising and the 21% of survey respondents who had received previous educative inputs, felt that education, if delivered in the right way would potentially reduce weapon carrying behaviour.

"Yes, I have heard about the information about carrying a knife. And I know I will never be carrying a knife around."

However, one survey respondent raised a valid point regarding the adverse impact that education and awareness can have on escalating fear and anxiety, which in turn may perpetuate weapon carrying, highlighting the care that should be taken in sourcing education that puts these issues into context, alleviating fear whilst simultaneously factually presenting the risks.

"Well, I don't carry one... but if anything, it does the opposite as it prompts kids to be worried about getting stabbed"

Whilst schools therefore can play a vital role and are well positioned to provide education and awareness raising, the onus and responsibility should not be on them

alone to do so. Thought and consideration should also be given to how educative strategies will reach those cohorts not accessing education, such as those that are home educated, attend alternative education provision and are placed on part-time timetables. **(Recommendation 3.4)**

2.12 Perpetrator Profile

The term perpetrator is used to distinguish those individuals who committed acts of weapon assisted violence from the children who are victims of their actions. However, the review recognises and does not overlook the commonly found victim/offender dichotomy and therefore recognises that perpetrators of violence have often experienced victimisation themselves at certain junctures of their lives.

Understanding the factors and motivations that underpin knife crime and Serious Youth Violence is essential to steer preventative strategies and approaches. Therefore, the scope of this review seeks to not just understand the lives of victims in context, but also the lives of those that are alleged[37] to have perpetrated the acts of violence that resulted in the deaths of Child Z and Child R, and the serious injury of Child K.

To facilitate this profiling, an additional practitioner panel was held with practitioners that were working to support the alleged perpetrators of SYV that resulted in the deaths of Child R and Child Z, and the serious injury of Child K.

A review of the perpetrator profile found that there were some shared characteristics with the victim profile, providing further evidence of the victim/offender overlap.

- **All alleged perpetrators were male**
- **All perpetrators were non-white (two children were from Mixed White and Black Caribbean or Asian backgrounds)**
- **Most perpetrators where from families with absent fathers.**
- **A significant proportion of children within the perpetrator profile had been identified as being at risk of Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE) and known or suspected links with local co-offending peer groups.**

Findings from this panel have been reflected on at relevant points of this review, but the review recommends that the areas of commonality that exist between the

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[37] Where the term "alleged" is used, this is to denote that some of the children arrested and charged are still awaiting trail and have therefore not been convicted in a court of law.

victim and perpetrator profiles should be considered as a basis for further systemic analysis and research.

2.13 Conclusions and Recommendations

This aim of this review is to provide greater insights into the drivers that commonly underpin Serious Youth Violence and knife crime but also recognise the complexity of these issues.

In conclusion, considering the multiplicity of drivers that underpin and fuel Serious Youth Violence, this review rejects single-level theories of violence prevention focused on individual pathology, and rather advocates that violence prevention strategies should adopt a social-ecological approach that understands the intersect between structural, cultural and individual contexts.

Therefore, changing the trajectory of children's lives and making a significant difference to children's outcomes, whilst possible, can seldom be achieved by professional intervention alone. Instead, there is a need to understand and work in effective collaboration with families, children and whole communities.

Whilst several cross-cutting themes were identified between cases that formed part of the rapid review sample and perpetrator profiles, the deep dive analysis of the rapid review sample, (particularly the case of **Child R**) highlighted that risk indictors may not always be predictive of future behaviour and therefore care should be taken to conceptualise SYV and knife crime in a way that is homogenous and not universal.

Given that two local children were killed and another injured in such a short space of time may mean, understandably, that practitioners at both strategic and operational levels feel that their confidence to tackle this issue has been undermined. But the commitment to improve local responses and prevent further loss of life is noted. Furthermore, Child K is testament to the efficacy of support that is provided to children at risk of harm.

Additionally, the overwhelming and perhaps unexpected scale of survey responses from local children shows that children are willing to share their perspectives, lived experiences and expertise to help strategic leaders develop and implement localised responses to these issues and challenges.

Children want to speak out. And this review concludes with feeling assured that leaders will hear them.

1. Training and professional development

Recommendation 1.1: SWP should explore the expansion of the current training offer and invest in specialist training to ensure that practitioners from all sectors understand the concepts of adultification, intersectionality and how these factors intersect with SYV, exploitation and knife crime. The training offer should provide safe, reflective spaces which prompt and encourage critical challenge and new conversations about race, ethnicity and discrimination and facilitate delegates to understand and consider how race and ethnicity impacts a child's identity and lived experience in the different contexts that have relevance to their lives.

Recommendation 1.2: SWP should consider expanding the current training offer to ensure that practitioners from all sectors understand the lived experiences of children growing up in poverty and the intersect that can be observed between poverty and SYV. WST should further support this area of work, by linking this area of work and focus to existing workstreams that are happening locally in relation to the cost-of-living crisis and ensuring that multi-agency risk assessment processes and safety planning processes consider the impact of poverty and deprivation.

Recommendation 1.3: WST should explore the current training offer and explore if additional targeted workshops to provide further education and awareness raising for children, parents, carers and professionals about the role that social media plays in the amplification of issues that may culminate in violence. Schools should consider implementing social media bystander training for pupils so they are aware of how they can report their concerns about violent content they have been exposed to.

2. Risk Assessment and Response

Recommendation 2.1: All agencies that work with children and young people should, via existing audit and quality assurance frameworks, consider how effectively assessment processes in use across the partnership, equitably and consistently capture and consider social and structural factors in a child's life. Additional learning and support should be considered to support practitioners at an operational level to explore and understand how intra and extra familial experiences interface and increase the propensity of risk beyond the family environment.

Recommendation 2.2: SWP should build on the current work of MACE and CEMOG to provide additional support and training to schools to facilitate them to carry out effective peer mapping that extends beyond the scope of schools. Further training should be provided to enhance the existing contextual safeguarding training offer,

to enable practitioners to understand and respond to issues and complexities presented by the "peer paradox".

Recommendation 2.3: SWP should ensure that practitioners from all sectors are aware of the potential risks a child may be exposed to if they are known or suspected to be "freelancing". Plans and processes should be put in place to ensure that any child who is identified as a "freelancer" is subject to appropriate safety planning and in receipt of appropriate intervention and support to respond to identified levels of risk.

Recommendation 2.4: WST and strategic partners should ensure the continued commissioning of services that provide children access to relatable practitioners with lived experience and ensure that children who lack positive male influence are able to access support and intervention from positive male role models.

3. Intelligence and Information Sharing

Recommendation 3.1: WST and strategic partners should consider utilising the evidence base and intelligence gathered locally explore and better understand the drivers that underpin weapon carrying behaviour in females and the role of females in co-offending peer group contexts and SYV.

Recommendation 3.2: WST and strategic leads should continually track and analyse the location and times of incidents of SYV and ensure that interventions are delivered at key times and in problematic locations and spaces to respond to risk and threat. Strategic and operational leads should work directly with children to understand, from their perspective, their perceptions of safety, what proactive and innovative multi-agency interventions are required to make spaces and places safer for children.

Recommendation 3.3: WST and partners should seek further assurance via existing audit frameworks and processes, that intelligence and information provided by parents, carers and the wider community is being appropriately considered and used to inform risk assessment and safety planning and given the same weight and consideration as intelligence and information provided by police and statutory partners.

Recommendation 3.4: Educative strategies should ensure that information reaches those not in full time or mainstream education, including those that are electively home educated. The delivery of educative strategies should involve a multi-agency approach to ensure that education and awareness raising is not the sole responsibility of schools.

4. Strategy and Governance

Recommendation 4.1: WST, SWP and key strategic partners are encouraged to look at aligning the Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) and Exploitation agendas in order to strengthen approaches and intervention. Further assurance should be sought to ensure that educative strategies and campaigns which utilise the support and expertise of the third sector explore with children and young people how factors such as gender roles and socialisation intersect with SYV.

Recommendation 4.2: SWP should consider as part of the serious violence duty the development and roll out of a strategy which ensures that consistent, equitable and appropriate support and interventions are put in place to support and protect the families of victims and perpetrators in the aftermath of incidents of SYV. Strategy development should also include clear plans to provide enhanced levels of support to school and community networks where necessary.

Recommendation 4.3: WST and Public Health leads should consider through existing workstreams the development of a Children's Substance Misuse Strategy that ensures the continual and strengthened strategic focus on children's substance misuse and the role that substance misuse may play in increasing levels of SYV and exploitation.

Annex A

List of Contributors

Wolverhampton Safeguarding Together

Wolverhampton Children's Services

Walsall Children's Services

Walsall Youth Offending Team

Wolverhampton Youth Offending Team

Power2

NHS Royal Wolverhampton Trust

West Midlands Police

Khalsa Academy

Annex B

Terms of Reference

In parallel to the thematic review of exploitation, a deep dive will be conducted into recent case studies where young people have been indirectly/directly engaged in knife crime to understand what common features there are in the lives of young people who feel it is necessary to carry a knife.

The review will seek to understand the key characteristics and potential reasons why individuals carry knives and seek to explore opportunities to increase capability and capacity within the whole safeguarding system to raise awareness/education of young people, parents, professionals, etc on how to address this and minimise risks associated with it.

This will be achieved by:

- Undertaking a systemic review of case studies of children and young people who have been resident in Wolverhampton when they have been victims of serious injury or death as a result of knife crime.

- The deep dive of cases will also have a focus on the perpetrators of knife crime (in addition to victims) to understand their actions and offending in context.

- Panels with children and young people from a diverse range of backgrounds to understand from their perspective, the factors and key characteristics that underpin weapon carrying behaviour, and their feelings and perceptions of safety.

- Panels with a professional from key statutory partners and the voluntary and third sector (preferably panels will comprise of professionals who have were involved with children and young people who are a subject of the case studies to be examined) to understand the systemic and operational challenges they encounter when working to protect children from knife crime.

- Determining how effectively public health infrastructure is being used to prevent the contagion of weapon carrying and knife crime.

- Examining the efficacy of current educative strategies in desisting weapon carrying behaviour.

- Panels with parents and carers to understand the contextual challenges they face when trying to prevent their children from being impacted by weapon carrying behaviour.

- Exploration of the role that social media and media influences has on weapon carrying behaviour.

In order to ensure that the review is carried out in scope and achieves all the key aims as set out above, it is important that commissioners of this review and key stakeholders agree Key Lines of Enquiry (KLOEs). The proposed KLOEs for the purpose of this review are set out below:

Key Lines of Enquiry KLOEs:

Prevention and Education

- Determine the efficacy of programmes available locally that prevent and desist Serious Youth Violence and weapon carrying behaviour

- Understand the impact and efficacy of educative strategies.

Demography and problem profiling

- Understand how effectively partners quantify local levels of Serious Youth Violence and their understanding of the drivers of Serious Youth Violence and weapon carrying behaviour.

- Ascertain if certain locale, or certain cohorts of children and young people are disproportionately impacted by Serious Youth Violence and weapon carrying behaviour and if so, identification of the factors that contribute to certain cohorts being disproportionately impacted.

- Ascertain if and how the Covid-19 pandemic and other current societal factors has impacted the exploitation landscape and contributed to Serious Youth Violence and weapon carrying behaviour.

Partnership working and information sharing

- Understand the effectiveness of partnership working and the use of public health infrastructure to tackle the issue of Serious Youth Violence and weapon carrying.

- Establish the systemic and operational barriers that impede the identification and response to children and young people who may be at risk of Serious Youth Violence.

- Determine the effectiveness of information sharing across local authority borders for children and young people who may be at an enhanced risk of exploitation and associated Serious Youth Violence.

Assessment and risk management

- Explore the consistency and accuracy of risk categorisation and management and understand how this may impact on proportionate and effective safeguarding responses.
- Determine how effectively organisations are working contextually to understand risk and plan effective risk response.

Participation and engagement

- Understand how the voices and lived experiences of children and young people are influencing learning and changes to policy and practice.
- Explore how well sighted strategic partners are on the needs of those working operationally with children and young people and their families.