

## Escaping the Trap:

Supporting homeless young people affected by youth violence and criminal exploitation.





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# Executive Summary

**Youth violence and criminal exploitation are significant drivers of youth homelessness, and the loss of accommodation is a significant risk for the young people involved.** Much has been done to highlight the risks of youth crime and violence, but the impacts on a young person's housing situation should be made clearer.

**A lack of diversionary activities and targeted support for young people puts them at risk of falling into criminal activity and gangs.** Universal youth services, family mediation and access to therapies and mental health support can help prevent both youth violence and youth homelessness, but need adequate funding and long term stability.

**The experience of homelessness puts young people at an increased risk of getting caught up in criminal activity.** From sofa surfing to staying in hostel accommodation, homeless young people are vulnerable and without support risk being targeted by gangs and exploiters.

**Difficulties accessing sustainable employment, and challenges arising from the benefit system can push homeless young people towards criminal activity and make them more vulnerable to exploitation.**

**Young people moving on from homelessness and into independent accommodation risk being targeted for exploitation if they do not have the right support.** Loneliness and isolation can push young people towards risky situations and networks, and the loss of accommodation and repeat homelessness.

**Homeless young people are some of the most vulnerable members of society, but are often not seen as such.** Treatment by the police and other agencies often does not take into account specific vulnerabilities, especially for those aged over 18.

# Recommendations

**1. The Department of Work and Pensions** should ensure that the benefits system is able to cover essential living costs for young adults, and that supported accommodation residents are able to access sustainable employment through restoring the original lower-rate work allowance to this group.

**2. The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport** should ensure that young people across the country have access to quality and professionally staffed youth services; local authority youth services should be placed on a statutory footing and funding guaranteed by government, as should funding for youth work qualifications.

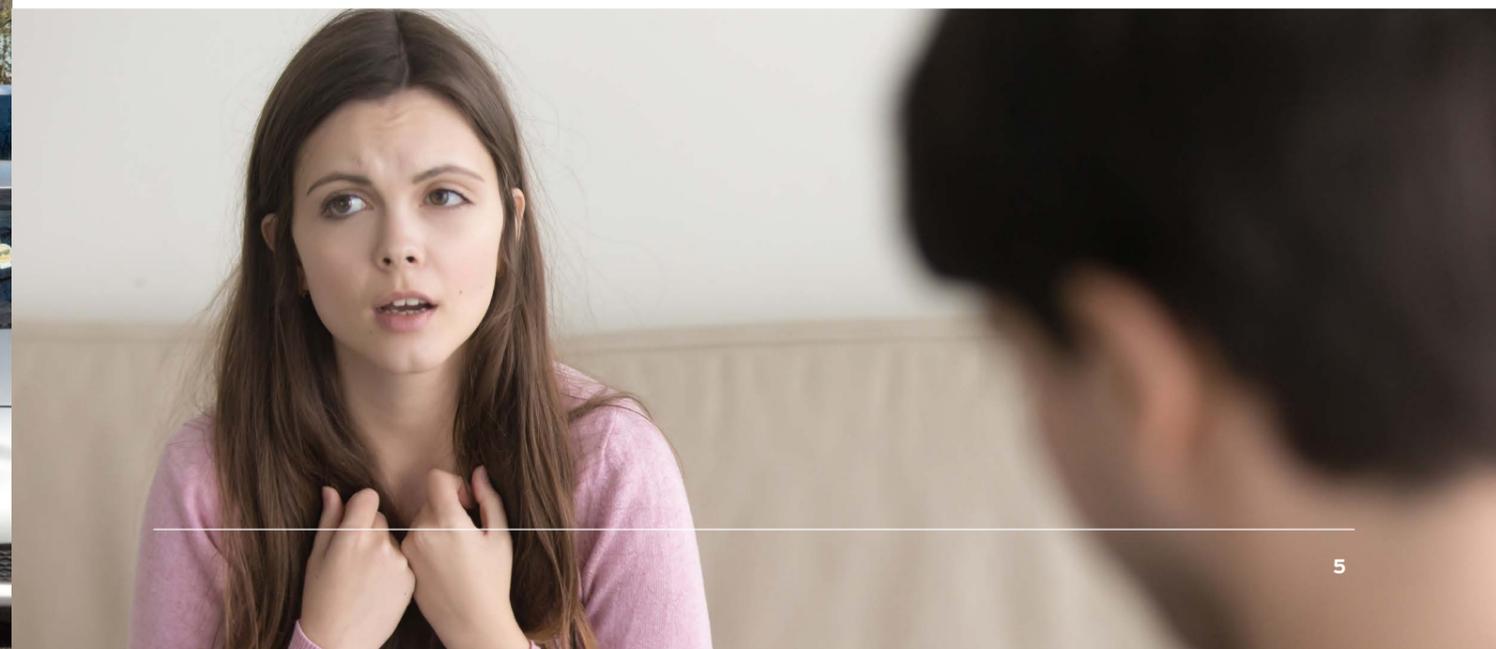
**3. The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government** should support young people and households affected by serious youth violence to access alternate accommodation, through updating national homelessness guidance to provide greater clarity around priority need.

**4. The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government** should provide resources to local and regional authorities to expand and replicate successful housing-led gang exit schemes such as the Pan-London Housing Reciprocal.

**5. The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government** should ensure that local authorities are properly resourced to provide high-quality, ongoing floating support and advice for young people moving on from homelessness.

**6. The Home Office** should ensure adequate funding for the Police to enable Police and Crime Commissioners to sign up to the 'commitment to refer' those experiencing or at risk of homelessness to other local agencies in order to provide holistic support to young people affected by youth violence and criminal exploitation.

**7. The Ministry of Justice** should build upon the recommendations of the 2015 Justice Select Committee report and review the criminal records system in relation to children and adults up to the age of 25 to ensure that young people convicted of minor offences are not blocked from accessing opportunities in later life.



# Introduction



Serious youth violence is one of the most pressing public policy concerns in the UK today. With knife crime rates at their highest levels for over a decade, and one in three victims of knife homicide aged under 24, significant political and media focus is on understanding and tackling serious youth violence. Alongside this, there is increased understanding of particular forms of organised crime and drug running for which the trafficking, exploitation and use of violence and coercion against vulnerable children and adults is a fundamental component.

Young people experiencing homelessness, who are among society's most vulnerable and isolated groups, face significant risks from criminal exploitation and serious youth violence. There is overlap between many of the factors understood to drive both youth violence and youth homelessness, such as poverty and exclusion, family breakdown, experiences leaving care and other state institutions, and difficulties with mental health and trauma. Homelessness can also increase young people's exposure to violence and exploitation, whether in hostels, sofa surfing and in insecure accommodation, or sleeping rough.

This research explores how these issues affect homeless young people, and identifies some of the drivers that can put them at risk. With the harmful impact of these activities so great, it is critical that organisations supporting homeless young people understand how to identify, divert and protect any who may be at risk.



# Methodology

## Literature review

A literature review was undertaken through online searches and discussions with practitioners to signpost to relevant papers and reports. The review provided a starting point to assess previous research into the links between homelessness and exposure to criminal activity, and to assist with shaping the lines of enquiry for the qualitative research.

## Call for evidence

Between February and May 2019, Centrepoin sent out a written call for evidence to practitioners, working in the areas of housing, homelessness, policing, safeguarding and social services, youth services and youth justice. Ten organisations and individuals responded with written evidence.

## Interviews with practitioners

Fifteen practitioners took part in semi-structured interviews either on the phone or in person. These interviews explored how youth violence and exploitation affected young people experiencing homelessness, and how organisations were able to meet these challenges. These ranged from twenty minutes to an hour and a half.

A full list of participants for either the interviews or respondents to the written call for evidence can be found at the beginning of this report.

## Discussions with young people

Between February and May 2019, Centrepoin spoke to 19 young people about their experiences of homelessness and exposure to youth violence and exploitation. Three young women and one young man who have lived in supported accommodation took part in semi-structured interviews lasting between half an hour and an hour and a half. A focus group was also held with fifteen members of the London Assembly's Peer Outreach Team (aged 16 to 25), to explore what they saw as the main drivers of youth violence in the capital. Several participants had experience of homelessness.

Young people's honest testimony is critical, however, the subject of this research topic presented several ethical considerations around the possibility of distressing and re-traumatising the young people who took part. Those identified for the research were either those that had moved on from supported accommodation a while ago, or those identified as appropriate by key workers and supported housing staff where they were still living in supported accommodation.



# Background and definitions

## Youth violence, gangs and criminal exploitation

Tackling serious youth violence is a major government priority across the UK. While rates of crime, including violent crime, have been in steady decline over several decades, recent increases in violence affecting young people have caused considerable public concern, with a shift towards increasing numbers of younger victims and perpetrators.<sup>1</sup> 2017/18 saw the highest number of people killed with a knife since records began, with over a third of those killed aged under 24.<sup>2</sup>

This most recent upturn in youth violence has occurred alongside a reduction in public spending in the wake of the 2007/8 financial crisis. This has led to significant spending reductions to frontline public services, including a real terms reduction in police numbers from 244,497 in 2010 to 199,752 in 2018. Local government has also seen cuts of around 50 per cent since 2010, with non-statutory services - such as youth services - facing reductions in funding of up to 90 per cent over the same period.<sup>3</sup>

## Youth violence

Central to the discourse around youth violence is the role of gangs. There are around 27,000 children in England who identify as a gang member, with a much wider group identified as being at risk of harm from gangs.<sup>4</sup>

For some commentators, affiliation and involvement in gangs provides a route to wealth and status for young people on the margins of society, including those living in areas of high poverty and/or inequality who may face structural challenges in accessing education and employment.<sup>5</sup>

While the reasons why young people become caught up in youth violence are complex, research has consistently highlighted the impact of growing up in deprived areas, with limited opportunities for employment and development<sup>6</sup> as well as personal difficulties and problematic family environments, as increasing young people's exposure and vulnerability to involvement in criminality and gangs.<sup>7</sup> For these young people, gangs are identified as providing a sense of belonging and protection.<sup>8</sup>

Several of the practitioners in this research highlighted issues with the terminology used around youth crime, specifically the word 'gangs'. The term is often used by politicians and the media, to broadly describe groups ranging from young people socialising on the streets to organised criminal enterprises.

**"All the news... They glamourise the drill, the gang violence and all of that... if you're always talking about the negative things people do, everyone's going to turn negative."**

- Jordan

Those working in youth justice highlighted that a focus on gangs often failed to capture young people's experiences of violence and exploitation, and too often led to them being labelled as criminals and their vulnerability being overlooked. Commentators have argued that a loose and unclear definition of what a 'gang' is has led to large numbers of people - overwhelmingly young black men - facing investigation and criminalisation simply for their peer groups, style of dress and the music they listen to.<sup>9</sup>

**"I think the word is really unhelpful... I'm not suggesting we don't have a problem with young people in groups who are in conflict with each other. We definitely do. But just talking about gangs is not a helpful way of understanding what's going on here."**

-Youth offending team

## Criminal exploitation

Criminal exploitation is an arrangement where a vulnerable child or adult receives something (such as money, drugs, gifts, or even affection) as a result of them carrying out a task of a criminal nature for another individual or group of individuals. Criminal exploitation is characterised by relationships of imbalance, where the exploiting party has power and control over the exploited person by virtue of their age, status, wealth, intellect or physical strength.<sup>10</sup> This form of exploitation routinely features violence, intimidation and coercion. Often the victim will not recognise that they are being exploited, seeing the relationship as consensual and seeing themselves as in control. Criminal exploitation is frequently bound up with sexual exploitation and abuse.

One increasingly recognised form of criminal exploitation is 'county lines', whereby 'runners' (frequently vulnerable young people) are used by gangs to transport and distribute drugs. This spans rural and urban areas and the property of a vulnerable adult may be used as a local base. The exploitation of vulnerable people has been identified by the police as 'an essential aspect of county lines drugs supply'.<sup>11</sup>

The model relies on the exploitation and manipulation of vulnerable and isolated individuals - from the runners who can be as young as primary school age transporting drugs, cash and weapons across the country, to the vulnerable adults who are 'cuckooed' and lose control over their own home.

Three quarters (74 per cent) of British police forces report that organised gangs target vulnerable people, with two thirds (65 per cent) identifying the targeted exploitation of children and young people by gangs locally.<sup>12</sup> As the police have become better at spotting 'traditional' gang members, criminal gangs have sought to recruit and exploit those less likely to attract attention from the authorities - such as younger children, particularly girls.<sup>13</sup>

**"It's not a new phenomenon, but the difference is that we've given it a new name. We've badged it, which is good because once you've given something an official title people start to take notice".**

- Safeguarding specialist

The numbers of vulnerable people - in terms of the numbers of children in care, children excluded from school and vulnerable adults - has risen markedly in the past five years.<sup>14</sup> The number of people identified as victims of trafficking and exploitation has also increased.<sup>15</sup> Alongside this, markets for hard drugs, particularly crack cocaine, have expanded as new routes and increased demand have driven their availability.<sup>16</sup> These are factors that have created an environment for county lines and criminal exploitation to flourish.

The impact of involvement in criminal exploitation includes:

- **Physical injuries: risk of serious violence and death.**
- **Emotional and psychological trauma.**
- **Sexual violence: sexual assault, rape, indecent images being taken and shared as part of initiation/revenge/punishment, internally inserting drugs.**
- **Debt bondage - young person and families being 'in debt' to the exploiters; which is used to control the young person.**
- **Neglect and basic needs not being met.**
- **Living in unclean, dangerous and/or unhygienic environments.**
- **Tiredness and sleep deprivation: child is expected to carry out criminal activities over long periods and through the night.**
- **Poor attendance and/or attainment at school/college/university.<sup>17</sup>**

## Youth homelessness

Across the UK, all forms of homelessness have increased in the last decade.<sup>18</sup> The causes of homelessness are often complex, but a critical lack of affordable housing, difficulties with welfare reform and a lack of security in the growing private rented sector are all key drivers of homelessness.<sup>19</sup> In 2017/18, over 103,000 young people (aged 16 to 25) across the UK approached their local authority for assistance with homelessness, although the majority were not recorded as receiving any support.<sup>20</sup>

The experience of homelessness is traumatic and isolating, and can cause long term damage to a person's health and wellbeing.<sup>21</sup> Being homeless affects a person's ability to access stable employment, start or continue in education and sustain relationships and peer networks. Homelessness is also understood to increase the risks of violence and exploitation faced by those experiencing it.<sup>22</sup> For young people

in particular experiences of homelessness frequently involve exposure to violence, victimisation and domestic abuse.<sup>23</sup>

The government has committed to tackling homelessness, and ending rough sleeping by 2027. The 2018 Rough Sleeping Strategy, outlines investment in emergency accommodation, specialised prevention work and measures to help people move on from supported accommodation. The Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 was passed to ensure that everyone approaching a council as homeless receives an assessment, support and advice, and that a range of public agencies take responsibility for identifying and preventing homelessness. However, concerns around resources and wider challenges arising from a lack of affordable accommodation mean that it is still unclear just how much these measures will benefit young people experiencing homelessness.



**Police funding has reduced by a fifth since 2010<sup>24</sup>**



**Local authority budgets have been reduced almost half since 2010<sup>25</sup>**

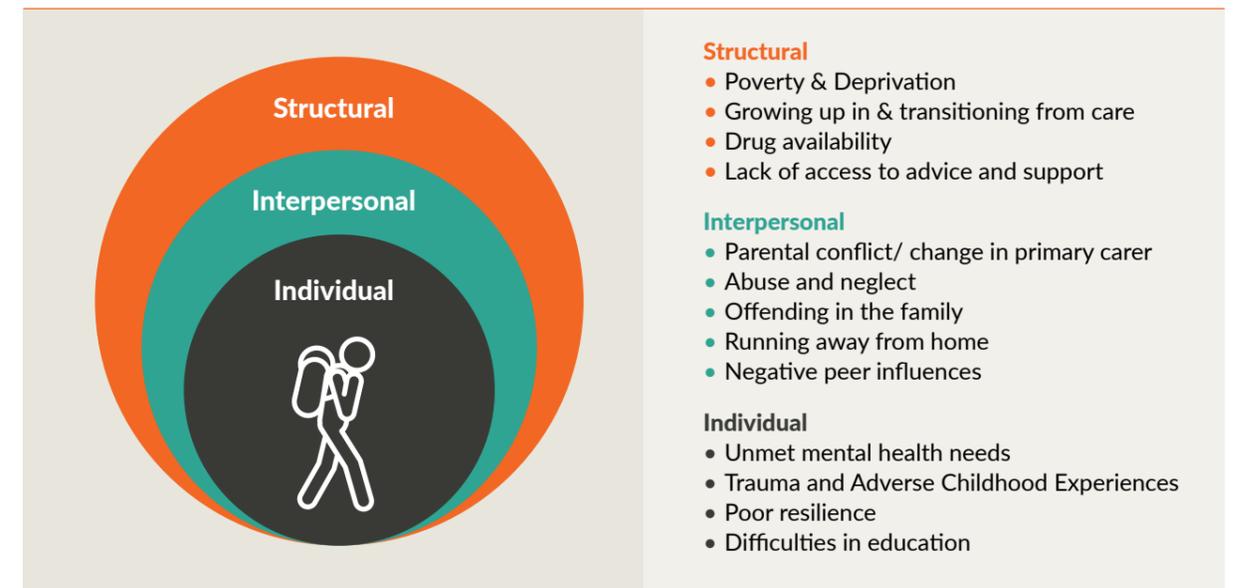


**Funding for youth services in England has been reduced by almost two-thirds since 2010<sup>26</sup>**

## What are the drivers of youth violence and criminal exploitation?

Both youth violence and youth homelessness can be viewed as an interplay of individual, social and structural factors, which disproportionately affect young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. Many of the factors understood to drive involvement in youth crime and put young people at risk of exploitation, such as poverty and instability, are similarly reflected in the reasons why young people can end up homeless.<sup>27</sup>

### Youth Homelessness and Youth Violence – Overlapping risk factors



Sources – Early Intervention Foundation (2015)<sup>28</sup>, Office of the Children's Commissioner (2019)<sup>29</sup>, Centrepoin (2016)<sup>30</sup>, Llamau (2015)<sup>31</sup>

Through the course of this research, two main themes came out which affected homeless young people especially. These were poverty and isolation, and both were identified as increasing the vulnerability of homeless young people to exploitation and involvement in criminal activity.

### Low incomes and poverty

For all the young people spoken to in this research, not having access to a stable source of income was cited as a key reason why somebody might become involved in criminal activity. For young people experiencing homelessness, not having a stable home is a serious barrier to accessing and sustaining employment, while reduced benefit rates make it extremely difficult for young people without family support to meet the costs of living.<sup>32</sup>

As well as difficulties affording day to day items, one young person spoke about pressures arising from social media to keep up with peers and to portray an expensive lifestyle.

Those interviewed felt that homelessness could push some to breaking point where they felt they had to become involved in criminal activity just to meet their basic needs.

**"You're living in a hostel and can barely afford to pay rent. So it's almost like there's no other way of getting money. You can't get a job, you may not be doing so well in school, or you might be working but it's not giving you any money. You see lots of older boys who are living in the hostel, or outside in the area they show you can make money doing this, this and this and you think I can make money doing that."**

- Leila

For young people living in supported accommodation, rules around housing benefit and Universal Credit entitlements meant that it could often make little sense to increase their income or take up more hours at work. Delays and reduced payments could also leave young people without enough money to live on, pushing them to make impossible choices.

**"It's this waiting game. Delays. I remember waiting for my first payment, I had to borrow money. The world doesn't stop, your bills don't stop, the bus doesn't suddenly let you on for free because you're waiting for your payment. Life goes on. That's part of the driving factors."**

- Courtney

One young person highlighted how getting involved in low level crime was a way of ensuring they had enough money to cover their rent and other essential costs. However, any level of involvement could escalate the risks that young people faced, from arrest and criminalisation, to losing accommodation, to exposure to violence and exploitation:

**"For me, it was a make ends meet thing. It wasn't meant to be a long term. For most people, it isn't meant to be a long term thing. But for some people, they are just unfortunate to get stuck in the cycle. And when you borrow from certain people, or you depend on certain people, not everyone's got a good heart or got good intentions. People can be violent. They can put that kind of fear in you."**

- Courtney

Debt was also identified as pushing young people towards criminal activity and exploitation. Where they had relied on peers in a times of crisis, homeless young people could find themselves having to pay debts off with considerable interest, or being made to carry out tasks as payment.

**"Debt is one of the big drivers here. It's used by criminal gangs as a way of holding power and control over young people. The minute you fall into debt it all becomes difficult. If you're working in my county line, and you fall into debt, I'm going to make you work for free. I'm going to control you, and you may never pay that off."**

- Academic

One youth homelessness service in the midlands reported how a young man had fallen into debt with a local drug dealer, who made him have his Universal Credit claim paid into his account. Staff were able – with some difficulty – to have the bank account changed and the young person was relocated for his own safety.

**Recommendation: The Department of Work and Pensions** should ensure that the benefits system is able to cover essential living costs for young adults, and that supported accommodation residents are able to access sustainable employment through restoring the original lower-rate work allowance to this group.

## Exclusion and Isolation

For young people experiencing homelessness this sense of exclusion is intensified, putting them at increased risk of becoming involved in gangs and criminal activity. They are unable to rely on support networks, and cannot turn to family and friends for practical and emotional support in the same way that their peers can.

**"You're vulnerable, and any help is help. I know that from personal experience, homeless people are a lot more impressionable. People with families... maybe they have been on the block or whatever, but they've got family to go home to. Mum can speak to them, at least to say I hope you're not going out with a knife. Young homeless people, who have they got?"**

- Leila

Practitioners spoke about how isolation could push young people towards gangs for social support and identity, and criminal groups and exploiters would specifically target those without strong networks.

**"...they know where to go, who to pick, who to approach. That's one thing I'll say about them. All of these exploiters are skilled in identifying who they can exploit. And rarely do they get that wrong."**

- Safeguarding specialist

**"There's an even greater risk if there's no connection to their family whatsoever... The people that still had contact with their parents or family member were less likely to enter [criminal activity] full throttle."**

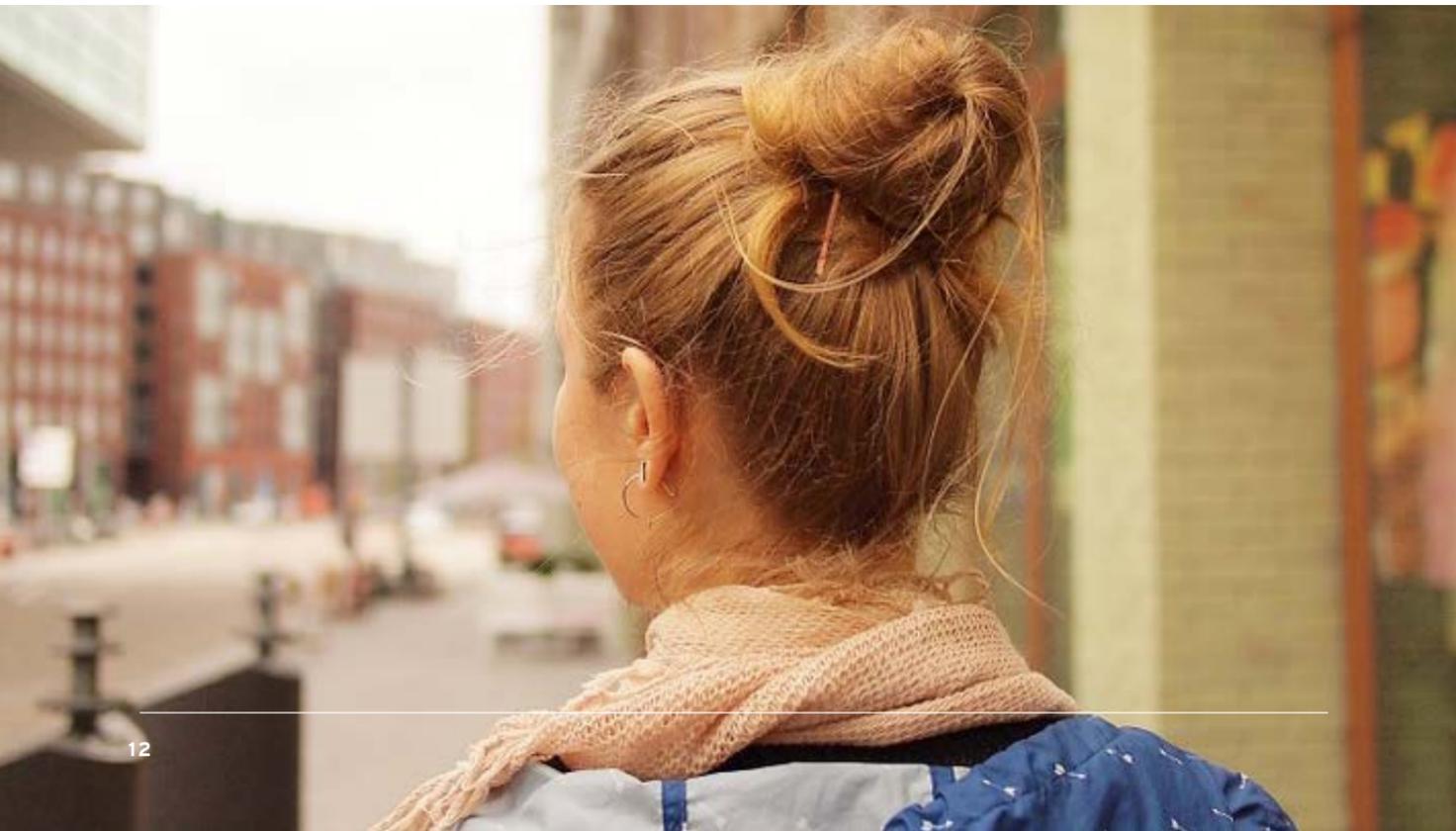
- Courtney

Young people also reported that fear of violence could lead to them carrying weapons, or getting involved in gangs and criminal groups for their own protection, and that boredom and loneliness could themselves push young people towards risky behaviour and situations.

**"If you're in a hostel by yourself all the time you're going to start feeling some loneliness. And if you're feeling that you're going to want to go outside, you want to be filled with adrenaline. And you're going to do things that aren't beneficial, to just not feel lonely."**

- Jordan

Young people spoke about how violence and intimidation were constant risks for those caught up in criminal activity. Several had either witnessed acts of violence or been victims themselves. Supported accommodation practitioners highlighted how personal disputes between young people had boiled over and led to attacks with knives and other weapons.



**“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!”**

- Courtney

**“If I don’t carry, somebody else might be carrying. And these guys, they judge you exactly as police judge you. Police see you and they see gang. And these boys, they see me in the same way.”**

- Jordan

Even where young people were not involved in gang or group-based criminal activity, interviewees reported how they could become targets for robbery or assault where their peers or other people in the neighbourhood became aware of them having money. Even young people not involved in crime at all faced risks of violence, simply by virtue of their location, their peers or how they looked:

**“I’m thinking about how I’m dressing, because I’m scared I might get hurt if I dress in a certain way. And it doesn’t make sense.”**

- Jordan

Young people were keen to stress the positive impact that committed staff and regular contact could have. Several spoke about the value of youth workers and the importance of having a trusted adult to speak to in a context which was not ‘clinical’ or stigmatizing, but noted that cuts to local authority budgets and non-statutory services had made these environments increasingly difficult to access.

Tackling exclusion and isolation, not only for young people in supported accommodation services but also those who have moved into independent accommodation, was seen as being of critical importance by practitioners working with homeless young people.

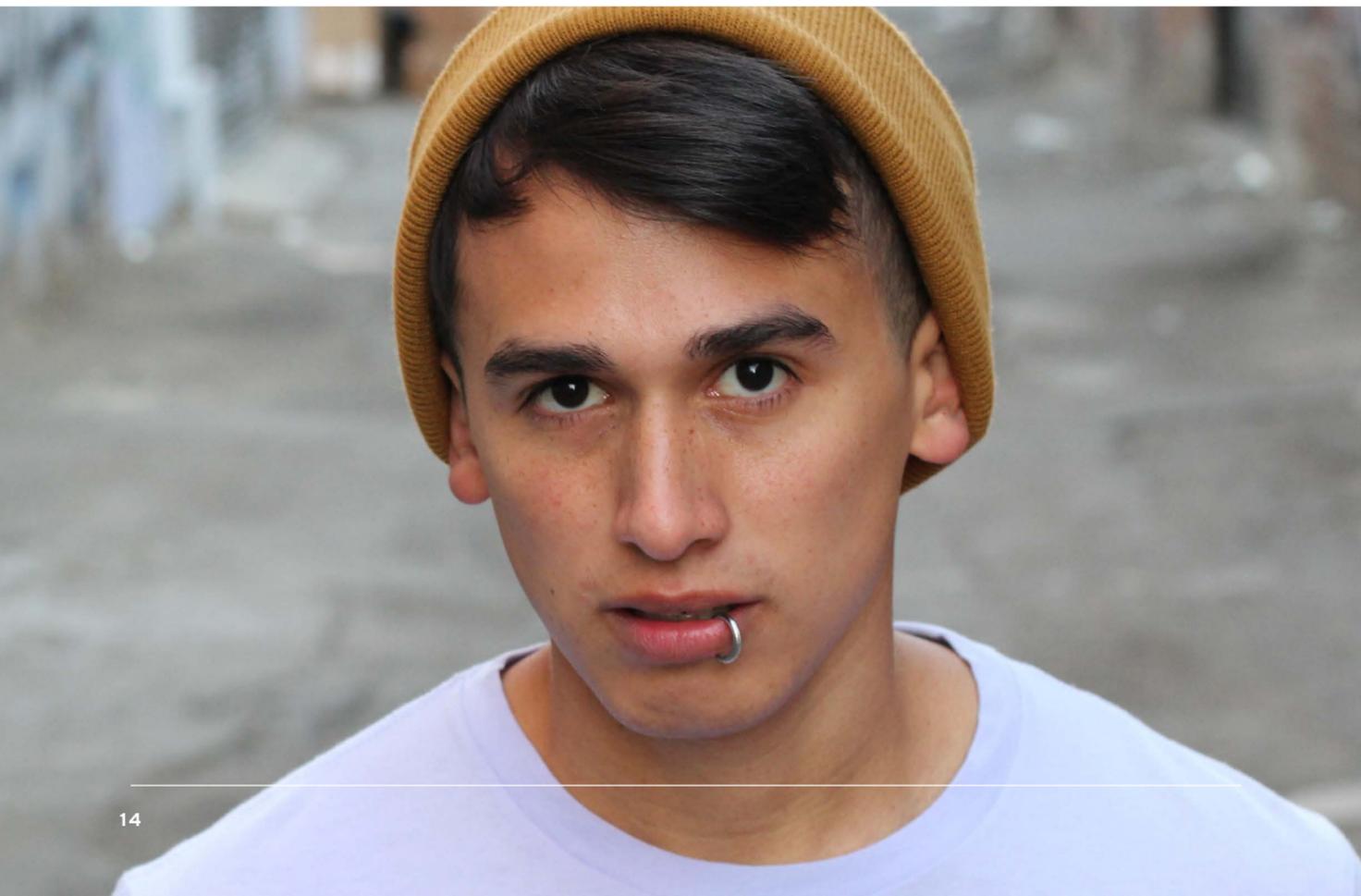
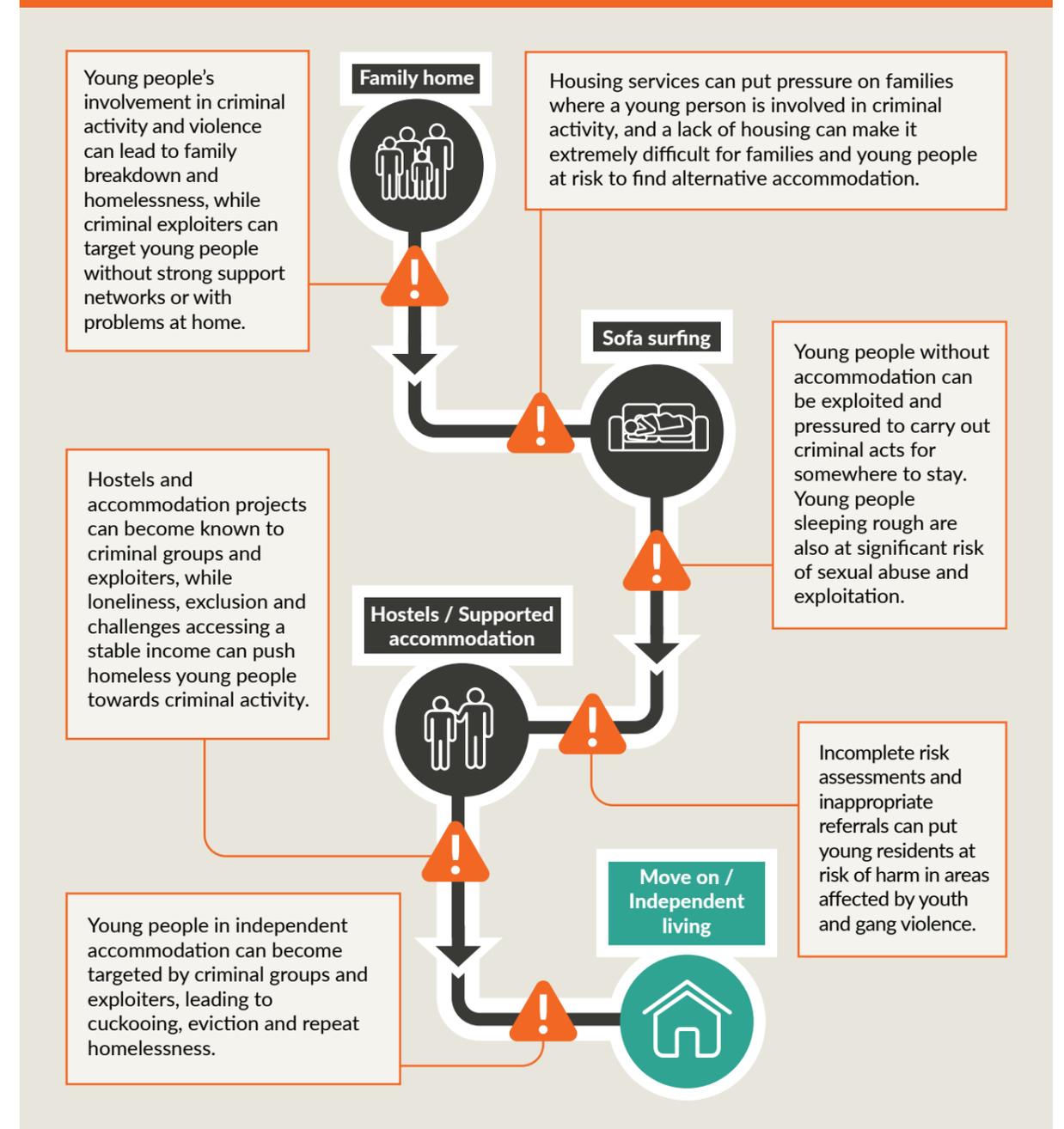
**“We worked with one young person with substance use issues, their dealer came to ‘chill out’ in the property, somebody else came in and before you knew it, it was taken over and the young person wasn’t able to access their own place anymore. They were scared that if they said anything to anybody they’d lose the place and end up back on the streets.”**

- Gangs specialist

## How do youth violence and criminal exploitation impact homeless young people?

Violence and criminal exploitation can affect a young person at every stage of their journey through homelessness. From losing a home due to violence and antisocial behaviour, being exposed to exploitation while homeless, through to being unable to access independent accommodation and further opportunities due to historic affiliations. This research found clear links between the experiences of violence, criminal exploitation and youth homelessness.

### Youth violence and criminal exploitation can affect young people at every stage of their journey through homelessness



## Losing accommodation

Domestic abuse and violence related to family breakdown is a common experience of many young people becoming homeless.<sup>33</sup> Almost one in 10 (9 per cent) of the 18-24 year olds recorded as approaching a local authority for support had lost accommodation due to violent relationship breakdown in 2017/18.<sup>34</sup> However, the role of violence and exploitation outside the home can be overlooked, and how this can impact on a young person's ability to remain in settled accommodation. In one study, almost a fifth (17 per cent) of young people accessing homelessness accommodation services had become homeless due to antisocial behaviour or crime.<sup>35</sup>

Centrepont's research into the drivers of family breakdown found that for many young people, exposure to violence and criminal activity were part of daily life prior to becoming homeless and contributed to pressures on households and family relations. Where families struggled to access support, criminal activity and antisocial behaviour often contributed to family breakdown and a young person being forced to leave their home.<sup>36</sup>

**"I've seen both sides. They've been threatening your family home to the point you can't get home, and then you being the threat in your home. Whereby, everyone else is a target, so you need to get out."**

- Courtney

One interviewee, who had become involved in low level criminal activity through peers at his school, spoke of being made to leave the family home after his parent felt he was putting his siblings at risk:

**"Peer pressure, getting into smoking and that. I was round people that weren't beneficial to me. And my parents could see that I was becoming a bad influence to my younger siblings, and so they kicked me out. They were giving me chances...but they had to think of the younger ones."**

- Jordan

In some cases, practitioners reported young people involved in gangs and criminal activity having to flee the family home due to danger to themselves or their family members, leading to them facing homelessness and further isolation.<sup>37</sup>

**"...if a young person gets into debt, the threat can now come back to the family in a way it didn't use to before. And that's a big change, in the past five or ten years... It's a change of rules."**

- Specialist Gangs Academic

**"...when [young people] realise it's not what they thought, they're stuck in it. They can't get out. And there are these awful threats against them and their families, so they will disappear and by doing so make themselves homeless."**

- Safeguarding professional

Previous studies have also noted exploiters and criminal gangs' increasing propensity to target children and young people without strong support networks and with emotional vulnerability, such as those experiencing problems at home or with special needs and mental health issues.<sup>38</sup>

**"I feel like its exploitation, these older ones seeing the younger ones in vulnerable positions and getting them to start doing certain things. This can lead to homelessness because your parents start to not trust you, seeing that you're showing some behaviours that you weren't doing before, start asking what kind of friends are you hanging around with, and then they start letting you go, slowly, giving you little chances."**

- Jordan

**"...it's in the interest of the street gang to pull them apart. It is almost like grooming for [child sexual exploitation], they're pulled apart from their parents. And that's more recognised now than it was before... and over time the links to the family disengage and the attachments become stronger with the peer group"**

- Specialist Gangs Academic

Practitioners reported that in some situations, a young person's behaviour or involvement in criminal or antisocial activity could lead to families being threatened with eviction by housing services. In situations where families struggled to access support, it was often easier to ask a young person to leave rather than put the entire family's accommodation at risk.

**"In this borough we've got a zero tolerance policy. If its drug supply or weapons issues, you'll get housing saying your child can't live here, otherwise we're kicking you out. And you'll be making yourselves intentionally homeless."**

- Youth Offending Team

While under homelessness legislation individuals and households can apply as homeless due to violence, both practitioners and young people reported that in reality the thresholds for proving violence - and successfully being moved - were often very difficult to reach. Again, these pressures could build up to the point where families felt they had little option than to ask a young person to leave home.

**"My brother had issues with the boys in my area. They'd come outside my mum's and intimidate him... He couldn't even leave the house. We went to the council to ask if we could move because of the danger but it was really hard to move - even with problems of gang violence in the area. People just don't see that or understand that as an issue as to why you need to move. It just puts people's lives in danger."**

- Leila

Practitioners reported challenges arising from young peoples' reluctance to disclose information about the risks they were facing, for fear of reprisals, not wanting to 'snitch' and a general mistrust of the police and other authorities.

## Homelessness

Once a young person has lost accommodation, the push factors to become involved in criminal activity and youth violence become even stronger. In one Centrepont study, more than one in 10 (12 per cent) homeless young people committed a crime in order to be arrested and taken into custody for the night.<sup>39</sup>

Research into youth gangs in the London Borough of Waltham Forest identified that few identified gang members had any form of stable housing tenure, and many moved variously between family, friends and 'cuckooing' arrangements.<sup>40</sup> Analysis has also suggested that children in or associated with gangs are far more likely to have an insecure housing arrangement than their peers.<sup>41</sup>

Even where a family could prove the real risk of violence, they would not always be viewed as priority need, and a critical lack of affordable housing stock made it difficult for local authorities to find them alternative accommodation.

**"If the young person's not in priority need, and the family aren't also in priority need, they wouldn't get a management transfer, so what often happens is that the family will cut ties with the young person and throw them out."**

- Housing Options professional

**"To get a move, the amount of evidence you require is ridiculous. You need police reports, you need engagement reports, you need social services. And these are people that have been let down, and don't want to start having to tell their story all over again."**

- Courtney

**Recommendation: The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government should support young people and households affected by serious youth violence to access alternate accommodation, through updating national homelessness guidance to provide greater clarity around priority need.**

Practitioners highlighted how accommodation could be offered to a young person in exchange for taking part in criminal activity, but this accommodation was often unsafe and put them further at risk. In many cases it meant young people were further indebted to criminal groups and exploiters.

**"...if somebody wants me to carry a knife for them, do a favour for them so I've got somewhere to stay so that I'm not on the streets at night, I think most of us what take that option... it's a very, very easy opportunity to exploit."**

- Specialist gangs worker

## Hostels and supported accommodation

Supported accommodation projects (such as hostels, foyers and semi-independent accommodation) were seen as some of the safest options for young people who could not stay with family or friends. Trained key workers could provide oversight and support to address a range of needs, and support vulnerable young people into education

However, practitioners and young people said that some hostel environments can expose young people to violence and criminal activity, particularly larger projects and 'all-age' hostels where vulnerable young people can be placed with older individuals with complex and multiple needs.<sup>42</sup> Guidance to councils on identifying victims of trafficking and criminal exploitation highlights that the homeless community, and in particular homeless young men, are especially at risk of being exploited by criminal groups:

**'Traffickers are known to exploit vulnerable individuals by approaching them in homeless shelters, food banks and soup kitchens with a view to recruiting them to carry out short term work in the guise of cash in hand payment, however this can become criminal work where the recruiter may use drugs and/or alcohol as a means of control over the victim.'**<sup>43</sup>

One young person spoke about the risks of homelessness accommodation services, and the residents there, becoming known to criminal groups:

**"When you're in a hostel, people know where the hostels are... the minute you live there you can become a target. If they know there's drugs, or think someone's dealing in there, they'll kick it in. You're targets both for robbery and recruitment. If you're doing something for yourself, and someone finds out, they'll come and rob you. If you're struggling, looking for a way out, and someone sees that you're vulnerable, sees that you're easy to exploit, they'll strike up a friendship. It's beneficial for them as well as for the young people who don't see that they're exploited. I saw it too many times, too much of it."**

- Courtney

One homelessness hostel reported that the service had become a target for a local criminal gang, and that young people had become entrapped and trafficked after 'free offers' of cannabis and alcohol. The service had increased its staffing and security but staff raised concerns that the targeting and exploitation had just moved elsewhere in the town.

Other practitioners highlighted the impact of inappropriate referrals, where information about a young person moving to a service was incomplete and where risk assessments had not been properly carried out by the referring agencies. Other young people in a service could be placed at significant risk, even where they themselves were not involved in any criminal activity.

**"...they're not getting the full information, particularly from children's and adults services, and are only finding things out after the fact. So when a young person presents as very high risk because of mental health, drugs, CSE... staff highlight that and they [referring agency] are like, 'oh yeah we know.' Well why didn't you say anything!"**

- Safeguarding professional

### Case study: Ishmael

Ishmael was a 17 year old boy in supported accommodation, known by staff to be involved in drug dealing and street crime. The local Children's Services department referred another young person to the service, not knowing that this person was in a rival gang and actively looking to harm Ishmael. Staff were able to intervene before anything happened between the two young people, but both had to be moved out of the housing pathway and to different cities for their own safety.

One homelessness service highlighted that young people themselves informed staff that a new resident had been involved in a violent altercation with a young person already living in the service, allowing the situation to be resolved before anything could escalate.

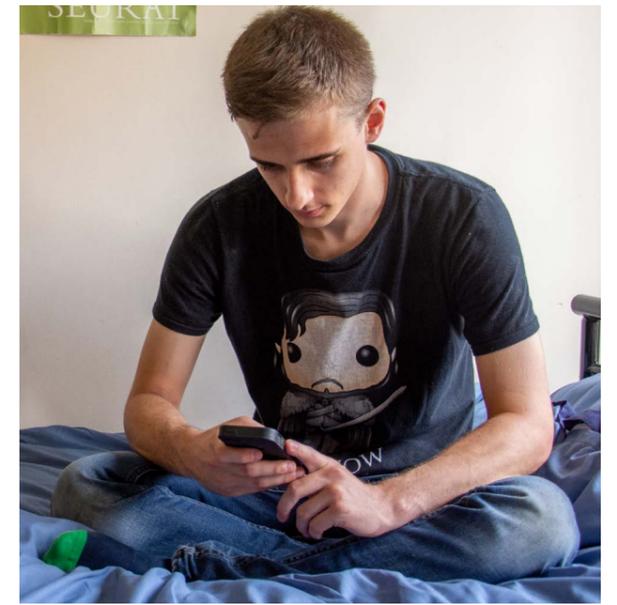
However, some young people felt that if residents were known to be involved in criminal activity, they would often not bring it back to the hostel they were staying at.

**"They know this where they live. It makes it different. And responsibility kicks in. I'm pretty sure there's people here from every area [in the borough]."**

- Jordan

**"The service I work for provides a safe place for young people to return to. Even if they are out dealing drugs all day, they are safe when they return to the service and often tend to respect the service and staff's best efforts to support them."**

- Supported housing worker



## Forced labour and modern slavery

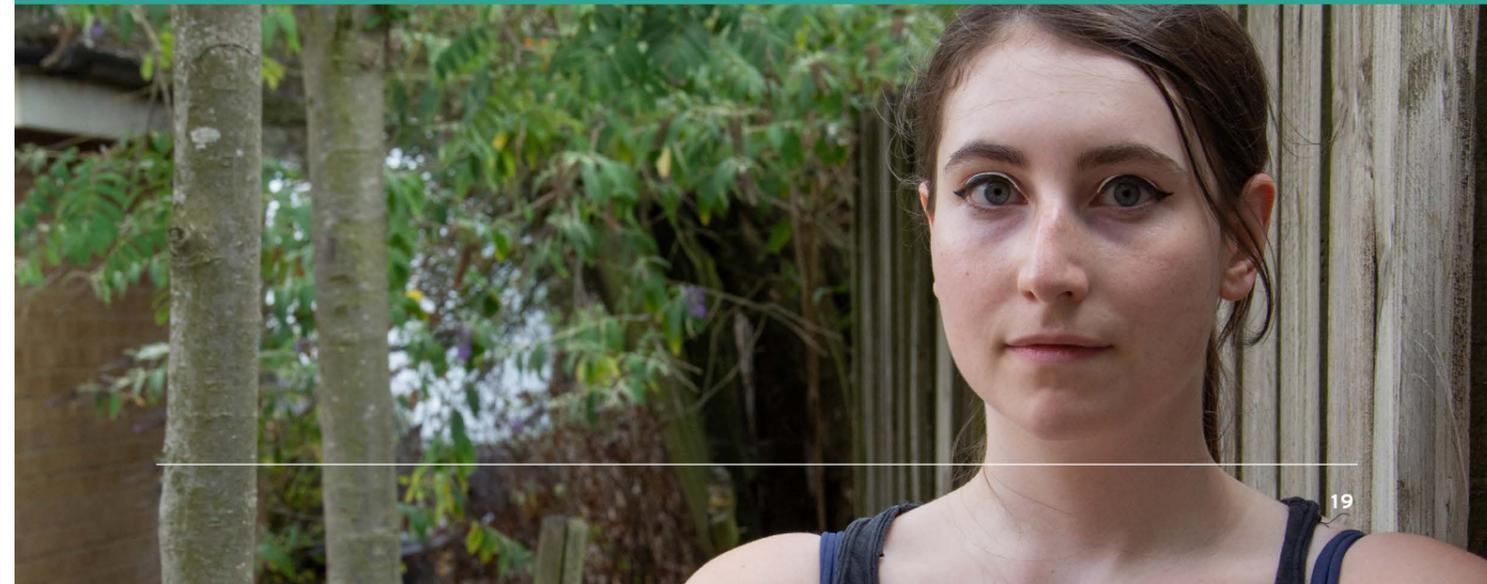
Several practitioners reported cases where homeless young people had been forced or tricked into carrying out physical labour. One young man was promised his own accommodation in exchange for renovating another property in the area, and it was not until he had finished the job that he realised the promised accommodation did not exist. Another service in the north west highlighted how residents of a young persons' project had been targeted by a local criminal gang, and had been trafficked to Spain and deprived of their passports until they had paid off 'debts' to the group.

In almost every case, young people and practitioners highlighted the importance of services being sufficiently staffed, where residents were able to easily access and communicate with key workers. However, funding

cuts have impacted their ability to keep services staffed around the clock, and there were concerns about young people with complex needs being left unsupervised.

**"I was fortunate in that most of the housing I was in had a support worker there... it was times when there wasn't a support worker, that's times where it's a lot easier to do what I was doing. If there's no support worker around, if you don't have good advisors, it's easy to get caught up, it's easy to see the fast money, the quick money and just think 'let's do it!'"**

- Courtney



## Financial Crime and Exploitation

Both young people and practitioners highlighted how homeless young people could become caught up in various scams, frauds and money laundering schemes. Young people reported being targeted in colleges, online and in homelessness services to take part in financial crime:

**"...it's easy to get caught up in that circle. I was living in a hostel, I was only 18 years old and didn't have any money. I was trying so hard to get a job. I couldn't get anything, but these boys in my hostel were like 'oh you can make money where you do this thing where you go into a shop with a stolen credit card and just pretend to be someone else'. Well, I'm not making any money and jobseekers isn't coming for another two weeks."**

- Leila

Fraud was often presented as 'easy money' with a low level of risk for the young person involved. However, financial crime could lead to blacklisting and difficulties accessing financial services in future, in turn affecting young peoples' ability to access employment, benefits and accommodation. Practitioners also highlighted how this could put young people at further risk of exclusion and financial hardship, as difficulties opening a bank account created further barriers to gaining employment, claiming benefits and paying rent, and could push young people further towards criminal activity.

**"There's life after. Even destroying your credit at 18, 19, when you're 25 trying to buy a car it becomes a problem."**

- Courtney

## Gender-based violence and sexual abuse

While fewer young women and girls are involved in criminal activity, and for shorter periods of time, they face specific risks and exposure to gender-based violence, exploitation and intimate partner abuse. Evidence highlights the overlap of women's experiences of homelessness and their exposure to violence and exploitation; a significant proportion of young women experiencing homelessness have experienced domestic abuse. Almost one in five (19 per cent) of young women in one survey had suffered sexual assault while in an insecure sleeping arrangement.<sup>44</sup>

Several of the young people in this research highlighted how girls and young women could be exploited to carry or sell drugs, due to being perceived as less likely to attract police attention:

**"These boys asked me and my friend to go country while we were living in a hostel. And we went, we didn't see anything. We're thinking 'oh we're going out of London.' Little did we know we were just there to decoy the situation, to make them look less bait. I thought I was seeing this guy and we were just dating. But we weren't. He was just taking us on the M1 to country... I didn't realise at that time that I was in that situation. You don't realise you're being used, you think 'oh we're on a date and my friend is just dating his friend.' Until years later, you know you were going to be exploited."**

- Leila

Where both males and females were exposed to situations of criminal exploitation, practitioners stressed that sexual violence and abuse were common forms of control and coercion. One young person highlighted that for homeless young people especially, exploiters would take advantage of their situation for sex:

**"A lot of people that people think are couples, aren't actually couples. Let's put it that way. Exploitation definitely takes place. Free rent, as long as you sleep with me, that happens a lot. Young men are at risk of that as well."**

- Courtney

## Impact on mental health and wellbeing

There are clear links between youth violence and poor mental health for young people. The role of trauma and adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) are identified as increasing a young person's vulnerability to gang involvement and exposure to violence, abuse and exploitation also causes long term damage to their mental health and wellbeing.<sup>45</sup>

The young people and practitioners in this study highlighted the impacts of exposure to criminality and violence on the wellbeing of homeless young people, many of whom had already faced significant trauma. Where young people looked to self-medicate through drugs and alcohol, practitioners stressed how this could risk bringing them into further contact with criminality and exploitation.

**"My sister lives in a hostel and it got raided, they raided a different room but she got PTSD afterwards. She was so affected by the raid."**

- Leila

Young people spoke about the difficulties in accessing mental health services and a lack of non-clinical spaces where young people could talk to professionals such as youth workers. Pressures on local services also often meant long waiting times and young people only receiving support at crisis point.



# Move-on and independent living

As well as driving homelessness and impacting on young people without access to stable accommodation, this research found that youth violence and criminal exploitation can act as a serious impediment for young people looking to move on from homelessness and into a long term home of their own.

**“Gang-related activity can keep young people trapped in the cycle of homelessness. It can disrupt their lives, their move-on plans, their stability in one place.”**

- Supported housing worker

For young people who had previously been involved in street crime and gang activity, historic affiliations and problems with young people from other areas could reduce their move-on options. Key workers reported working with young people to identify areas which were suitable and safe, but in many cases this further restricted limited move-on options and meant young people ended up ‘stuck’ in supported accommodation for longer than they needed to be.

**“Something could have really occurred in an area which they don’t want to go to. And every time they go there it affects their mental health. And people just have to accept that. It’s not even about therapy. They just can’t go there. It brings back bad memories and trauma. I didn’t know about that until something similar happened to me.”**

- Jordan

Staff highlighted one case where a young man in supported accommodation in London and was being considered for a housing association tenancy. He was attacked near the service and had to be moved out of the area for safety reasons. He then lost the chance of moving into the housing association property.

For young people caught up in criminal activity, being arrested can significantly impact their future opportunities and options. It can be extremely difficult for young custody leavers to access accommodation on release, which can push them into a cycle of further homelessness and exclusion.<sup>46</sup> Practitioners highlighted the impact of criminal records on young people’s access to accommodation and other services:

**“...you’ve got training providers who won’t accept referrals because a young man’s seen as too risky. Even housing providers. They’ll ask for risk assessments, and if that young person’s been arrested for carrying a knife or being involved in a robbery, they won’t accept them.”**

- Youth Offending Team

Several of the young people spoke about the impact of convictions impacting them in later life, and expressed concerns that youth criminal records could stay on their record forever:

**“Little things like dealing drugs will stay on your record for life. When you’re 30 and trying to get a job or go on a family holiday, the things you did when you were a teenager could affect that.”**

- Courtney

Many practitioners spoke about the risks of individuals being targeted after moving on from supported accommodation and that if support and oversight were not available, young people faced being exploited or falling in with criminal groups. Those working across a range of services highlighted cases where vulnerable young people had lost accommodation after being targeted by older criminals. As well as putting young people at risk of harm and violence, practitioners highlighted how this could also lead to loss of accommodation and significant difficulties accessing housing in future.

**“When it comes to move on, it’s how you work with the providers. Maybe they should be in a house, rather than on an estate. Putting them onto an estate can be putting them back to square one. If they haven’t got the support they’ll come into the clutches of someone who they think understands them.”**

- Supported housing manager

**“When you move into your first independent accommodation you’re very lonely. And that loneliness can take you to some very vulnerable situations.”**

- Leila

Where young people had relied on ‘friends’ for accommodation previously, they could feel obliged to return the favour and let people stay in their property. This could in turn lead to the property being used for illegal activity and a young person facing eviction and further homelessness.

Similarly, where young people had been moved out of an area for their own safety, if support was not joined up there was considerable risk of them either getting caught up in criminal activity in their new area, or leaving their new accommodation and coming back to join up with old networks.

**“One family were moved to [borough] and put in a Travelodge. So one room, this young man, his mum and his sister... he’d been moved, but there was no support, and he just wouldn’t stay there. He just went back to the flat he’d come from and stayed on his own. So he was even more vulnerable, because he couldn’t tolerate the placement.”**

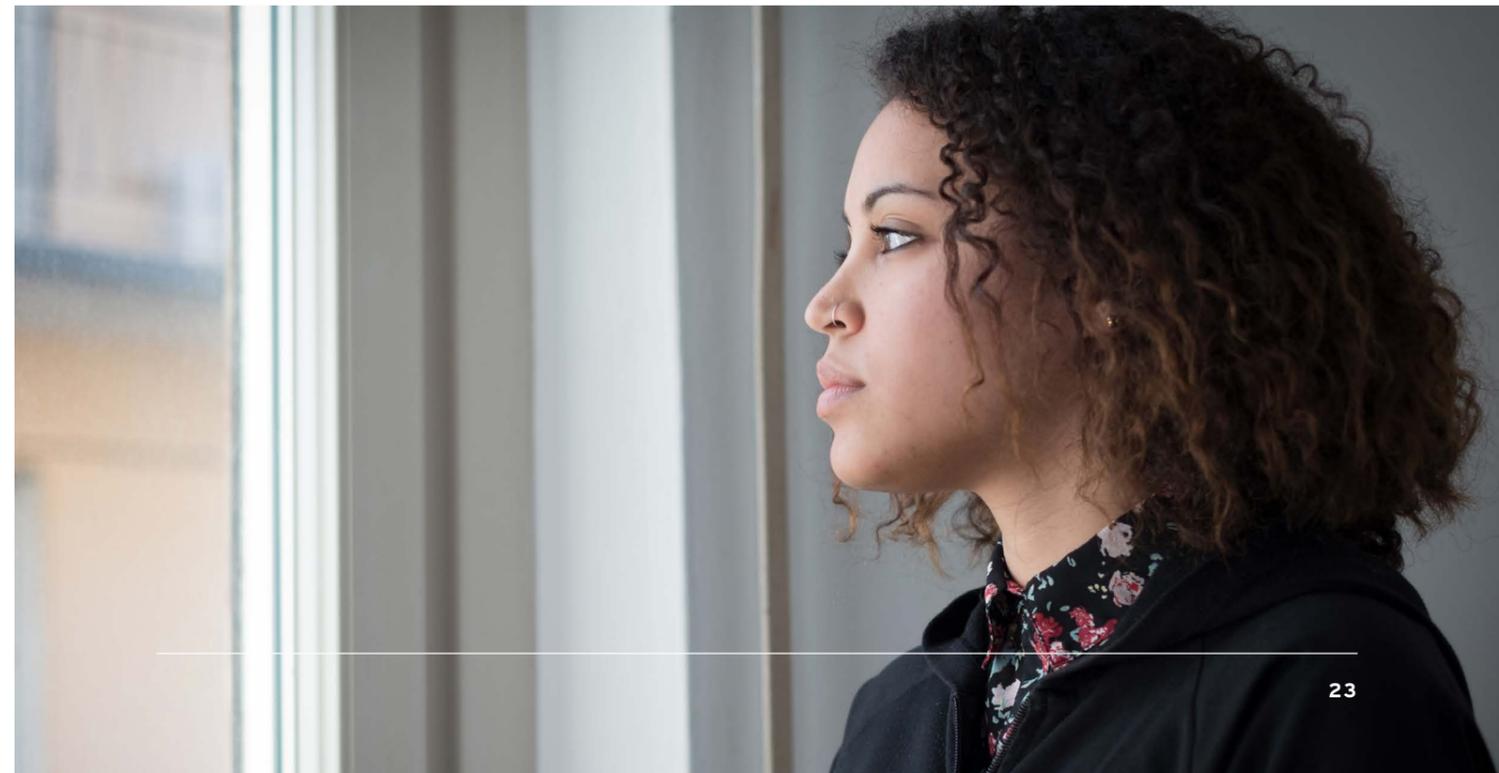
- Youth Offending Team

However, with the right support and guidance, having access to stable accommodation plays a critical role in helping a young person desist from criminal activity and avoid situations where they would be exposed to violence and criminal exploitation.

**“It’s about stability. If you give an individual the opportunity to put down some roots, to remove the chaos, and having someone to believe in you. If you’ve been kicked around from pillar to post, when you have some stability... everything changes.”**

- Safeguarding specialist

**Recommendation: The Ministry of Justice should build upon the recommendations of the 2015 Justice Select Committee report and review the criminal records system in relation to children and adults up to the age of 25 to ensure that young people convicted of minor offences are not blocked from accessing opportunities in later life.**



# What are the signs that a young person may be at risk of youth violence or criminal activity?

Supported housing staff highlighted different signs that a young person could be involved in criminal activity, from having unexplained possessions and expensive goods, to lacking engagement with a key worker and support.

**“Unexplained money, frequently coming back to the hostel late. Some young people are out with their friends, but some might be getting picked up outside the hostel. Wearing expensive clothes, a lack of engagement with a key worker...”**

- Courtney

**“You see somebody that hasn’t gone out for ages, and you work on why they aren’t going out. Does he owe money? Is he scared that people are looking for him? Does he only go out late at night, but is in the hostel all day?”**

- Supported accommodation manager

However, staff were keen to stress that young people could also be wrongly identified as involved in criminal activity and gangs simply because of their peer group or the clothes that they wore. It was critical for key workers to be able to develop relationships and trust with the young people they worked with, to be able to discuss any issues with gangs or violence in a safe and trusted setting.

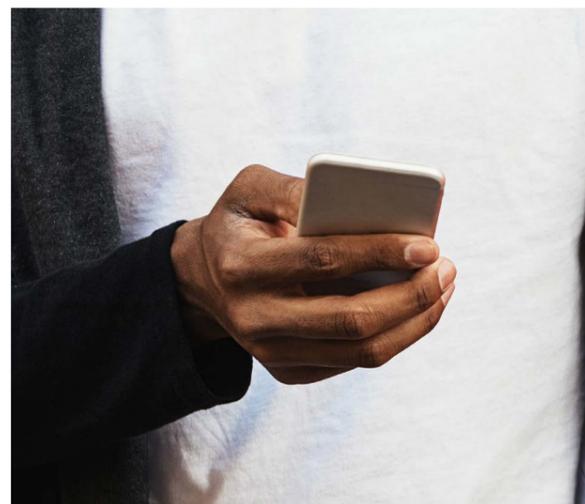
## Case study: Taylor

Taylor is a 17 year old boy living in supported accommodation in the north of England. He was initially referred to a project accommodating young people up to age 25, but was moved to a younger persons’ service after it was clear the environment put him at risk of harm. He is keen to constantly impress his peers with tales of a ‘gangster’ lifestyle, and talks about dealing drugs, having his own car and property, carrying knives and weapons and running his own gang.

Taylor often appears with unexplained possessions, such as watches and phones, and returns to the service via taxi late at night in an intoxicated state. On occasion staff have contacted Taylor to establish his whereabouts, only to be answered on the phone by older males who he refers to as his ‘boys’. Taylor is described by staff as a charming and intelligent young man, but with complex needs and vulnerabilities that put him at major risk of harm. Instead of running his own criminal enterprise, his key workers are concerned that he is in fact being exploited by older males. Taylor has been referred for specialist support with an organisation that helps young people move away from youth violence.

One specialist organisation supporting young people in London highlighted that some signs of criminal exploitation can include:

- **Regular possession/supply of drugs**
- **Expensive clothes and items that they might not have the money to pay for**
- **Carrying weapons**
- **Being worried about traveling outside their area**
- **Traveling around in cabs all the time**
- **Making regular short trips outside the home**



# What is being done to prevent youth violence and criminal exploitation?

## The Serious Violence Strategy

In April 2018 the government published the Serious Violence Strategy and established the Serious Violence Taskforce. The strategy prioritises preventative action and focuses on partnership working to identify and disrupt county lines operations. This involves the development of a new county lines coordination centre as well as legislation to control the sale of weapons (especially knives and corrosive substances) and the early intervention youth fund, a two year source of funding available for organisations working to prevent and divert young people at risk of involvement in criminal activity.

## A public health approach to serious youth violence

Following evidence of success in Scotland, where cases of serious assault and attempted murder fell by 35 per cent between 2008/9 and 2017/18, many commentators have called on the government to take a public health approach to violence across England and the rest of the UK.

A public health approach to youth violence recognises the many social and structural factors which drive young people to acts of crime and violence, rather than simply taking a punitive, criminal justice led position. Public health approaches stress the importance of multi-agency working to identify and prevent those young people at risk of being caught up in violent crime, and using mediation and negotiation as a way of stopping the ‘transmission’ of violence and retaliation across communities. Following the Serious Youth Violence summit in April 2019, the government has begun consulting on the creation of a public health duty to tackle youth violence in England and Wales.

## Local responses

Devolved authorities also play a major role in coordinating local responses to youth violence. The Greater London Authority, for example, has a range of initiatives to tackle rising levels of violence in the capital, such as the establishment of a Violence Reduction Unit and investing into the Young Londoners Fund to support diversionary and preventative work.

Many have pointed out, however, that one off and time limited funding is often not enough to make up for long-term spending reductions made to a range of vital services by central government.<sup>47</sup>

## Youth Services

Young people spoke about the role of youth services in providing not only a space for recreation and socialising, but where they could also engage with trusted professionals for advice and support on a range of issues.

The Youth Violence Commission surveyed over 2,200 children and young people in 2018, asking what they thought would make the most difference in keeping young people safe. The most popular option was the provision of ‘more youth centres, sports clubs and other youth activities in their local areas’.<sup>48</sup>

Although the links between reductions in public spending and youth violence are contested, many of the young people and practitioners involved in this study stressed how the loss of local services and support left few diversions for young people at risk of involvement in criminal activity.

And while not a quick fix to problems such as youth violence and homelessness, practitioners highlighted the role of professional youth workers in providing advice and guidance on a range of issues affecting young people:

**“Youth work not only helps with early identification of many the factors that can contribute to vulnerability to both criminal exploitation and homelessness; such as family breakdown, school exclusions, involvement in anti-social behaviour, and others; but it also provides support that can help prevent escalation to the point of criminal involvement and/or homelessness.”**

- Youth Agency

However, limited resources are leading to increasing competition between providers, and limiting scope and enthusiasm for collaborative working.<sup>49</sup>

**“If the government want to take action then they will make young people’s services compulsory. That’s the only action I see because nothing they’ve done so far has done anything positive.”**

- Courtney

**Recommendation: The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport** should ensure that young people across the country have access to quality and professionally staffed youth services; local authority youth services should be placed on a statutory footing and funding guaranteed by government, as should funding for youth work qualifications.

## Family mediation

Family mediation is key to supporting households to resolve problems before they can lead to relationship breakdown and a young person being made to leave their home. It can provide essential respite and a neutral perspective to help parents, carers and young people work through problems.

Practitioners also spoke about the benefits of professional support for families where children were at risk of becoming involved in criminal activity, but reported difficulties for families in accessing these services. Children’s charities have highlighted deep cuts made to early intervention and family support services, while the number of people accessing mediation services for family disputes has dropped substantially since 2013.<sup>50</sup>

**“We need to bring back family social work. Bring back mediation and discussion. There are too many kids being taken into care.”**

- Supported housing manager

**“...it’s easy to say to a parent check your sons pocket when he leaves the house, but there’s not enough information given to parents about what signs they should look for, anything like that.”**

- Leila

## Recognising vulnerability

Young people experiencing homelessness are highly vulnerable to a range of harms, from violence and exploitation to long term impacts on their mental and physical health. However, many of the practitioners who took part in this research expressed concerns that this level of vulnerability was often not picked up by the police and other statutory agencies, leading to young people seen simply as criminals and not directed to appropriate support.

**“...with young men, they’re perceived as risky and it means people lose sight of their vulnerabilities. Even when they’re under 18 they’re seen as gang members, as a risk.”**

- Youth Offending Team

Homelessness was often not identified as a specific vulnerability, with agencies not knowing how best to support or refer a young person coming into contact with the justice system who presented with a lack of a fixed address or any stable accommodation.

The Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 created a wide ranging ‘duty to refer’ for public services to support those experiencing or at risk of homelessness. However, several key agencies, such as the police, were omitted from the duty. With considerable overlap between involvement in criminal activity and housing instability for young people, there is a clear case for the police to take a greater role in identifying and responding to homelessness.

Similarly, many practitioners expressed concerns around the difference in treatment of young people as they turned 18. Over 18s are treated as adults in the criminal justice system, and lose a significant level of entitlements to statutory support from social services and housing services. Support was often said to ‘drop off’, putting young people in situations where they were at risk of further exploitation.

**Recommendation: The Home Office** should ensure adequate funding to enable Police and Crime Commissioners to sign up to the ‘commitment to refer’ those experiencing or at risk of homelessness to other local agencies in order to provide holistic support to young people affected by youth violence and criminal exploitation.

Practitioners highlighted how some police forces and Police and Crime commissioners had taken the lead in identifying and protecting vulnerable adults and young people. Dorset Police have created a dedicated unit to deal with cases involving abuse and exploitation, while the Surrey Police and Crime Commissioner’s membership of the ‘Making Every Adult Matter’ coalition means that they can better support people with multiple needs coming into contact with the police access suitable support and assistance. In both cases, effective partnership working with a range of statutory and voluntary agencies - including housing - is critical to meeting individual needs and vulnerabilities.

## Safeguarding and social services

In recent years, considerable work has been done to expand understandings of vulnerability and explore how safeguarding needs to be tailored to recognise the needs and specific risks faced by different groups of young people.

**Contextual safeguarding** begins with the recognition that although much of traditional safeguarding and child protection focuses on domestic and family-based settings, young people face risks of harm from a range of environments and relationships outside of the home. Particularly in regards to violence and exploitation by peers, contextual safeguarding calls for collaboration from a range of agencies interacting with young people outside of the home, from schools and colleges to local businesses and services.

**Transitional safeguarding** identifies adolescents and young adults as a distinct group, between children and adults, reflecting increasing awareness in developmental psychology that young people do not reach maturity until their mid-20s. This form of safeguarding calls on all practitioners working with young people to recognise the specific risks, and to ensure that support is tailored to a young person’s need rather than whether or not they are under or over 18.

## Specialist gang exit schemes & programmes

For young people caught up in youth violence, specialist schemes and programmes can provide targeted support, such as those offered by organisations such as Redthread and Catch-22. They reach young people at crisis point, such as in prisons and hospital A&E departments, to provide emotional and practical support and explore ways for young people to move away from youth violence.

**“We’re doing what we can to pull young people out the river, before it’s too late and they can still make the change. But more needs to be done to stop them falling in the first place.”**

- Gangs specialist

Safer London provides critical housing support through the Pan-London Housing Reciprocal by facilitating tenancy moves for individuals and families in social housing at risk from domestic abuse and gang violence.<sup>51</sup> The project has helped young people and families across London move away from harm and into a safe area with the help of specialist support and advice, allowing them to rebuild their lives and networks. However, practitioners reported challenges arising from an absolute shortage of affordable housing in many parts of the country, and a lack of consistency and approach across different local authorities:

**“Local authorities are left to deal with it on their own. You get local authorities with a disproportionate level of housing demand generated by youth violence issues, but they don’t have the resources to deal with it, and then you get authorities without the problem who aren’t interested in signing up to any reciprocal arrangements. They don’t want to be importing the issues.”**

- Housing Options professional

### Case study: Antony

Antony was referred to Safer London for support around risk related to serious youth violence. He had a history of shoplifting and drug offences and had been in contact with probation on several occasions. The risk escalated after his home address on a housing estate in London was raided by the police due to a group of young men from the same estate constantly coming into his home to deal and use drugs. After the police raid, the group started to harass Antony, kicking on his front door and calling and texting him to threaten him. On one occasion as he was walking home he saw two of the group members waiting for him in an alleyway. They were holding knives, making sure that they were visible to intimidate him.

Antony’s Safer London support workers arranged for the police to make the property safe and then successfully arranged for him and his partner to be relocated to a safe area.

**Recommendation: The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government** should provide resources to local and regional authorities to expand and replicate successful housing-led gang exit schemes such as the Pan-London Housing Reciprocal.

## Floating support

Floating support for those living independently is critical for preventing further homelessness. It helps individuals sustain their tenancy, access and remain in employment or education, and critically reduce social exclusion and help relieve any feelings of loneliness and isolation.<sup>52</sup>

**"That phone call, that life line is there. They always know that can pick up the phone and speak to someone... that worker won't have all the answers, won't be able to wave a magic wand, but will be someone they can bounce back and forth on."**

### - Floating support manager

Practitioners highlighted floating support and advice could make a real difference in safeguarding vulnerable young people in their own accommodation, who could often become targeted by exploiters and criminal groups due to their isolation.

Importantly, floating support sustained contact with a young person and ensured that they had access to a trusted professional during a period in which they were finding their feet. This kind of support has proven to be

effective in supporting young people to remain safely in stable accommodation, but staff highlighted again how difficulties with funding had made it difficult to provide the level of support needed.

**"Each year funding's being cut down. We used to have 17 workers. Now we have 4 staff, with a caseload of 70 young people."**

### - Floating support manager

With young people moving on from homelessness still at a significant risk of being targeted for exploitation and abuse, it is critical that they are can access professional support from a trusted adult.

**Recommendation: The Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government** should ensure that local authorities and agencies are properly resourced to provide high-quality, ongoing floating support and advice for young people moving on from homelessness.

## Conclusion

**"I feel like some people get a thrill out of these things. But no one gets a thrill out of being homeless."**

### - Jordan

Youth crime and youth homelessness are distinct phenomena. Most homeless young people are not involved in criminal activity, and many young people who do have stable homes and family environments are also at risk of falling into youth violence or being targeted for exploitation by criminal groups.

However, this research has shown just how homelessness and exposure to violence can often be linked and how the experience of one can all too often cause or worsen the other. For young people caught up in violence, the loss of accommodation is a constant risk. And for young people without access to stable accommodation, the factors which put them at risk of being exploited or involved in youth violence – namely a lack of resources or support networks to rely on – are massively increased.

In spite of these challenges, this research highlights the wide range of services and organisations committed to providing advice and support to young people at risk

of both homelessness and exploitation. However, in the face of increasingly limited resources and uncertain futures, much of this support is aimed at tackling crises and not geared toward prevention. The reduction in non-statutory services, especially youth services, can mean that the range of options for both diversion and recreation, and advice and support from trained and trusted professionals are limited for some of the most vulnerable young people in society.

Evidence of success in Scotland suggests that violence can be best tackled when understood in a wider context, and when everyone takes a responsibility in identifying and assisting those at risk. The same principles apply to preventing homelessness for young people, and we need to recognise the role that a secure and decent home can play in safeguarding young people from violence and exploitation.

There are no quick or easy fixes to the root causes of youth violence. The recommendations in this report, however, are intended to help identify and support those who may be currently at risk, and to highlight the role homelessness organisations can play in supporting and protecting the young people they work with to avoid harm and exploitation.



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