Every Contact Counts Executive Summary

Presenting the voices of children, young people, families and practitioners on the underlying causes associated with serious violence in Merseyside during 2020-2021

MERSEYSIDE
Violence
Reduction
Partnership

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This report seeks to humanise our understanding of the drivers of serious violence in Merseyside.

By valuing existing relationships and the inspiring work that is already taking place across Merseyside, an incredible collaboration of people and agencies has enabled the Merseyside Violence Reduction Partnership (VRP) to present the voices of children, young people, their families and professionals during 2020-21.

The insight included in this report has been collected through a combination of focus groups and surveys for strategy or service design; peer-research commissioned by the VRP; ongoing informal conversations and questionnaires as part of violence reduction programme delivery; and a bespoke online VRP platform called 'Dialogue'.

We hope that this report will support practitioners, commissioners and decision makers to better understand the causes of serious violence and help to recognise strengths and gaps in multi-agency responses.

This report was collated in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic and a year spent living with social restrictions. Opportunities for young people to engage with positive activities were reduced. Contact with those who provide important protective factors, which are recognised to reduce the risk of experiences of serious violence were limited. We are yet to fully comprehend the impact of the events of 2020-2021 on serious youth violence.

This report will, however, **provide a baseline understanding of perceptions** collected throughout this incredibly challenging year, structured around known causal factors for violence. From this baseline, we will be able to gradually understand whether and how perceptions of these causes change over time. We have not attempted to cover all aspects of individual, relationship, community or societal risk. Instead, we have focused on the aspects of risk that young people and families have shared with those professionals with whom they have trusting relationships.

For example, young people shared that they felt **"mental health support needs to be accessible for everyone so that they can help themselves before it's too late"** (VRP Peer-Research). "Young people are on waiting lists. **It feels like they're waiting for young people to harm themselves badly before they'll step in"** (Liverpool Young Advisors Adolescent Strategy Insight). This is not new information for mental health service leads, but it is important to recognise that despite progress in mental health support outlined in this report, these perceptions remain.

Mental health (including low self-esteem, self-confidence, anxiety, PTSD and crisis) is an **individual risk factor** for serious youth violence which can impact on other individual risks. This report presents perceptions on the importance of early years **communication and language** education, effective **SEND** awareness and provision; the impact of **school exclusions** and the need for **consistent messaging delivered in schools**; use and ease of availability of **drugs and alcohol** and gaps in support services; **adolescent attitudes to risk-taking and knife crime**; and the role of **aspirations, employment and skills** as factors which increase the chance or protect a child/young person from experiencing violence.

"I hope that I will be able to push past my bad experiences and own my own successful business"
- Young person from Merseyside Fire and Rescue Service and Princes Trust Programmes

At a **relationship** level, the report highlights the importance of **a supportive home** and need for **effective child-parent attachment** from birth. A parent shared that their Early Help Family Support Worker had "helped me in believing I can achieve things rather than failing which has made me stronger… I can concentrate on other things which has eased my day to day daily routine." We touch upon the impact of **parental conflict** as a potential cause of youth violence, shining a light on emerging effective, local practice to identify and reduce parental conflict.

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Although the exact numbers are not known, a significant number of young people across Merseyside have close family members in prison.

> *"I had a call off a lady [POPS] as my son is living in prison… I've been having struggles with my mental health and my children… she has gave me advice, listened to me and helped me so much… if it wasn't for [her] calling me I don't think I'd be in this place where I am now."*
> *- Family working with Partners of Prisoners (POPS)*

We reiterate some of the repercussions of the stigma **familial incarceration** carries for children and young people, presenting the approaches taken by some of the brilliant assets we have supporting these families in Merseyside.

Peer relationships and influence, particularly during adolescence, are addressed in this report. Young people's peer-researchers from across Sefton, Wirral and Liverpool found that feeling the need to fit in and peer pressure were the most common reasons young people gave for why they felt young people commit violent crimes. The report also presents how **peer relationships can be used as a strength or protective factor as well as being considered a cause of violence.** Hearing about a club, group, support service or a positive activity through 'word of mouth' or 'being invited by friends' should be recognised and utilised by services to expand engagement.

In relation to **community** level risk, we tried to be careful in collating this report **not to conflate 'gang' violence and criminal exploitation with youth violence**. However, it is clear from the perceptions of young people that the lines between these issues are as blurred as they are for government ministers and policy makers. Across various consultations with young people throughout 2020-2021, **fear of and the threat of 'gangs' was consistently raised as a community safety issue.** We briefly explore the potential reasons for the prevalence of this perception but suggest that further insight and nuanced analysis of factors contributing to perceptions may be required.

As is often the nature of consultations, surveys and focus groups where questions are asked about peoples' experiences of life, support services, or complex social issues, etc., there can be a tendency towards the negative or deficits. We have tried to find a balance throughout this report, presenting findings on **community assets** and providing rationale for continuing to concentrate more on **better understanding these assets to improve their use as protective factors against violence.**

The most difficult perceptions to capture for this report were those which address **societal factors** impacting upon safety and young peoples' experiences of violence. Covid-19 provided a spark for educational professionals to share their perceptions that it would result in increased **poverty**; **loneliness** and **isolation**; lack of **safe, supportive environments**; difficulties in **family relationships**; increased social **media pressure**; and changes in physical **health**, appearance and weight for young

people. Poverty-related **digital exclusion** has also been a consistent part of the Covid-19 narrative amongst local delivery providers over the course of 2020-2021. We explore the impact on resilience, independence and family relationships for young people living at home for longer as a result of being priced out of moving away to access further education or accessing the rental/housing market.

None of the factors or risk levels discussed in this report should be addressed uniquely, nor should they be used to identify 'cases' or young people 'more at risk' than others. **Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)** are a golden thread, underpinning the risk factors presented. They can help us to understand **how, where and when interventions can be effective**, but they *cannot* **be used to identify children, young people and families in need of support.** Young people can still be exposed to violence even if they have not experienced ACEs. Nor does it mean that people who have experienced multiple risk factors in their life will inevitably experience violence.

One conclusion of this report is that **greater investment is needed at a holistic or population-level to enable prevention**, rather than interventions targeting 'high risk' individuals or groups. On an individual level, any professional or agency that has an opportunity to meaningfully engage with a child or young person, should see this as a golden opportunity. If they do not feel comfortable listening, identifying or addressing the needs of the child or young person, they need to be able to go beyond signposting, helping that young person to access the support they need. Professional training is

available via CAMHS and local area Safeguarding Children's Partnerships to support **professional development to enable effective engagement to make 'every contact count'.**

Violence is considered a global public health issue. In some ways, **the Covid-19 pandemic has brought to life what 'taking a public health approach' means.** Most importantly, it has demonstrated that it is a collective, societal effort, needing a comprehensive strategy of measures working across multiple levels to reduce the risk of people experiencing violence:

1. Prevention (primary); early intervention (secondary); and treatment/recovery (tertiary)
2. Population-level (Universal) and individual/group (Targeted)
3. Individual, relationship, community and society

In summary, it is everyone's business. Every contact with a child or young person, whether by professional, family or community member, really does count in the effort to prevent them experiencing any of the causes outlined in this report. It is a long-term approach, but if we can reduce these potential causes, we believe that we can reduce violence.

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Next steps:

The Merseyside VRP will use the perceptions, feedback and insight collected to form this report as a baseline and springboard. It will be used to ratify strategy for 2021-22. Ongoing engagement activities will continue to help build upon this baseline, notably the partnership with YPAS on the Peer Action Collective. This is a project specific to improving our understanding of the impact of youth violence, which will see peer-researchers recruited to conduct research to inform decisions on support for youth-led social action from autumn 2021 through to December 2022.

By having a baseline understanding of perceptions, we can work to develop multi-agency planning, leadership, delivery, evaluation and the embedding of a 'family focus' to reducing youth violence. At the moment, children, young people and families are only sometimes asked for their views through more formal consultations and surveys. We are on a journey to make this a more active engagement where they are consistently involved in the design, delivery and measurement of success of services to reduce youth violence.

There are some notable gaps in perceptions from populations with experience of the care system, the justice system, black, Asian and minority ethnic voices and from the wider Merseyside community. We would like to develop opportunities as we emerge from a year of lockdowns to undertake a more asset/strengths-based approach using focus groups and community events. We hope that this will enable us to work better with communities to develop sustainable, population-based solutions to reducing violence.

To access the full 'Every Contact Counts' VRP Report, please 'contact us' via https://merseysidevrp.com/

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