

13.10.25

BEYOND THE BLADES

THE SHARP TRUTH OF
MENTAL HEALTH &
YOUTH VIOLENCE

By the
London
Peer
Action
Collective



BEYOND THE BLADES

You see the knife
You see the fight
But you don't see what's inside

No one asks why we carry pain
like weapons
Why anger feels safer than
crying
Why we choose violence
When all we really wanted was
to be heard

It's not just about gangs and
streets
Sometimes its the storm in
your own head
That drives you to the edge

Behind every blade is a mind
breaking, quietly

And no one notices
Until it's too late

Kyan Alves Nicholson

Peer Researcher and Social Action Lead,
PAC London Team



TACKLING YOUTH VIOLENCE, GIVING YOUNG PEOPLE A VOICE

We are the
**London Peer
Action
Collective.**

A group of
young
people
fighting for
justice, for
equality, for
peace.

We don't always do this by shouting or protesting. We create change by listening, trying to understand, creating space for different perspectives, and using our own knowledge and expertise to amplify the voices of our fellow young people who might not have the tools or space to make change.

We will never solve youth violence without understanding and giving power to young people.

As part of our work to give voice to other young people, we have conducted in-depth research to understand their opinions, experiences and ideas for change.

We then turned these research findings into social action to promote change with and for young people within our community. **This magazine documents our work, which took place from November 2023 to September 2025.**

A LETTER TO **YOU,** **THE READER**

They always ask about the knife.
The blade.
The headline.
But they never ask what came before it.
They never ask why.

This magazine is called "Beyond the Blades"
Because youth violence isn't just about
what's in someone's hand,
It's about what's in their heart, their mind, their environment.
It's about pain, pressure, trauma, survival.
It's about everything leading up to that moment that no one
wants to talk about.

We're here to talk about it.

This magazine is raw. It's real.
It's from us: the young people living this,
not just reading about it in the news
or getting talked about in Parliament or school assemblies.

We're tired of adults making decisions about us, without us.

We're tired of being judged, silenced, and overlooked.
And we're tired of the same cycle of violence and blame.

What's missing from every conversation on youth violence
is our voice, our truth.

The truth is, a lot of us are struggling
with things that no one ever prepared us for.
Loss. Pressure. Broken homes. No safe spaces. No trust.

We're growing up fast, sometimes too fast,
and we're told to "be strong" while carrying wounds no one
sees.

And that's where mental health comes in.

We don't talk enough about the link between mental health
and youth violence but it's real. It's deep. And it's being
ignored.

When you're dealing with anxiety, depression, PTSD, or trauma from a young age
and there's no one to talk to, no one who understands,
violence starts to feel like the only language left.

It's not an excuse. It's a warning.

A message.

A cry for help that's often misunderstood as "just being angry," or "bad behaviour."

The truth is, many of us don't want to hurt anyone.

We just want the hurting to stop.

This magazine exists because young people deserve to be heard before it's too late.

We're not just "youth at risk." We're youth with potential.

We're not the problem. We're part of the solution.

So if you're reading this, whether you're a teacher, a parent, a policymaker, a friend,
or a young person just trying to survive, know this:

Beyond the blades are stories. Struggles. Systems. Silences.

But most importantly, beyond the blades are human beings.

Listen to us.

Work with us.

Protect us.

Believe us.

Because if we want to end youth violence, we have to start with the truth.

The sharp, painful, necessary truth that healing starts where blame ends.

And that truth begins here.

Kyan Alves Nicholson

Peer Researcher and Social Action Lead,
PAC London Team





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WHO IS THIS FOR?

This magazine is for anybody that cares about young people and their future.

You might be a young person yourself, a parent, an adult who works with young people or an adult who makes decisions that affect young people and their mental health.

If you don't have time to read the whole magazine, here are some suggestions for parts you may find the most interesting:

I AM A

young person

I AM A

person who works
with or cares for
young people

e.g. teachers,
parents

I AM A

person who makes
decisions that affect
young people

e.g. policy
makers

WHAT YOU WILL GAIN FROM THIS

A better understanding
of mental health and
youth violence, reading
others experiences and
some tips from the team
for managing mental
health.

A better understanding of
mental health and youth
violence, and how adults
can provide support that
protects young people
from youth violence

A better understanding of
mental health and youth
violence, the value of
youth-led change and how
mental health interventions
can protect young people
from youth violence

WHICH PARTS MIGHT INTEREST YOU

Mental health tips:
p 57

Findings summary:
p 25 - 28

Recommendations:
p 58 - 60

Detailed Findings:
p 29 - 50

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p 51 - 55

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Our journey and
methods:
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BEFORE YOU BEGIN...

One of the things that we heard over and over again during our research was that young people can struggle to understand their feelings (and we have a sneaky feeling that adults do too!).

Whether you are a young person, youth worker, teacher, parent, academic or anything else at all, taking a few minutes to check in with yourself can help reset a bad day or make a good one even better.

So however you are feeling right now as you begin to read this magazine, we invite you to take our quick 'check in' questionnaire to reflect on where you are right now.

If you're reading this online, you can download a printable pdf here:
www.mcpin.org/projects-programmes/beyond-the-blades/

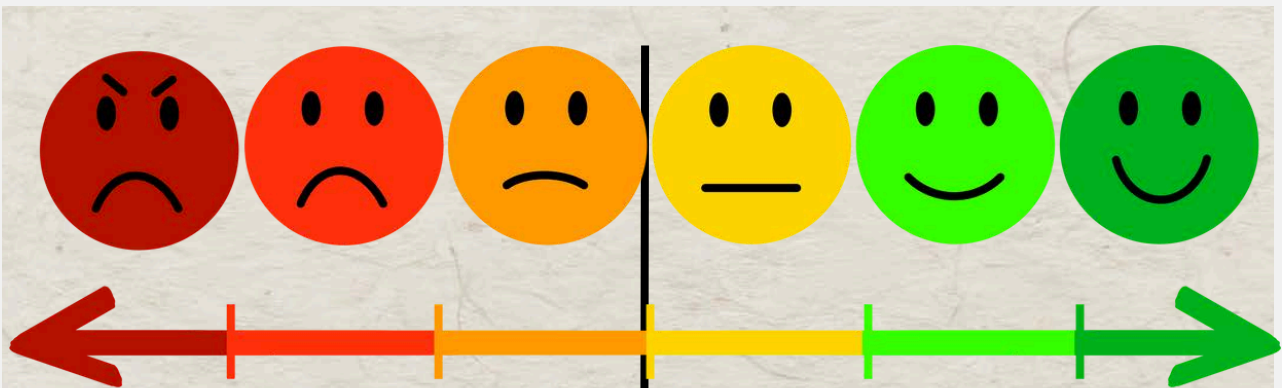
1) How do you feel today? Circle the face.



2) Circle the emotions you are feeling, or write your own

Lonely Happy Confused Excited
Sad Grateful Peaceful
Hurt Frustrated Meh
Angry Restless Content
Numb Calm Proud
Disconnected

Something else :



If you circled one of these faces...

Sorry to hear today hasn't been so great.

We would encourage you to take some time for yourself and reflect on how you can support yourself to feel just a little bit better tomorrow.

A question...

What is one thing about you that the people around you are grateful for?

An action...

What is one thing you could do today to improve the rest of your day / tomorrow?

An activity...

Complete this mini wordsearch with ideas for self-care activities.

If you circled one of these faces...

Yay! You're having a good day!

When we have a good day, it's helpful to focus on gratitude and reflect on why your day has been good so that you can remember it when you have a bad day.

A question...

What is one thing that you did well today? What are you proud of?

An action...

What is one thing you can do tomorrow to have another good day? Or help someone else to have a good day?

An activity...

Complete the calming colouring to continue the good vibes.

SELF CARE IDEAS WORD SEARCH

M	E	D	I	T	A	T	E
U	P	E	E	L	S	A	Z
S	I	N	G	T	Q	L	E
I	M	L	C	K	A	K	D
C	U	R	T	L	R	O	R
C	M	U	B	A	T	H	A
S	O	N	E	W	B	E	W

Meditate

Music

Draw

Walk

Run

Sleep

Bath

Talk

Sing

MINDFUL COLOURING



THE PEER ACTION COLLECTIVE

“The biggest problem is that as young people we don’t feel heard or understood.”

- The London Peer Action Collective Team

Through the Peer Action Collective (PAC), young people are working to make their communities safer, fairer places to live across the UK.

We are the London PAC team.

Funded by the Youth Endowment Fund, the #iwill Fund (a joint investment between The National Lottery Community Fund and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport) and the Co-op, the PAC is here to **support young people to take the lead.**

PAC is a ground-breaking network of Peer Researchers, Social Action Leads and Changemakers across England and Wales. **Young people with lived experience of violence find out what needs to happen to make their area a better place to live and turn these insights into action.**

Since the PAC network started in 2021, the programme has involved more than 12,000 young people through research or social action.



From influencing school practices, to improving local mental health services, co-producing violence reduction strategies or supporting more young people into employment – together, they are ensuring that young voices respond to issues that directly affect them.

Our London PAC team is **led by 19 young people who live in, or are connected to, Haringey**. Between 2023 - 2025, PAC London has engaged 880 young people through research and social action. This team of young people is supported by the McPin Foundation and Peace Alliance. The McPin Foundation team provides research training, supervision and research delivery support. The Peace Alliance provides pastoral and wellbeing support, social action training, supervision and social action delivery. Our team's mission is to **generate robust youth-led evidence to inform youth-led change in our local community, with a particular focus on 'presence in schools'**.



THE TEAM



Chrisel



Emmanuella



Kobi



Jonathan



Kyan



Alanna



Junior



Kandra



Charline



Daniel



Zach



Charlotte



Ramanie



Dane



Olenga



Jake



Jonathan



Naomi



Izzy

WHY I JOINED THIS PROJECT



Being exposed to gangs and knife violence while in school, I had a fair share of youth violence before.

Eventually growing away from violence, I understood the feeling for once how it feels to be on the other side of being attacked by gangs and experiencing knife violence first hand. I came to the realisation that this is not a life I would want for myself, nor anyone else, to experience.

I care about prevention, and not just the reaction that comes with it. Because I feel like addressing the root cause like mental health struggles, lack of support systems and societal pressures can lead to fewer people feeling pushed toward violence as an escape route for their personal struggles.

I believe that with the right care, intervention and guidance, we can help young people choose a better path - which is the main reason I decided to join this team.



Peer Researcher and Social Action Lead,
PAC London Team

LONDON THROUGH OUR EYES

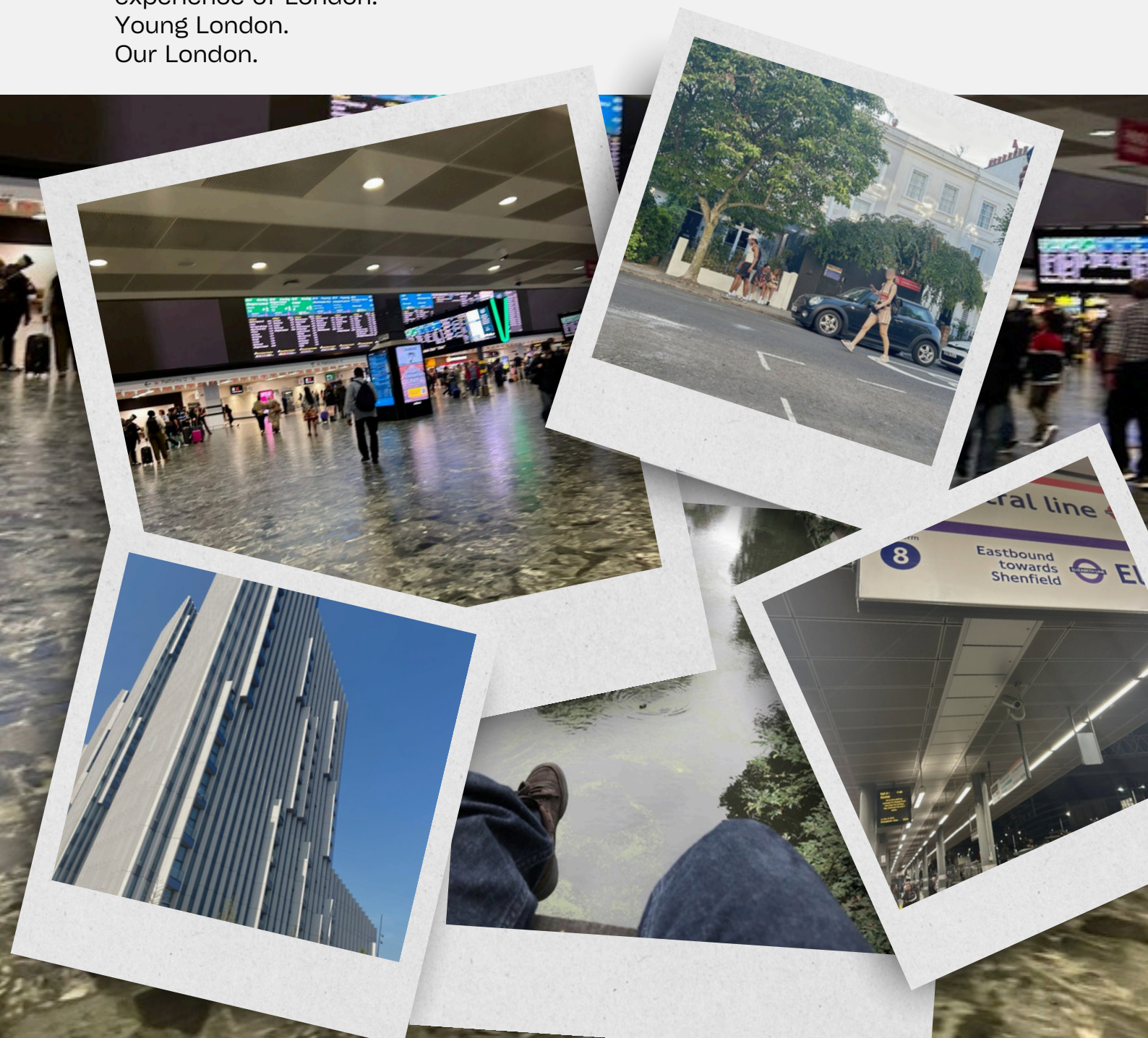
Everything in this magazine has been **created by young people, with young people, for young people.**

That includes the photography used throughout the magazine. It's either of us, or by us.

Each photo is a snapshot of a moment, a place, a feeling that conveys an experience of London.

Young London.

Our London.



OUR JOURNEY

We've spent the last two and a half years meeting up twice a week to work on this project. We've watched it change us, our teammates and our community. Our approach is based on turning robust findings from peer research projects into social action, alongside our community.

Research: Using research techniques to understand young people's experiences and ideas surrounding youth violence.

Social action: Creating youth-led change through social action projects driven by the research findings.



We've completed two key phases of work which sought to answer distinct questions:

Phase 1

(Nov 23 - Oct 24)

71 participants

What kind of support before during and after a school exclusion protects young people from youth violence?

Phase 2

(Oct 24 - Oct 25)

88 participants

What is the link between mental health and youth violence? What is the role of schools in the solution?

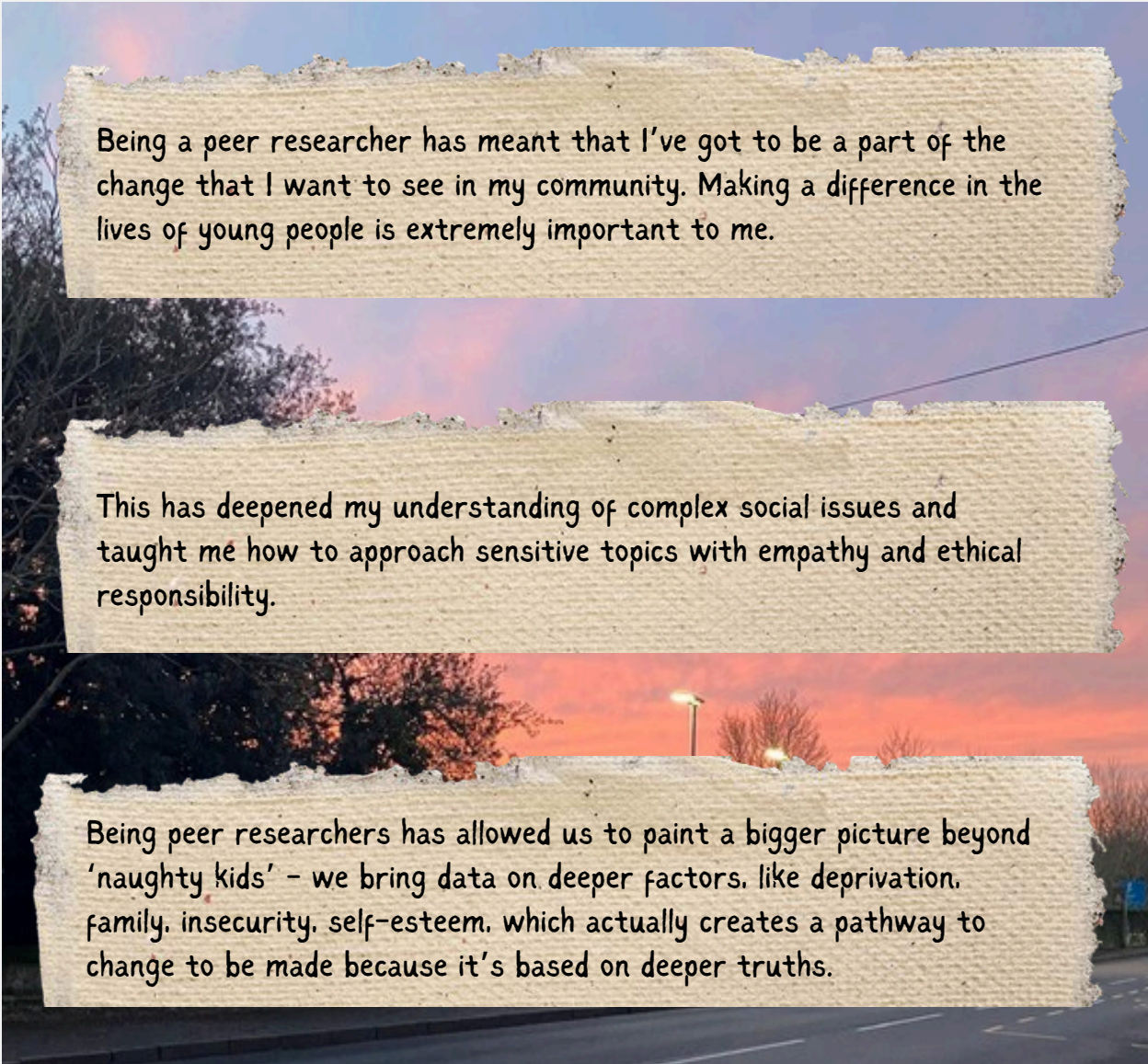
This magazine mainly focuses on the findings from Phase 2. You can read our Phase 1 report here: www.mcpin.org/projects-programmes/beyond-the-blades/

PEER RESEARCH

Peer research is an approach where people with lived experience of the issues being studied are involved in every stage of the research process – from design to data collection to analysis.

In PAC's case, we are young people who have been affected by violence. We use that experience to connect with other young people in the community and learn more about what needs to change to help them and us.

NOTES ON WHAT IT'S LIKE BEING A PEER RESEARCHER



Being a peer researcher has meant that I've got to be a part of the change that I want to see in my community. Making a difference in the lives of young people is extremely important to me.

This has deepened my understanding of complex social issues and taught me how to approach sensitive topics with empathy and ethical responsibility.

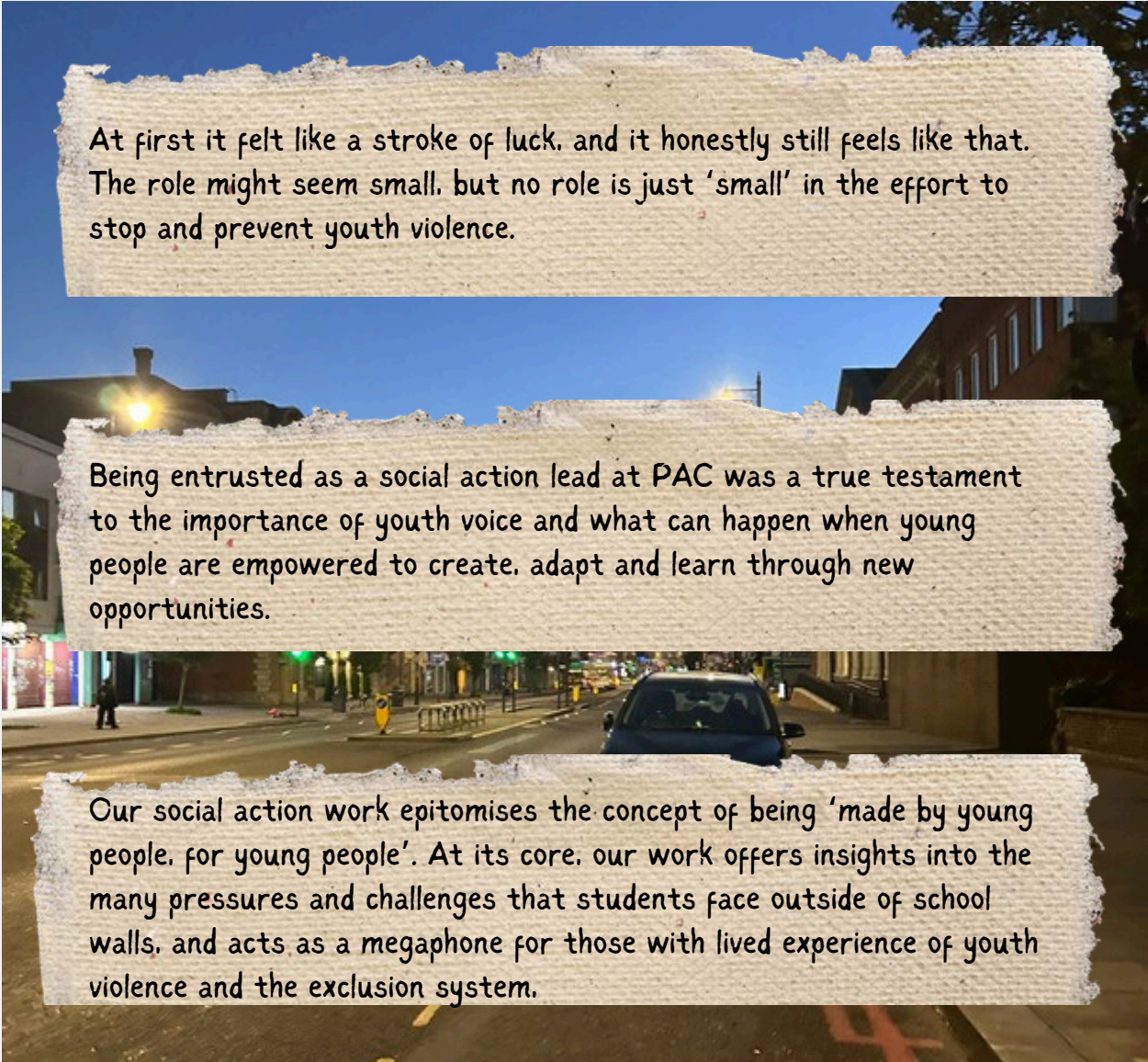
Being peer researchers has allowed us to paint a bigger picture beyond 'naughty kids' – we bring data on deeper factors, like deprivation, family, insecurity, self-esteem, which actually creates a pathway to change to be made because it's based on deeper truths.

SOCIAL ACTION

At PAC, we drive social change by delivering youth-led projects fuelled by our research findings. We create the change for young people, by young people.

We work with our local and national stakeholders, including schools, social workers, MPs, the Department for Education, Home Office, local council, and (most importantly) other young people to create change.

NOTES ON WHAT IT'S LIKE BEING A SOCIAL ACTION LEAD



At first it felt like a stroke of luck, and it honestly still feels like that. The role might seem small, but no role is just 'small' in the effort to stop and prevent youth violence.

Being entrusted as a social action lead at PAC was a true testament to the importance of youth voice and what can happen when young people are empowered to create, adapt and learn through new opportunities.

Our social action work epitomises the concept of being 'made by young people, for young people'. At its core, our work offers insights into the many pressures and challenges that students face outside of school walls, and acts as a megaphone for those with lived experience of youth violence and the exclusion system.



WHY MENTAL HEALTH & YOUTH VIOLENCE?

To us, mental health is the state of a person's mind, including their emotional and psychological wellbeing.

Why did we pick mental health?

- Mental health is close to our hearts and minds because it's affected each of us at one point or another. It doesn't matter who you are: mental health affects all of us.
- During our first phase of research, young people told us that the link between mental health and youth violence was crucial to effectively solving the problem.
- Existing research reveals relationships between mental health and youth violence that operate in both directions.¹ These need to be understood from a youth perspective.
- The stigma and taboo that surrounds both mental health and youth violence, especially for men and boys, means that it is even more important to have people with lived experience conducting research on these topics. Young people are more likely to be honest and open with us about these topics than adult researchers - which means we get a better understanding of the problems and are more likely to create effective solutions.

¹

The mental health needs of gang-affiliated young people, Public Health England

MENTAL HEALTH MATTERS

Letters from the team on how mental health has touched their lives and drives their work on the project.

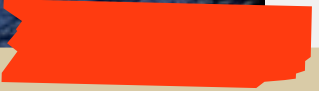


Mental health is something that is very significant to me and has been a big part of my life. I suffer from multiple conditions, and have been on medication and treated for these for a number of years.

As a child, I had to deal with addiction and abuse. Growing up in this hostile environment was highly problematic and led to me misbehaving in school. Having been labelled as a 'bad kid'. I became more involved in criminal activity, as it was the only place I felt a sense of community, considering my situation at home.

I have now turned my life around and am on a much better path. However, had I not received the help I needed when I needed it, I could have easily become a knife crime statistic.

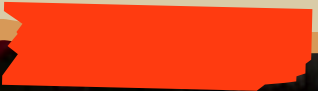
I very much believe mental health should be treated much more seriously, as in my case and many others, that feeling of not belonging is a driver for involvement in youth crime and violence.



This project is important to me because me myself have struggled with my mental health for a long time. I've struggled with toxic environments, not feeling supported and suicidal thoughts.

It got to the point where I didn't want to be here anymore and I tried to take my life more than once. I still struggle to this day but there have been a lot of factors that have helped me get past it, such as inside help from my mum and family, and outside help such as walks, music, daily affirmations and talking to myself.

I want to help young people who went or are going through the same things that I went through when I was struggling, and that's where this project comes into place. We want to support and reach out to young people that think it's too late or they are in too deep. A lot of the things we research relate to me and as someone who has been through it all, I feel as if I can help make an impact and change in our community.



RESEARCH METHODS

Our team of 19 peer researchers explored young people's views on the links between mental health and youth violence, and how schools can be a part of the solution. Young people were recruited through schools, youth centres, social media posts and word of mouth.

Our research questions were:

**What are the links between mental health and youth violence?
What role can a school play in any solutions?**

To us, mental health includes anything that affects how someone feels about their day-to-day life and wellbeing.

We spoke to 88 young people aged 10 – 24 years in Haringey, London who had an interest in sharing their knowledge and perspectives around mental health, youth violence and schools. They were invited to do so through a range of activities depending on their preference.

Young people we spoke to:

Gender	Race	Disability	Age
31% Women	34% Black / Black British / Black African / Black Caribbean / Asian / Asian British / Indian	11% Have a disability	14% 10 - 13 years old
25% Men	6% White British / White Any Other Background	45% Don't have a disability	27% 14 - 17 years old
0% Non-binary	14% Mixed Race	43% Prefer not to say	12% 18 - 24 years old
44% Prefer not to say	41% Prefer not to say		41% Prefer not to say

We used the following methods:

Interviews	15 young people in 12 interviews	In-depth discussions using an interview guide
Focus Groups	35 young people in 2 focus groups	Small group discussions using activities to explore our research questions
Football Workshops	38 young people in 2 workshops	Football circuit-style workshops exploring key findings from the focus groups

All forms of data collection were designed and facilitated by the young peer researchers, to foster trust and comfort for the participants.

All in-person activities started with an ice-breaker, tailored to the group age and dynamic. Informed consent was recorded for all participants before data collection commenced, with parental consent collected for participants under 16 years of age.

Our procedures were externally reviewed for ethical considerations prior to data collection by members of the Young Foundation.

We used an analysis method called framework analysis to spot themes and patterns within the data to reveal what young people say they feel and need around mental health support from schools to protect them from youth violence.



FOOTBALL AS A RESEARCH METHOD

HOW?



We set up 3 circuit-style football drills to gather young people's opinions. In small groups they did each drill, then answered a couple of questions to understand their thoughts.

The 3 drills answered these questions:

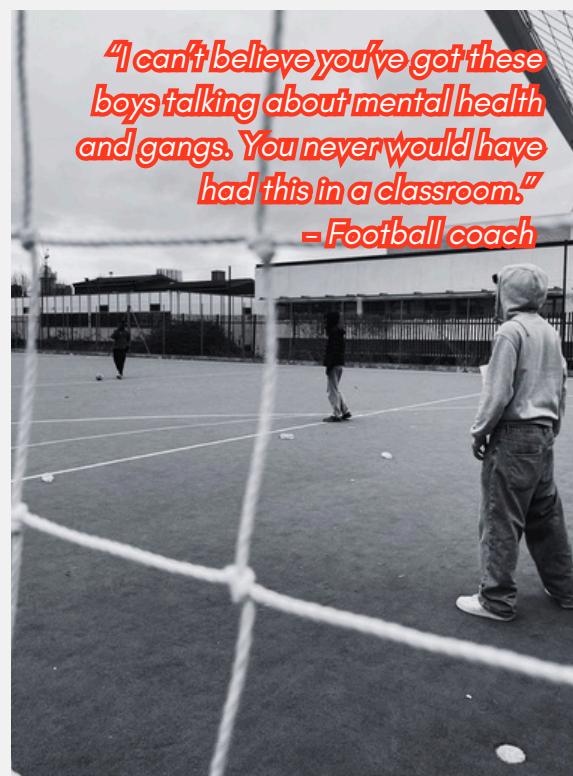
1. What is the biggest driver into youth violence?
2. What are some good vs bad influences surrounding youth violence
3. What is the best support to protect young people from youth violence at different ages?

WHY?

We know that not every young person wants to sit in a room and answer questions, so we took the research to the pitch.

As young people, we knew that to get people talking who wouldn't usually like to engage in this kind of thing, we had to talk their language...or play their game.

By using football as a method for gathering data we made the research more accessible, engaging and we gathered data from participants we wouldn't have reached otherwise.



THE SHARP TRUTH OF MENTAL HEALTH & YOUTH VIOLENCE

THE FINDINGS

SUMMARY: PAGES 26 - 28

DETAILED: PAGES 29 - 50

Beyond the blade
lies a mother's tears,

Friends left haunted
by empty years,

A moment of anguish,
a life erased,

Dreams unfinished,
futures displaced.



Peer Researcher and Social Action Lead,
PAC London Team

RESEARCH FINDINGS: SUMMARY

In phase two of our work, we conducted research with 88 young people aged 10 - 24 to explore these questions:

1 WHAT ARE THE LINKS BETWEEN MENTAL HEALTH AND YOUTH VIOLENCE?



Young people identified **4 key ways that mental health and youth violence were linked:**

Not knowing how to **understand, regulate and release emotions** can lead young people to become involved in youth violence because their emotions build up and aren't understood. They can come out in violent, uncontrollable and unintentional ways.

If young people don't have high levels of **self-esteem, confidence and positive identity** they can seek external validation which makes youth violence seem more attractive.

2 WHAT ROLE CAN A SCHOOL PLAY IN THE SOLUTION?

Young people need to feel **physically and emotionally safe on three levels** to protect them from youth violence:

- a) individual
- b) group
- c) systemic

Social media can interact with young people's mental health

making youth violence worse through it being seen as:

- more attractive and rewarding
- less risky
- easier to become involved in
- more frequent and more violent

RESEARCH FINDINGS: SUMMARY CONT.

1 WHAT ARE THE LINKS BETWEEN MENTAL HEALTH AND YOUTH VIOLENCE?

2 WHAT ROLE CAN A SCHOOL PLAY IN THE SOLUTION?

Our research found that **schools can be a part of the problem**. They can exacerbate experiences that feed poor mental health in ways that can push young people towards violence.

This is mainly because the young people we spoke with shared that schools can make young people feel **misunderstood, labelled and unsupported**.

"Some people **feel like they've got no choice** because there's those guys in school where they just don't pay attention in school, they've got learning difficulties and that, so they just don't feel like trying. Then by year 11, they fail everything. They try and go to that rubbish college over there and realise they're not getting anything out of it. Then they're just going to go over there and sell some drugs and then make £200 in three days and say you know what, I might make a living off this. Then they're **just stuck** doing the same thing."

However, our research also showed that young people think that schools have **an opportunity to be a part of a powerful solution to youth violence**, by improving mental health support in a way that addresses the links with youth violence. For example, finding ways to support boys to feel safe and confident within themselves, without needing a weapon for an emotional or physical sense of security.

RESEARCH FINDINGS: SUMMARY CONT.

According to over 150 young people engaged in over 2 phases of our research, good youth mental health interventions:

1 Youth-led (young people have decision-making power) 	7 Feel accessible to all young people 	11 Staff feel relatable to young people and centre positive stories of change that the young people relate to
2 Empower young people to understand and manage their mental health in a way that doesn't prescribe a one-size-fits-all solution or make them reliant on the service	7 Are specific to a young person's identity (including gender and ethnicity) and address the barriers that boys and young people from ethnic minority backgrounds face in accessing mental health support	12 Advertise and connect to young people in the spaces they use most, for example social media  
3 Take a preventative approach to mental health, and address the relationship with youth violence 	8 Make young people feel understood and comfortable, especially those who may have been marginalised before	13 Have long-term investment. Interventions aren't judged (and funded) against short-term quick win goals 
4 Use various ways of engaging young people and their emotions and acknowledge that not everyone expresses themselves in the same way 	9 Address the 3 levels of safety (individual, group and systemic) that young people say they need to protect them   	14 Supported by additional training and systemic change required of the education system to help teachers be and feel capable of supporting young people's mental health
5 Communicate that confidentiality is a big priority - young people must be able to trust that they won't be 'snitched on', while balancing safeguarding	10 Give young people tools and spaces to understand, regulate and release their emotions, and utilise the power of extra-curricular activities to do this	15 Delivered through a joined-up approach with a young person's community / network 

DETAILED FINDINGS: MENTAL HEALTH & YOUTH VIOLENCE

1 Not knowing how to **understand, regulate and release emotions** can lead young people to become involved in youth violence because their emotions build up and aren't understood, so they can come out in violent, uncontrollable and unintentional ways.

We heard some young people can struggle to understand their own emotions which may lead to them feeling overwhelmed and acting in ways they don't always understand. Many boys told us that they struggle with how to feel and process anger in a safe way, and that anger is their default negative emotion.

"Stress and anxiety and **these things can lead to you doing things that's not in your nature....** Have you ever just had so many emotions flying around your head that you just don't know what to do. **Then five minutes later, you're running away from a scene with a bloody knife** and you're thinking what the hell just happened."

"Any kind of negative emotion I feel can just turn into anger so quickly.
Anger is just the main negative on the panel."

We heard how some young people don't feel like they have the tools, knowledge or spaces to regulate their emotions, which can lead to explosive or violent behaviour.

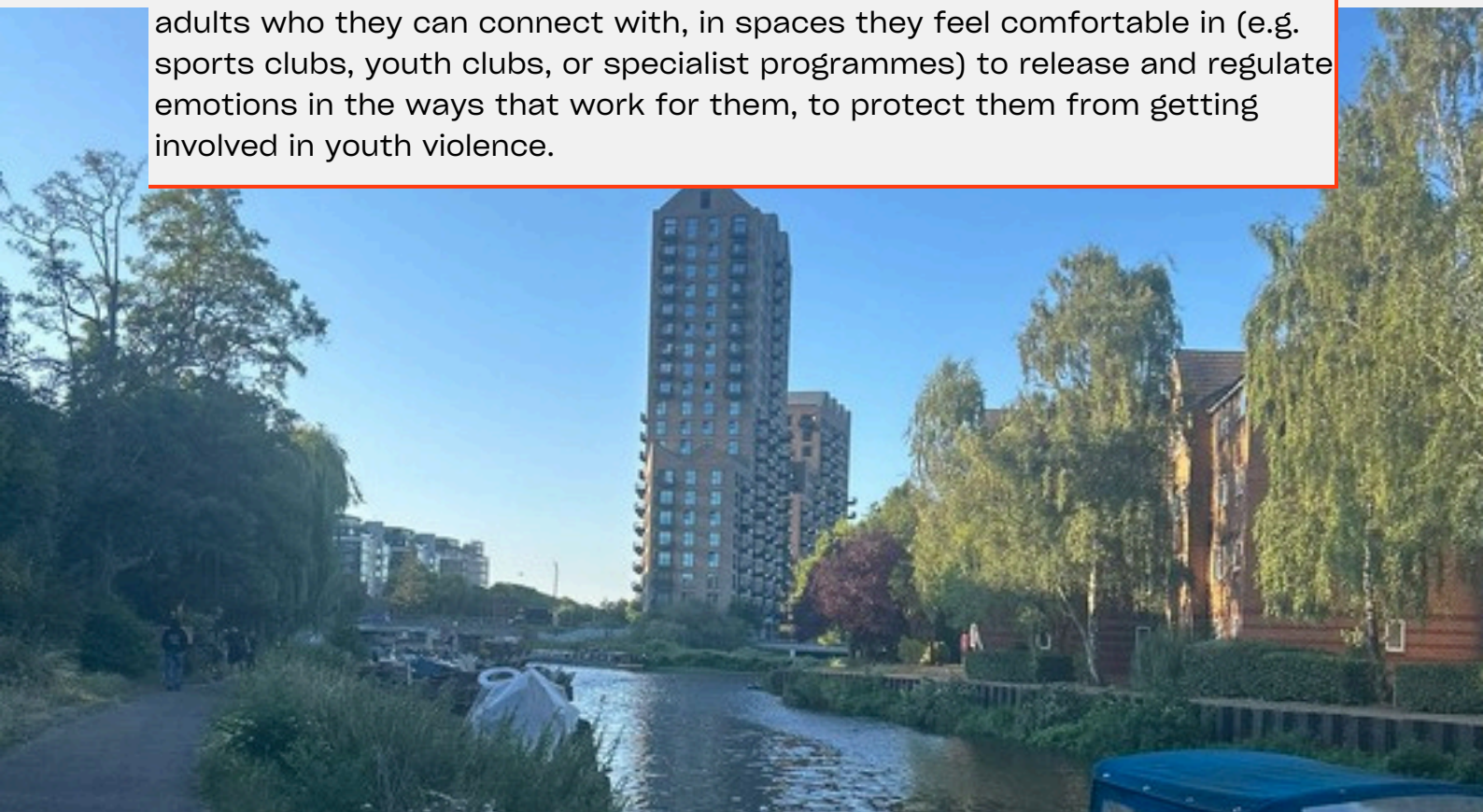
"I was really mad. I was just walking angry, angry thinking...And miraculously this guy appears in front of my eyes... I put him on the car bonnet up there and I battered him for five minutes and I left him and I went home. I felt bad after, like two days, but in that moment I was just mad...I was thinking why am I doing this? **...If I wasn't so angry that day, I don't think I'd have done that.**"

We also heard how young people don't have the space to release their emotions in ways that feel safe and comfortable for them, which can lead to emotions building up.

"We don't want to hurt those people but why do we do it? Because we **don't know how to channel that anger**. We don't know how to channel that into something a little bit more positive. We don't know how to find strategies to support us so we don't feel that way. Some people are so consumed with those feelings and those emotions that they don't know how to do anything else... it's important to have these sort of strategies and **don't let seven seconds of anger get you seven or plus years in jail.**"

"Because of how society is, a lot of people desensitise to what they see so when you're feeling anxious or feeling fearful or stressed...you can honestly make some dumb decisions which lead you to knife crime...**If you weren't able to regulate it, you would just go and do something.**"

The young people we spoke to were asking for education, spaces and tools to help them to better understand and manage their emotions. Our findings suggest that the current provision doesn't work for everyone. They need adults who they can connect with, in spaces they feel comfortable in (e.g. sports clubs, youth clubs, or specialist programmes) to release and regulate emotions in the ways that work for them, to protect them from getting involved in youth violence.





Young people need to feel physically and emotionally safe on three levels to protect them from youth violence:

- a) individual
- b) group
- c) systemic

One young person explained how they feel that there is a lack of understanding from older generations around the fear that many young people face in relation to youth violence:

"I feel like sometimes the older generation forget that **people just don't want to be hurt or fearful**. That's why sometimes they get involved in acts of violence. Sometimes I think, I'm like, bro, **I don't want to end up on a t-shirt**. I don't want my mum to be crying. I would never let my mum go on TV because someone stabbed me. I would never let that. So it's like, no one wants to be a victim. So **if you can get people from thinking I don't want to be a victim, to how can I stay safe or how can we make the community safe?** Then you'll get a better result rather than just trying to deter people from doing it, because **the more you try to deter, the more people get scared** because then they've got to deal with okay now I've got everyone on me saying don't carry. It's more about treating the problem."

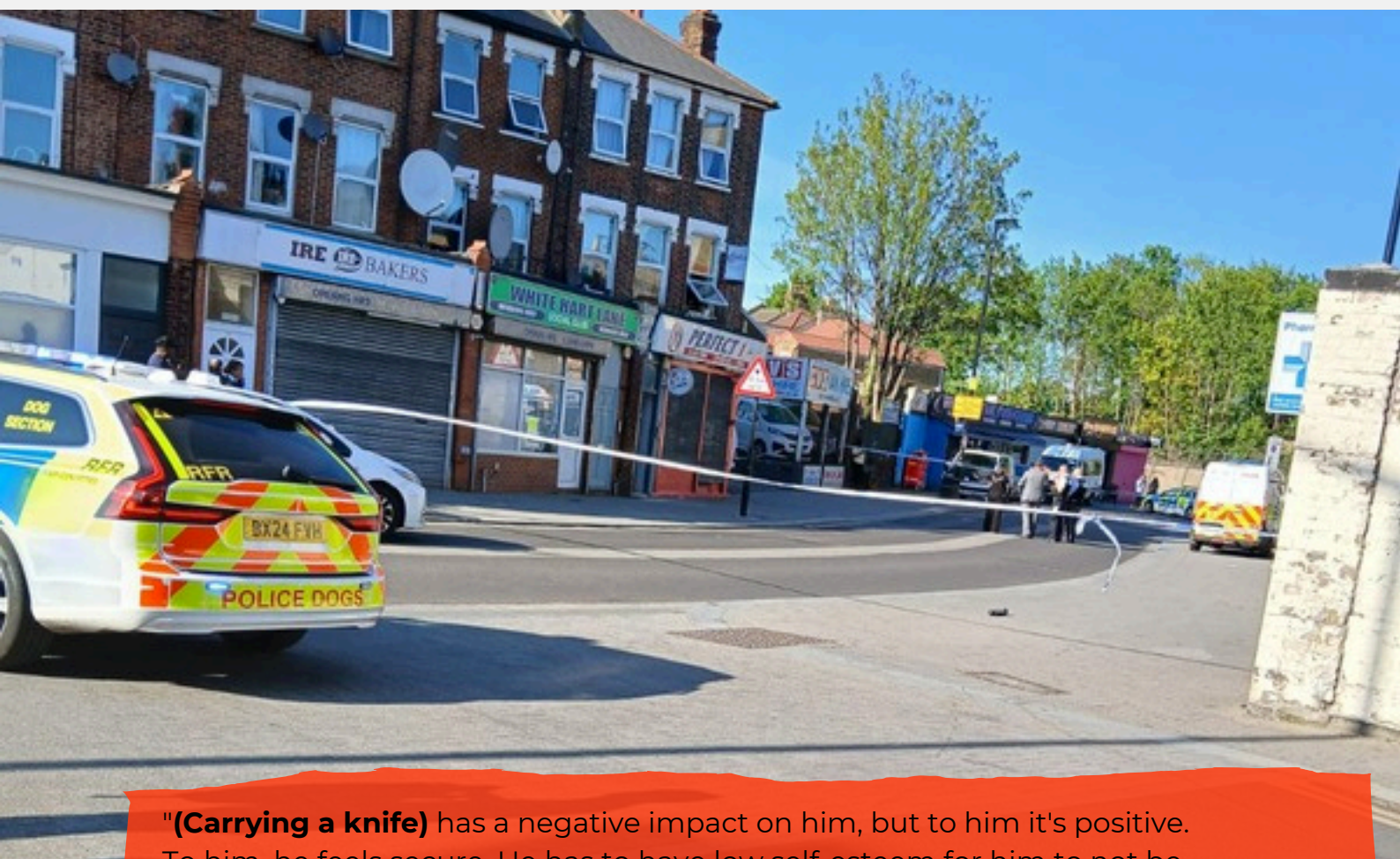
Our research heard a resounding message: many young people get involved in youth violence because they are scared. For themselves, their reputation, their families and their communities.

We grouped what we heard into 3 levels of safety that young people spoke about:

INDIVIDUAL SAFETY

Needing to feel safe, secure, empowered and capable in themselves.

Young people explained that many instances of youth violence are caused by young people feeling unsafe or insecure in their minds, bodies or self. They told us that when young people feel like a target or weak, they reach for a weapon to feel safe.



"(Carrying a knife) has a negative impact on him, but to him it's positive. To him, he feels secure. He has to have low self-esteem for him to not be able to walk freely, so **to him he now feels really secure."**

Many young people drew a link between experiencing trauma and getting involved in youth violence because it altered their perception of what was normal / healthy, and made them struggle with their mental health in ways that could lead them to be violent themselves or be drawn to violence. They told us it felt like an endless and self-perpetuating cycle of trauma, experiencing violence and committing violence.

"My mum is blacked out. She's even been stabbed. It was normal for me. It was so normalised. Like at six years old, do you think police weren't coming to my yard every day? I'm seeing everything as so normal."

"Some people may want to indulge in violence because of their traumatic experiences because they **think indulging in violence will help them overcome what they already faced** in the past."

GROUP SAFETY

Needing to feel safe, accepted, empowered and established within their friendship groups and communities.

Young people told us that if they felt insecure or unsafe in their friendship groups or communities they would sometimes rely on youth violence to gain a sense of security, social standing or to feel connected to their friends.

"Everyone wants to be angry because now it's like **anger gets you a bit of status** now."

If young people couldn't rely on their friends, they may rely on a weapon.

"(I carry a weapon because) I've got to protect myself because then again, my school friends...I know if something goes down, I'm on my own."

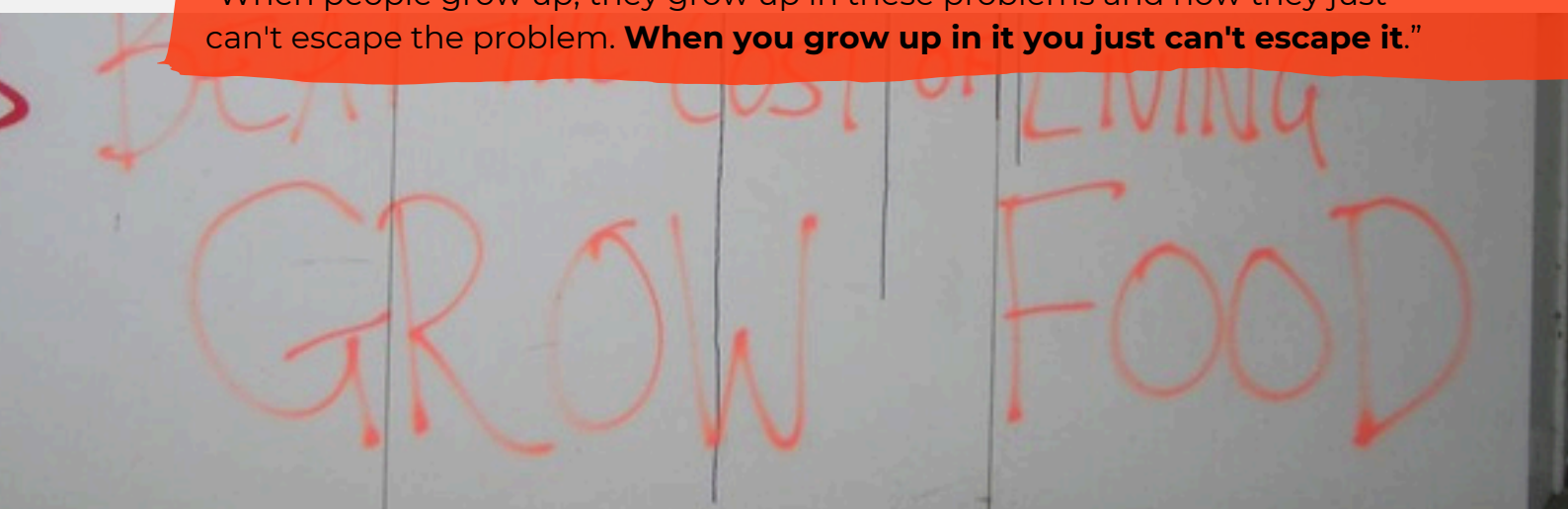
There was a very common fear-based mindset in young people that they must choose between being a victim or perpetrator and that it's 'survival of the fittest'.

"It's about survival of the fittest. Sometimes it's a defence mechanism for a lot of people. **I need to act in a certain way to prevent myself from being a target, from being a victim** and find yourself involved in something."

"You've got people who are just scared. There's a lot of people that are scared - they don't want to be a victim. **I don't want to be a victim.**"

Young people also told us that there is need for groups / communities as a whole to feel empowered, capable and safe, because right now certain communities don't see any other options but getting involved in youth violence.

"When people grow up, they grow up in these problems and now they just can't escape the problem. **When you grow up in it you just can't escape it.**"



SYSTEMIC SAFETY

Needing to feel safe and supported by the systems that are meant to protect them (e.g. police, social care, education).

Young people need to feel that as an individual and also as a community they are safe within systems. Currently, some young people don't feel this level of safety and certain communities feel much less safe, for example Black boys.

"It's **either (carry a weapon) or you get robbed** and you go home and you have to tell your mum your stuff got taken and your mum's throwing a fit and then you're sitting there like I can't have my mum do superman for me, that's crazy. **I can't have my mum call the police, that's embarrassing.**"

"We don't call the police because we don't trust them. They do bad stuff. They paralysed my friend, they killed my dad's friend. They punched up my cousin two months ago for foolishness.... No one says nothing, like it's just cool."

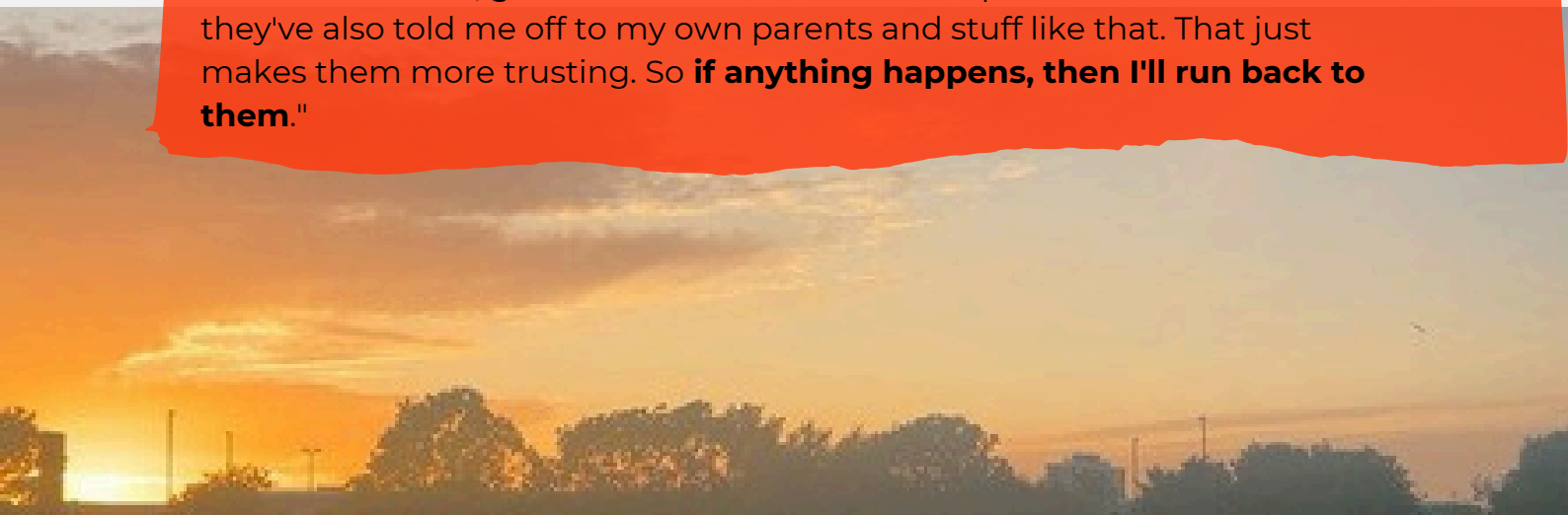
Most young people we spoke to have a severe lack of trust in systems, particularly police and social care/workers. This makes individuals and communities feel like that they can't rely on them to help in situations, like poor mental health and youth violence, so the situations escalate.

"(the police) having nothing to do. They've done enough."

"(social services) will make the situation even worse.

Overall, young people were very positive about youth clubs and the staff there.

"I've been going to the youth (club) for years. So they've watched me in and out of school, go for exclusions and make stupid moves and then they've also told me off to my own parents and stuff like that. That just makes them more trusting. So **if anything happens, then I'll run back to them.**"



3

If young people don't have high levels of self-esteem, confidence and positive identity they can seek external validation which makes youth violence seem more attractive

A lack of confidence, self-esteem and sense of safety means some young people are more easily influenced and get involved in youth violence because they need the external validation.

"Because you **don't believe in yourself. You listen to what other people tell you.**"

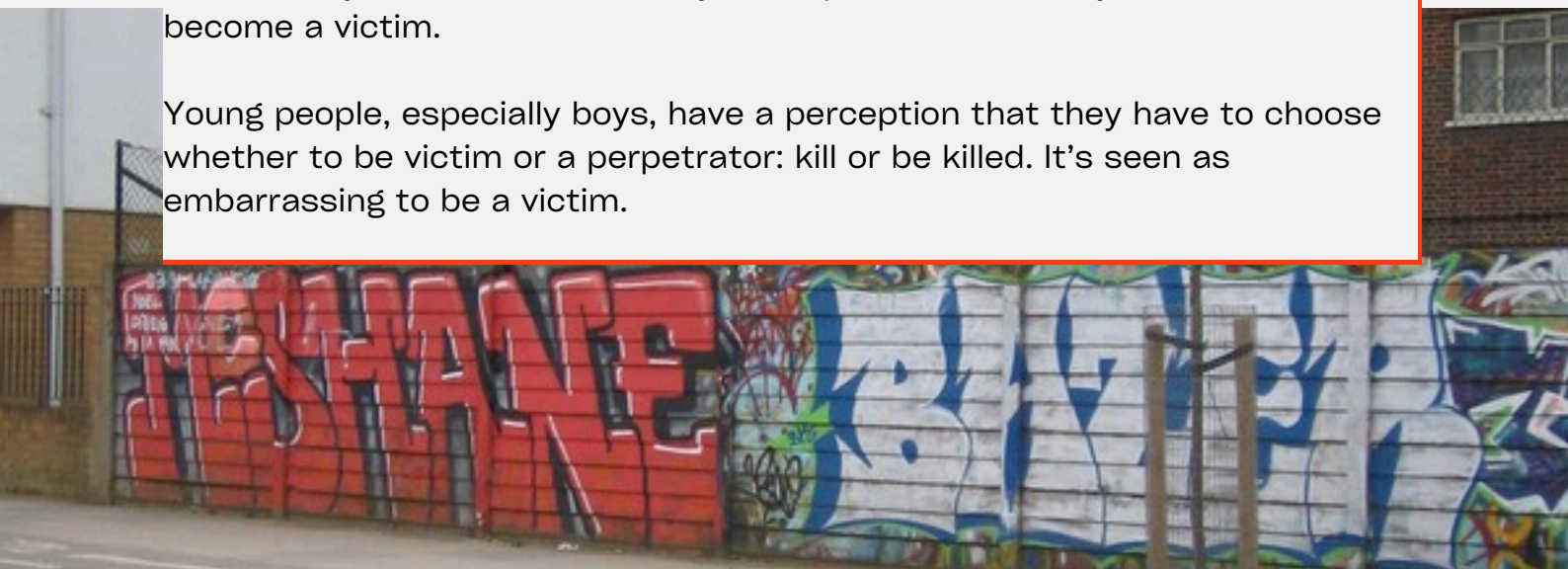
"I feel like **the worse someone's mental health is, the worse they are, the worse they act.**"

We heard young people say that if there are things missing in your life related to mental health (e.g. lack of self-esteem, ambition and motivation, connection / sense of belonging or community, confidence, emotional intelligence) then you are more likely to try and fill those empty gaps with youth violence (that can give you money, power, gang affiliation, weapons). But these things don't fix your mental health problems, they are a sticking plaster on the problem.

"If you have like bad mental health, like you won't be thinking straight, so you'd be like 'maybe if I enter youth violence and that or probably fill something like e.g. money and power.' **They're just fillers.** Realistically, if you remove all of that, you're still going to have sh*t mental health."

It was clear to a lot of young people that it is seen as 'uncool', 'unmanly' and 'embarrassing' to be a victim of youth violence. Most young people get involved in youth violence or carry a weapon because they don't want to become a victim.

Young people, especially boys, have a perception that they have to choose whether to be victim or a perpetrator: kill or be killed. It's seen as embarrassing to be a victim.





In general, both boys and girls said there is more pressure for young boys to become involved in youth violence. This was driven by the perception that it's not 'cool' or 'manly' to be a victim of violence, a pressure to be able to provide / be financially stable for girls or family and the perception that it's cool / attractive to be a 'badman'.

"I feel like he's the **man of the house** so he's doing all of that, taking all the responsibilities. And probably **why he feels he needs to be tough.**"

When some young people don't feel self-assured or safe, they pick up a weapon in an attempt to find freedom. If you feel like a target, a weapon feels like power.

"He's thinking himself a target, so he has to be ready for a fight. **Carrying a knife makes him feel more free. He's relying on the weapon to feel secure.**"

The way that gangs and youth violence work make young people rely on external validation to make them feel good about themselves and safe. Then they get trapped in using these things to make themselves feel okay. Young people told us that:

🔪 Weapons can give young people a sense of safety.

👤 Gang affiliation, identities and nicknames can give young people a sense of identity.

🏆 Points systems (based on crime / violence) can give young people a sense of worth.

"If you feel powerless, having a weapon gives your power. If you have low self esteem in the first place, carrying a weapon will feel like power, but actually it's low self-esteem. Having low confidence makes you feel like a target, so you have to gain power through a weapon. **You then rely on a weapon for your self-confidence and security, instead of yourself.**"

4

Social media can interact with young people's mental health making youth violence worse through it being seen as:

- more attractive and rewarding
- less risky
- easier to become involved in
- more frequent and more violent

We heard that for some young people, social media contributes and exacerbates existing underlying issues that can connect to mental health (like low self-esteem, low confidence, need for external validation and identity issues) which makes them more likely to get involved in and commit more violence.

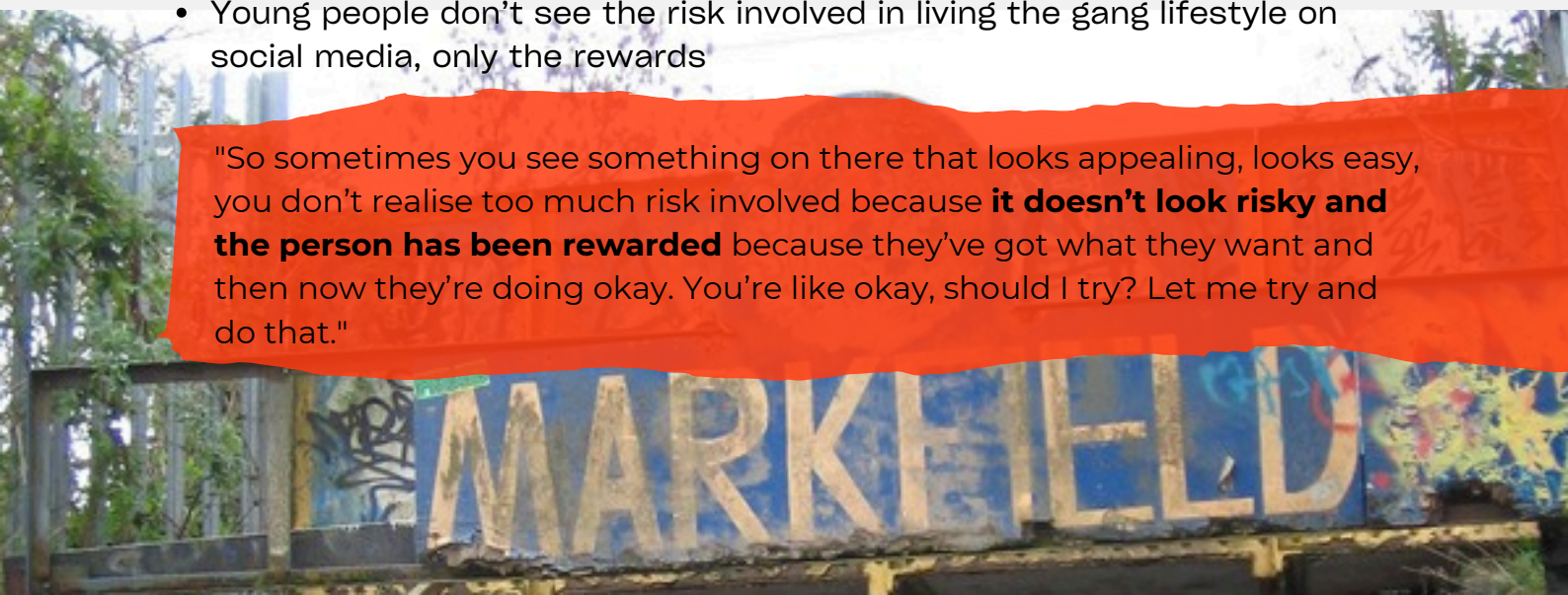
We heard how social media has made it **easier to get involved** with youth violence and **expanded the circle** of young people who get involved in violence because:

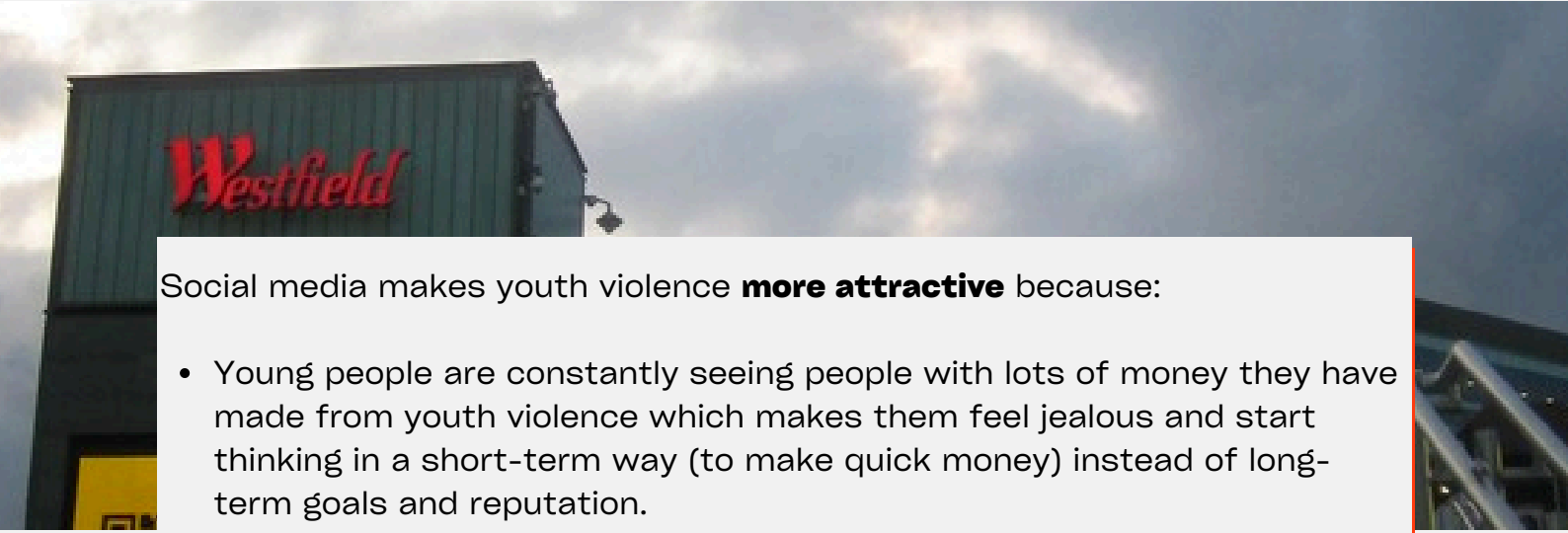
- You can start conflict online making it easier to get involved
- The online world has changed what kind of person you need to be to get involved in youth violence
- You can buy weapons easily online creating greater access to knives in particular

Social media makes youth violence seem **less risky** because:

- Young people are sat behind a screen from the person they are starting conflict with, so the consequences don't feel real, and they don't come straight away (no imminent risk)
- Young people don't see the risk involved in living the gang lifestyle on social media, only the rewards

"So sometimes you see something on there that looks appealing, looks easy, you don't realise too much risk involved because **it doesn't look risky and the person has been rewarded** because they've got what they want and then now they're doing okay. You're like okay, should I try? Let me try and do that."





Social media makes youth violence **more attractive** because:

- Young people are constantly seeing people with lots of money they have made from youth violence which makes them feel jealous and start thinking in a short-term way (to make quick money) instead of long-term goals and reputation.
- Social media makes the 'benefits' of youth violence more easily and more frequently seen by young people. For example, people are seeing that youth violence = money, girls, group safety, community, respect.

"If you see something, someone's done something and **see how easy it was done**, think I can do that, and they've made an amount of money just doing that. Fab, boy. **You start thinking of the short term.**"

Social media makes youth violence happen **more often** and **more violently** because:

- more people see if someone is disrespecting you, so there is more pressure to retaliate
- more people see if you are disrespecting someone else, which gives you attention and makes you feel cool
- young people lose perspective of what is violence because there is such graphic content online that they see so frequently.

"**You don't see the severity of what it is that you're doing. There was a lot of people doing things ten times worse than me** but it doesn't mean what I was doing wasn't bad."

Young people told us that when they had poor mental health, they were drawn to violence via social media. We heard that it is important to consider the relationship between mental health, violence and social media when looking to tackle youth violence.

DETAILED FINDINGS: A SCHOOL'S ROLE IN THE SOLUTION

Our research found that schools can be a part of the problem.

Young people say that as schools are the place they spend the majority of their time and where they are supposed to be learning lessons for life, it's a crucial part of the puzzle in solving both youth violence and youth mental health.

Young people also acknowledged the pressures that schools and teachers are under. However, many of the people we spoke to explained how schools can exacerbate experiences that feed poor mental health in ways that can push young people towards violence.

This is mainly because schools can make young people feel:

- misunderstood
- labelled
- unsupported or unsafe

FEELING MISUNDERSTOOD

In our research, there was a very common perception that schools and teachers don't understand students. This misunderstanding spanned across their identities, their mental health, their aspirations, their intentions, their behaviours and their actions. Some young people said this lack of understanding could push young people towards youth violence because they feel misunderstood.

"(talking about getting out of Pupil Referral Unit back to mainstream school) So I just wanted to be a part of society. **I don't want to be a bad kid** or labelled a bad kid. I always said I think **I was misunderstood** because the people, they didn't understand me. My teachers didn't understand me and I didn't know how to control my energy at the time. I was just loud. When I was talking I would say something I didn't mean and then I'm in trouble all of a sudden.

"They're not violent, they're not murderers. **They're just misunderstood, misguided** or, as I like to call them, they're just kids with knives"

FEELING LABELLED

Young people told us that how they are treated and common practices within schools can make them feel like a 'bad kid', and then they have to become one. Some young people explained that when they were labelled as bad (through words, actions or attitudes of the school) they felt like this made them feel that getting involved in youth violence was their only option for success. Being labelled makes young people feel hopeless for the future and search for external validation outside of schools.

Young people identified structural factors, like disability, geography, poverty, unemployment and racial discrimination as a driving force towards youth violence. They say that these can either be reinforced or addressed at school in a way to soften the impact of these structural issues.

"(Schools) affect their mental health by like, if they feel they're not doing well in school, **they feel like they have to find another option like the streets** to feel because they **don't feel like schools are them.**"

Young people said that being excluded and put into pupil referral units can push them towards violence by making them feel and surrounding them with other 'bad kids'.

This is supported by our first research project findings, which can be found at www.mcpin.org/projects-programmes/beyond-the-blades/

"They want to have a little fun after school, bam, they're excluded. The next minute they're in unit and the unit is not going to care. **The unit is just a stronger place to contain the bad behaviour that happens.** Bad behaviour is expected in a unit. Only some people go there and manage to get back into school, but some people go there and realise they've got freedom to misbehave myself and they just go crazy. **A lot of people go to unit and end up in a certain lifestyle there.**"

"When I was in unit...**you've got bare freedom to do what you want.** The teachers there aren't qualified to teach a specific subject, they don't really care. So I'm thinking right, I can actually do what I want and there's less repercussions than if I was in main school. So **this doesn't really rehabilitate people because people I was in there with became my brethren.** It's like a **breeding ground for misbehaviour.** It's like how can we expect someone to change when you put them with other people in the same situation. It's like blind leading the blind."

FEELING UNSUPPORTED / UNSAFE

Some young people told us that they don't feel emotionally, psychologically or physically safe in schools. In some instances, this lack of support and safety can push young people towards unsafe environments out of school or carrying a weapon in school to protect themselves.

"Most people don't even want to be in school no more because they don't feel like school is a safe place. So if the school system is made a bit more safe, like a safe place for people to be at, I think yeah - it'd be a good thing."

"Has anyone ever carried a knife to school?"

"Everyone does."

"What has the school done about it?"

"Nothing, they don't know about it."

Many young people feel particularly unsupported by, and have negative associations of, safeguarding teams.

"I'd rather not tell no one, I don't even like talking to safeguarding."

Young people with neurodiversity or mental health issues were more likely to feel unsupported by their school. Some young people reported feeling that their schools failed them by not recognizing and responding to their needs, which contributed to pushing them towards youth violence.

"For me, **I got failed from primary.** It's kind of messed up my mental health because now I know I need to keep doing GCSE's over and over again knowing I ain't going to pass.

They were supposed to test for me for ADHD but all they ever did was just send me out of class and then just put me in the next room doing no work, and then yeah, I'd just get excluded."

However, our research also showed that young people think that schools have an opportunity to be a part of a powerful solution to youth violence, by addressing the links with mental health.

They spoke positively about some existing provisions of mental health support that could be built upon. For example, anonymous worry boxes/websites, young and relatable youth mentors, workshops with organisations ran by individuals with lived experience of youth violence, youth club trips, mentors and free access to sports / gym or other activities.

Young people were hopeful that enhancing mental health support (within or coordinated by schools) would have a positive impact on young people which would steer them away from youth violence.

"I think it **(enhanced mental health support)** would help people stay away from **violence** because if you've got a **stable mindset** and you are thinking good thoughts and you're not like stressed, **it would impact your decisions and your actions.** "

We've captured what young people say they want from mental health interventions in our PAC: Principles for Good Youth Mental Health Interventions.

These 15 principles should be embedded into practice within schools and young people's wider networks. They should be used to:

- Guide decisions for new services/interventions
- Assess whether existing services meet young people's needs, adapt them where possible, and create new ones where there are gaps.
- Assess potential partners' ability to deliver services that respond to young people's needs.

1

Youth led (young people have decision making power)



Young people want to be involved in and have decision-making power in the design and delivery of the interventions that are supposed to support them.

"I feel like they should **listen more** and not be so hostile, demanding with certain stuff and let the kids actually express themselves how they want to or make them feel more comfortable."

2

Empower young people to understand and manage their mental health in a way that doesn't prescribe a one-size-fits-all solution or make them reliant on the service



Young people experience and connect with their mental health in many different ways, and need support to find the ways that work for them. Interventions need to honour this and create the space for them to find ways to manage their mental health that suit them as an individual. It's not necessarily about teaching them about mental health, it's about empowering them to figure it out for themselves.

"I want them to feel **empowered** when they come into my classroom and when they leave the classroom. I want them to understand that I'm here for you and things are going to go wrong and things go wrong for me and I will give them some real life stories sometimes and tell them that it happens. I'll be real with them." – Teacher

3

Take a preventative approach to mental health and youth violence



For some young people they feel that schools can be a trigger or catalyst for poor mental health, therefore schools have an opportunity to have a significant impact on young people's mental health by taking a preventative approach to spotting the early signs. The early signs can be linked with youth violence, for example absenteeism and fighting.

"I feel like **school is usually where it (poor mental health) starts, from results.** So if they catch it early on then they can just basically prevent it from happening."

4

Use various ways of engaging young people and their emotions and acknowledge that not everyone expresses themselves in the same way

Some young people need help and space to find how they want to express themselves. Good mental health interventions should offer multiple options for how young people can engage (for example, speaking, drawing, playing). They should also reflect the age or the young people.

"Sometimes when you do say what you are feeling, it feels like you are being not heard. **So writing it down is my way of feeling heard.**"

From our research, we found that young people think that the support they need varies significantly based on age.

For 6 – 10 year olds, 76% of young people said that extra-curricular activities are the most effective type of support that would protect young people from youth violence.

For 11 – 15 year olds, 53% of young people said mentorship would be the most effective type of support that would protect young people from youth violence.

For 16 – 20 year olds, 83% of young people said that mental health support and therapy would be the most effective type of support that would protect young people from youth violence.

5

Communicate that confidentiality is a big priority - young people must be able to trust they won't be 'snitched on'

A lack of trust in confidentiality was one of the biggest barriers that young people reported to engaging in mental health interventions in schools. We heard many stories of young people having their trust broken by teachers and staff. They told us that they understood teachers have a safeguarding responsibility, however they felt betrayed, angry and vulnerable when they had shared something with a member of staff, and then a different member of staff (or even other students) begin to treat them differently or speak to them about the issue. Confidentiality is a huge priority to young people and must be present to enable them to feel safe enough to engage in mental health interventions.

"I must've told the counsellor or therapist. I was just opening up to her and telling her and then it just turned on me so different. **It was supposed to be confidential.** It wasn't confidential. After that, I didn't trust anyone. **No type of trust in my heart for anybody in that school, especially the teachers.** The trust left that same day and I was so sad."



Feel accessible to all young people



Interventions need to be designed and delivered in a way that feels (not just is) accessible to all types of young people. One key way to achieve this is to co-design interventions with young people, as adults can wrongly assume what it means for something to feel accessible. There is a perception that mental health interventions are only available to 'good' kids so there should be particular focus on helping those who don't feel like they are seen to fit into this category.

"The ones who are better behaved in school, they **(the school) tend to help them (with their mental health) more.**"



Are specific to a young person's identity (including gender and ethnicity) and address the barriers that boys and young people from ethnic minority backgrounds face in accessing mental health support



Young girls and boys say that they need different things from mental health interventions. In general, girls felt more comfortable talking about their feelings and mental health (although many are still struggling with mental health). Lots of boys experience barriers to engaging with mental health interventions that are shaped by toxic masculinity, peer pressure and self-image. Similarly, young people from ethnic minority backgrounds also felt they experienced barriers to accessing support that need to be addressed in solutions.

The staff delivering interventions are also influenced by toxic masculinity and traditional gender-based assumptions which can lead to them supporting boys less than girls with their mental health. Interventions need to meet boys where they are and find ways to support their mental health in a way that addresses these factors. Many young people said that using activities like weight lifting, the gym and boxing is a good way to open a conversation about mental health because it makes them feel strong, capable and comfortable in themselves.

"I feel like there should be like a **space or something basically they (boys) can talk to when they feel like they don't know what to do.** They feel like they're not getting the support when it comes to these types of things or what to do when it comes to youth violence or if they're worried even about walking on the street by their self as a male. **I really think that boys should have that type of help.** Like someone they can call, someone they can talk to, maybe like a website they can write their thoughts and stuff or someone they can vent to."



Make young people feel understood and comfortable, especially those who may have been marginalised before



Young people can't be expected to be vulnerable about their mental health if they aren't feeling understood and comfortable. Interventions need to prioritise trust-building and creating a relaxed atmosphere in order for young people to safe enough to engage. This is especially true for young people who struggle to fit in to the school environment/strict structure.

"It's like because I have [intervention programme] today, I'm going to go to a **lesson where a man can learn something but I can also feel relaxed**, have a little laugh here and there but also learn things that you're not going to learn in English, just little stuff like interacting with people, **actually thinking about considering other people's emotions and how you talk to people and stuff like that as a person.**"



Address the 3 levels of safety (individual, group and systemic) that young people say they need to protect them



Young people want mental health interventions to address all 3 levels of safety they identified:

INDIVIDUAL

Young people need interventions to help them to build a strong sense of security and self-esteem .

Many young people think that providing access to things like boxing and strength-training would help to tackle youth violence and poor mental health because it makes young people feel capable in their bodies. Therefore they don't need to search for other things, like weapons, to feel safe or powerful.

Young people need interventions to help them feel supported to manage their mental health within the context of their friendship groups and community.

Young people want interventions to meet them where they are: acknowledge their circumstances and context.

Young people sometimes feel ostracised from the rest of the community and interventions should focus on creating space for them.

GROUP

SYSTEMIC

Young people need interventions to communicate that they are safe in and supported by the systems that surround them in everyday life.

Interventions need to work with the systems that affect young people: social care, youth sector, police to form a cohesive feeling of safety and support amongst them all. Interventions need to respond to the current lack of trust in systems before attempting to repair.



10

Give young people tools and spaces to understand, regulate and release their emotions, whilst utilising the power of extra-curricular activities to do this

Young people recognise it's important to create space to understand and release emotions because for some young people it leads them to committing youth violence.

Interventions can achieve this by providing:

TOOLS

Frameworks, activities, mindsets, techniques and tools to help young people understand and manage mental health.

"I feel like **(we need) a room where we can just chill...calm down.** If you have anger issues. Or people with ADHD."

Supportive and safe spaces to understand, regulate and release emotions.

SPACES

SUPPORT

A trusted adult to support and guide a young person whilst making them not feel judged.

"Having **someone to vent their thoughts to** would help because otherwise they're going to keep it all in, they're going to spiral."

"I was in a gang. I even got stabbed two times. I nearly lost my life. Actually, **I had lost my life. What really helped me get over that was sports.** I used to do karate, boxing, swimming, cycling, I used to do it all. My school system was trash, so it wasn't something that could support. **So sports really got me out of youth violence.**"

Positive and engaging activities that facilitate young people to understand and release their feelings in a way that feels safe to them. This could be sport, like boxing and football.

OUTLETS / ACTIVITIES

12

Advertise and connect to young people in the spaces they use most, for example social media



Young people want mental health interventions to have an attractive and 'cool' image that resonates with them, because it makes it easier for them to want to get involved. They want interventions to have a social media and word-of-mouth presence because this is how they engage with the world.

"They can make an account, post it, tell every young person that already attended they're supposed to repost it or like tell a friend to tell a friend type of thing. **Because I only heard about this place (youth club) a couple years ago in secondary school, and that was telling friend to tell friend.**"

13

Have long-term investment. Interventions aren't judged (and funded) against short-term quick win goals



Young people, and the staff that support them, recognise that mental health interventions can't be judged against quick/short-term goals because often mental health improvements are hard to quantify and happen incrementally. Young people also require a lot of time to build trust with adults to allow them to support them with their mental health. This is especially true when trust has been broken with schools and staff (which is often with the individuals who need the support the most).

"It's not a quick fix. This is what I think some schools fail to realise. **They think because you do an intervention for six weeks, that child's going to miraculously make an improvement and be perfect.**"

! 14

Supported by additional training and systemic change that is required of the education system to help teachers be and feel capable of supporting young people's mental health

Many young people currently perceive most teachers to not care or be capable of supporting them with their mental health.

"And we do anything else but following (instructions) say, if we're feeling angry or something and we're telling the teacher 'I need to step outside' they'll be like **'no you are here to learn, not to talk about your feelings.'**"

Some teachers acknowledge that the curriculum and teaching education doesn't prepare them to support young people's mental health.

"So if you know the curriculum, you think you can be a great teacher, it doesn't work that way. **You need to know how to build relationships and build rapport and allow these students to engage with you.**"

- Teacher

There needs to be changes within the system to allow teachers to feel equipped with adequate time, training and resources to support young people's mental health.

15

Delivered through a joined-up approach with a young person's community network



Young people need mental health interventions to span across their lives – not just at school. This is because their mental health is wider than just school, so they need the support reflect that. There are other spaces and people who need to be involved, including parents, youth workers, social workers and police.

For some young people, the trust is too badly broken with schools for them to engage with support there, therefore these individuals must be offered other options to access support within their communities.

Young people were overwhelmingly positive about youth clubs. We must learn from and utilize this when delivering mental health interventions. Youth clubs need to receive prioritised funding and resources to support young people's mental health as many young people trust them the most in the system.

"It's (youth clubs) literally keeping the kids off the streets. If there was no youth clubs, I feel like the streets would just be full of young kids and they'd be way more knife crime, gang violence. So this is basically a place to prevent some of that from happening and keeping the kids inside some might say, but they can actually be productive."

THE SHARP TRUTH OF MENTAL HEALTH & YOUTH VIOLENCE

RESOURCES

A blade in the street is a shadowed choice,
It silences laughter, it cuts all voice.
Cold whispers, promising power,
But leaves only the police sirens in the late-
night hour.

They say the blade makes you brave,
but tell me,
How brave are you when mum's gotta visit their
son's graves?
When your bredrin's face is printed on tees,
Candles on pavements, names left in the
breeze.

A knife in your hand doesn't make you brave,
Real strength lies beyond the blade.
Life's worth more than the fear you trade,
Dreams cut deeper than the scars it made.



Peer Researcher and Social Action Lead,
PAC London Team

OUR RESOURCES

At PAC, we conduct robust peer research in order to create change within our community and society, on behalf of young people. Based on two and a half years of conducting research with over 150 young people, we have turned their thoughts, experiences and calls for change into an array of resources:

Resource	What is it?	Where can I find it?
XCLUDED	An interactive movie based on the findings, supported by a toolkit	https://thepeacealliance.org.uk/our-initiatives/peer-action-collective-2/
The Better Exclusion Pathway Poster	A poster capturing a better exclusion journey for young people that supports them before, during and after any type of school exclusion	<u>Page 54</u> or download from www.mcpin.org/projects-programmes/beyond-the-blades/
How Schools can Help Tackle Youth Violence Poster	A poster capturing how schools can support and protect young based on their level of involvement in youth violence	<u>Page 55</u> or download from www.mcpin.org/projects-programmes/beyond-the-blades/
The 15 Principles for Good Youth Mental Health Interventions Poster	A poster capturing the 15 Principles for Good Youth Mental Health Interventions	<u>Page 56</u> or download from www.mcpin.org/projects-programmes/beyond-the-blades/
Mental Health Tips For Young People, From Young People	A selection of tips and song recommendations for when you are feeling anxious, sad, overwhelmed or angry.	<u>Page 57</u>

XCLUDED

The XCLUDED interactive film was created as the social action response to PAC London's peer research findings. Co-produced with over 50 young people, it brings research to life through the story of Heaven: a character navigating critical decisions around exclusions and her future.

By combining research, lived experience and creative storytelling, XCLUDED provides a powerful platform for reflection, discussion and change.

It is supported by the XCLUDED interactive workshop toolkit which translates these lessons into practical activities for professionals and students.

For more information on XCLUDED, please visit www.thepeacealliance.org.uk/our-initiatives/peer-action-collective-2/.





The Better Exclusion Journey

An 'ideal' journey for a young person experiencing any kind of school exclusion based on insights captured from 150+ people by the young peer researchers of the London Peer Action Collective 2025

"I feel like the school actually believes in me and wants me to find a better path in life."

1

Schools take an active approach to supporting those at risk of and already involved in violence

before exclusion

Schools focus on the prevention of exclusions by understanding the root causes of behaviour and providing support

**2**

"My teachers don't punish me straight away, they understand that behaviour is normally caused by something else, and they try to understand what is going on for me."

during exclusion

"Whilst I'm excluded, my behaviour mentor called me to check in on my mental health and that I've got everything I need to do the work."

3

Young people receive personalised support from trusted adults during their exclusion

Schools ensure there is effective communication before, during and after exclusion

**4**

"It was made clear to me and my parents why I was excluded, how I can change and what is going to happen now and afterwards."

after exclusion

"When I went back to school my teacher took the time to ask some questions about the exclusion and how I feel. We spoke about how I can behave better next time. She also connected me with other students who are struggling with their behaviour but trying to be better."

5

Schools create meaningful opportunities for reflection

Schools co-create personalised re-integration / transition support plans with reasonable adjustments to help the young person thrive

**6**

"I was allowed to go back to school on an altered timetable and take time outs to make sure I didn't have another outburst."



How Can Schools Protect Young People from Youth Violence?

Recommendations for protecting young people from violence based on insights captured from 150+ people by the young peer researchers of the London Peer Action Collective 2025



Young people who are not involved in violence

Schools focus on preventing involvement

Example actions

Involving students in decision making and the approach taken to actions

Mental health support and education

Education around youth violence

Understanding the root cause of behaviour

Aspiration and goal building

Possible impact

Enhanced support and education at school may prevent young people becoming involved in violence by interrupting the pathway to violence.



Young people who are lightly involved or at-risk of becoming involved in violence

Schools focus on detecting and addressing early signs

Holistic support within a young person's network and wider context

Structured conversations with those involved in violence (e.g. police, ex-gang members)

Create opportunities for reflection (e.g. with peers, teachers)

Spotting the early signs of becoming involved in violence and providing holistic, personalised support could stop young people becoming more involved in violence



Young people who are known to be involved in violence

Schools focus on supporting with positive influences and interventions

Engagement with specialist services

Conversations with parents/guardians

Taking an active approach to supporting those known to be involved in violence may provide the motivation, support and tools to avoid violence



15 Principles for Good Youth Mental Health Interventions

Guidance to be implemented within new and existing mental health services based on insights captured from 150+ people by the young peer researchers of the London Peer Action Collective 2025

1



Youth-led (young people have decision-making power)

2

Feel accessible to all young people



11

Staff feel **relatable** to young people and centre **positive stories of change** that the young people relate to

2

Empower young people to understand and manage their mental health in a way that doesn't prescribe a one-size-fits-all solution or make them reliant on the service

7

Are **specific to a young person's identity** (including gender and ethnicity) and **address the barriers that boys and young people from ethnic minority backgrounds face** in accessing mental health support



12

Advertise and connect to young people in **the spaces they use most**, for example social media



3

Take a **preventative approach** to mental health, and address the relationship with youth violence

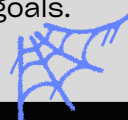


8

Make young people **feel understood and comfortable**, especially those who may have been marginalised before

13

Have **long-term investment**. Interventions shouldn't be judged (and funded) against short-term quick win goals.



4

Use **various ways of engaging young people and their emotions** and acknowledge that not everyone expresses themselves in the same way



9

Address the 3 levels of safety (individual, group and systemic) that young people say they need to protect them



14

Supported by **additional training and systemic change** required of the education system to help teachers be and feel capable of supporting young people's mental health

5

Communicate that **confidentiality is a big priority** - young people must be able to trust that they won't be 'snitched on' whilst balancing safeguarding

10

Give young people **tools and spaces to understand, regulate and release their emotions**, and utilise the power of extra-curricular activities to do this

15

Delivered through a **joined-up approach** with a young person's community/network



MENTAL HEALTH TIPS FROM YOUNG PEOPLE, FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

At PAC, we're not mental health professionals, and we always recommend that anyone struggling with their emotions or mental health should contact a professional. There are some links on the last page of this magazine. However, after speaking to over 150 young people, and thinking about our own mental health, we've heard some helpful tricks and techniques that help us, so we want to share them.



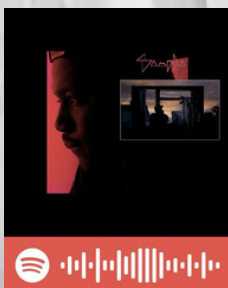
A PAC prescription for when you feel...

anxious

Writing things down

Breathing techniques, for example box breathing (breathe in for 4, hold for 4, out for 4, hold for 4 and repeat)

Talking to a friend, or family member, or adult, or yourself!



Try giving this song a listen:

Indecision
by Sampha



A PAC prescription for when you feel...

sad or depressed

List 3 things you are grateful for

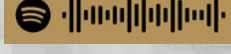
Doing something that brings you joy or comfort - go for a walk, do some colouring, watch your favourite film

Listen to your favourite music



Try giving this song a listen:

Water No
Get Enemy
by Fela Kuti



A PAC prescription for when you feel...

angry



Move your body - walk, run, box, stretch

Write down why you feel angry and then rip up the paper

Ground yourself by naming 5 things you can see, 4 things you can hear, 3 things you can smell and 2 things you can touch



Try giving this song a listen:

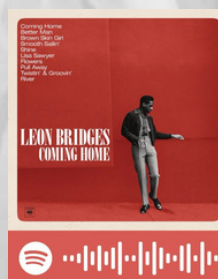
Till I Collapse
By Eminem, Nate
Dogg
(non-explicit version)



A PAC prescription for when you feel...
overwhelmed / don't know what you are feeling

Try a short meditation on Youtube
Google search for the 'Wheel of Emotions' to help figure out what you feel

Set a timer for 10 mins and journal - don't stop until the timer goes.



Try giving this song a listen:

River
By Leon Bridges



THE SHARP TRUTH OF MENTAL HEALTH & YOUTH VIOLENCE

RECOMMENDATIONS

Beyond the blade
There lies a way

A brighter dawn
A safer day

Where anger cools
And hope is made

Where peace can bloom
Beyond the blade



Peer Researcher and Social Action Lead,
PAC London Team

OUR RECOMMENDATIONS

We see a future where young people feel fully supported with their mental health in a way that protects them from being drawn into violence.

In this future, every young person feels able to reach for tools, resources and support to manage their emotions, not the blade.

But **we can't do it alone.**

WHAT WE NEED FROM YOU

IF YOU'RE A YOUNG PERSON

1

Share this magazine with a friend or a teacher.

IF YOU'RE AN ADULT

Share this magazine with a professional in education or policy who can help us to make a difference.

2

Ask a teacher to download and display the **Beyond the Blades posters**.

Find a way to get the **Beyond the Blades posters** displayed in a school, youth club or policy setting.

the QR code and link to download are on the posters on pages 54 - 56 of this magazine!

3

Implement one thing you've read - like one of the research findings or one of the techniques.

Implement the findings and principles into how you interact with young people.

If you know you can do more to help us to tackle youth violence, email hannajones@mcpin.org.

**TOGETHER, WE WILL
TACKLE YOUTH VIOLENCE BY
GIVING YOUNG PEOPLE A VOICE**

Thank you for taking the time to read Beyond the Blades: The Sharp Truth to Youth Violence.

Thank you for listening to the voices of the young
those who are too often unheard, overlooked, or misunderstood.
Every story shared, every truth spoken, is a step toward change.
A step toward safety, healing, and understanding.

Youth violence doesn't happen in isolation.
It's rooted in pain, fear, inequality, and silence.
By engaging with this magazine, you've shown that you're willing to look beyond the
headlines and into the real lives behind the statistics.
That matters. That makes a difference.

**But if, as you read,
you found parts of yourself reflected in these pages,
if you're feeling overwhelmed, unheard, or in pain
please know this:
you are not alone.**

There is help. There is hope.
And there are people who care and want to support you.

On the next page are links to charities and organisations that offer confidential, non-
judgmental help.

Whether you need someone to talk to, practical advice, or just a safe space, you deserve
support.

Your voice matters. Your life matters.
Please take care of yourself, and don't be afraid to ask for support.

Kyan Alves Nicholson

Peer Researcher and
Social Action Lead,
PAC London Team



WHERE TO FIND SUPPORT

IF

you want to talk to
someone about your
mental health or
wellbeing

MIND:
[www.mind.org.uk/for-
young-people](http://www.mind.org.uk/for-young-people)

Samaritans:
www.samaritans.org

Shout:
[https://giveusashout.
org/](https://giveusashout.org/)

IF

you feel in danger
(from yourself or
someone else)

NHS 999 (emergency) or
111 (non-emergency):
<https://111.nhs.uk/>

Childline:
[https://www.childline.org.u
k/](https://www.childline.org.uk/)

Safer London:
[www.saferlondon.org
.uk/young-londoners](http://www.saferlondon.org.uk/young-londoners)

IF

you want
information related
to violence

Safecall:
116 000

Find a local knife bin:
[https://www.word4weapo
ns.co.uk/knife-bin-
locations/](https://www.word4weapons.co.uk/knife-bin-locations/)

London Needs You Alive
(Free activities, courses,
volunteering):
[www.london.gov.uk/conte
nt/london-needs-you-alive](http://www.london.gov.uk/content/london-needs-you-alive)

THE ORGANISATIONS THAT SUPPORT PAC LONDON

McPin Foundation

The McPin Foundation exists to transform mental health research.

We are a mental health research charity. We believe research is done best when it involves people with relevant personal experience that relates to the research being carried out. We call this 'lived experience' and integrate this into our work.

The McPin Foundation team provides research training, supervision and research delivery support for PAC London.



Read more at: www.mcpin.org/



Follow them on: @mcpinfoundation



Contact them via: hannajones@mcpin.org

THE PEACE ALLIANCE

The Peace Alliance was launched in July 2001 as a local initiative in Haringey to tackle the underlying causes of violent crime.

Today, The Peace Alliance works nationally with key statutory agencies such as the Home Office and the Metropolitan Police advising on key policy issues.

The Peace Alliance is well known for its work across all communities to engender community cohesion, partnerships and peace whilst also working with vulnerable people, victims of crime, their families and young people.

The Peace Alliances provides pastoral and wellbeing support, social action training, supervision and social action delivery for PAC London.

Read more at: www.thepeacealliance.org.uk/

Follow them on: @thepeaceallianceuk

Contact them via: t.philemon@thepeacealliance.org.uk



THE INDIVIDUALS THAT SUPPORT PAC LONDON



**Yasmin
Ahmadzadeh**

Peer Research Lead
at PAC London
2023-2024,
The McPin
Foundation



**Debbie Ama
Obeng**

Social Action Lead
at PAC London,
2023 - 2025,
The Peace
Alliance



**Hanna
Jones**

Peer Research Lead
at PAC London
2024 - 2025,
The McPin
Foundation

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Council

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Hollie Hartley, The
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Nana Yabbey, Social
Worker

Most importantly, we thank every young person that engaged in our work, and the organisations that supported them to do so (the schools, the youth clubs, the football groups).

BEYOND THE BLADE

**THE SHARP TRUTH OF
MENTAL HEALTH &
YOUTH VIOLENCE**

By the London Peer Action Collective