



**TACKLING YOUTH VIOLENCE BY
GIVING YOUNG PEOPLE A VOICE**

The Peer Action Collective

**RESEARCH FINDINGS SUMMARY
OCTOBER 2024**



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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 don't 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.**

This document summarises the findings from our first phase of research in 2024, which focused on school exclusions and youth violence.



WHAT IS 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. **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.** 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. Over the next five years the PAC network will impact the lives of over 11,000 young people in England and Wales through peer research and social action.

Our team is **led by 12 young people who live in, or are connected to, Haringey.** 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 and 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’.**





METHOD

Peer Research

Peer research is when people with lived experience of the issues being studied lead in designing and conducting research. 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.

Research Methods

Our team of 12 young peer researchers explored young people's views on how schools can help protect their students from youth violence. We chose to focus on students affected by school exclusions, who may be at a higher risk of experiencing violence. Young people were recruited through schools, youth centres, social media posts and word of mouth. We asked them how they think schools can best support students before, during, and after any form of school exclusion.

Our research question was:

“WHAT SUPPORT HELPS YOUNG PEOPLE BEFORE, DURING, AND AFTER A FORM OF SCHOOL EXCLUSION TO BE PROTECTED FROM YOUTH VIOLENCE?”

Defining different forms of exclusion

Lunch time exclusions

Student not allowed in school lunch and break spaces, but does attend classes

Internal exclusions

Student completely separated from others, including for classes, within the school

Suspension

Student cannot attend school premises for a fixed number of days

Permanent exclusions

Student is not allowed back to the school

Managed move

Student attends different school, which can become permanent

Page 005

Pupil Referral Unit (PRU)

Student attends this alternative education provision if they are unable to be placed in a mainstream school



METHOD

We spoke to 71 young people aged between 12 – 23 years in London and the South East of England who had an interest in sharing their knowledge and perspectives around school exclusions and youth violence. They were invited to do so through a range of online and in-person activities, depending on their preference.

The following methods were used:

- A creative **body-mapping workshop** (nine participants, one workshop),
- **Focus groups** (33 participants, eight focus groups)
- An **online survey** (29 participants, one survey).

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 informal 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 the exclusion process to protect them against violence.

Young people we spoke to

<u>Gender</u>	<u>Race</u>	<u>Disability</u>	<u>Age</u>
55% Women	20% Black/Black British/Black African/Black Caribbean/Asian/Asian British/Indian	10% have a disability	29% <16 years
35% Men	45% White British / White any other background	63.5% do not have a disability	62% 16 - 18 years
1.5% Non-binary	18% Mixed race	15.5% do not know	3.5% >18 years
8.5% Unknown	10% Unknown		5.5% Unknown



THE FINDINGS

“You can’t do it.”

The bible says “words kill and words give life”,

And if you’re not religious, just know a sentence like that can produce strife.

How do you expect me to react when I’m being told you don’t believe in me.

Words of abandonment, do you expect me to take it easily?

One step out of line and bad is all you can see.

Bad isn’t the person I want to be,
But you make it out to seem like it’s all I can be.

I am not just the label that you assigned to me.

I want more,
I want to be free.

A poem about exclusions by



Peer Researcher and Social Action Lead,
PAC London Team



OUR FINDINGS

Our research revealed 11 feelings that young people felt needed to be understood around exclusions. The young people also shared 8 solutions for a 'better' exclusion process which would protect them from youth violence.

Key takeaways:

- Young people felt that experiences of **exclusions could increase a young person's likelihood of becoming involved in violence** because they have more opportunities to become involved with bad influences. They often feel **angry and resentful towards the school which disengages them** from education and positive influences.
- Schools should focus on **understanding the root causes and wider context of bad behaviour** (e.g. home life, mental health issues, bullying), supporting young people holistically, to protect them from becoming involved in youth violence.
- **Holistic support** from schools is needed. The support must help young people to manage their emotions, and understand their own and others mental health. Building their aspirations, emotional intelligence and resilience would help to prevent exclusions and young people getting involved in youth violence.
- Schools need to take an **active approach to youth violence** by spotting the early signs of being involved and supporting those who are involved, instead of labelling young people as a lost cause or excluding them.
- School should take a **holistic and personalised approach to supporting students before, during and after an exclusion** in order to make them feel valued, supported and understood by the school. Young people need to know that the school still sees their potential and wants to support them to reach it.

We have designed the findings as **FEELING CARDS** and **SOLUTION CARDS** to be used in practical ways in schools or when working with young people. Some ways you may want to use them are:

- Cut them out and use them with students
- Stick them on your wall to refer to when making decisions
- Use them in leadership meetings to remind you of what young people say they need



SYSTEM PRESSURES

Young people recognised that some of the challenges associated with exclusion, and access to support around exclusion is outside of their school, or teacher's control.

They felt that it was important to recognise that funding and staff levels can play a role in how exclusions are actioned – and wanted more investment for schools to provide holistic support, that increased opportunities for development and employment.



*"I think a lot of schools take it because they're so **underfunded** and **understaffed** and they don't have the necessities to deal with students that need extra help. I think they see **exclusion as an easy route of controlling a child**. But I think if they took more time into considering why the child's been acting this way instead of excluding them, I think there would be less exclusions, 'cause obviously if you exclude a child just because, oh, they didn't attend the lesson, instead of figuring out why they didn't want to attend that lesson, I think it's just going to **create more problems every time**. So by reducing the exclusions, they're just going to get positive students."*

Focus Group Participant





THE FEELINGS

Young people reported 11 feelings around exclusions that need to be understood:

ANGER

Anger is a very prominent emotion in relation to exclusions:

- Anger can **lead to bad behaviour** that causes further exclusion.
- Many students feel **anger at the teachers** involved in the exclusion, the school and potentially peers.
- There can be a lot of anger felt towards the teacher who excluded a young person- it often severs the relationship.
- The anger turns to **resentment** at the teachers involved and the school after the exclusion - which can get students into a **cycle of misbehaving, punishment and resentment**

If this cycle of anger is not disrupted, bad behaviour can continue and get more extreme.

ANXIETY

Some students can find exclusions anxiety inducing because:

- Being excluded can be **embarrassing** in front of peers and can cause feelings of shame
- Being **isolated** during an exclusion can cause anxiety. Some students also feel isolated on their return to school.
- Some students fear their peers and family will **negatively judge them** because of the exclusion.
- Some students feel anxiety about the **impacts of the exclusion** on their future.

STRESS

Students are likely to feel **stressed** during the exclusion process. This could be due to **lack of communication** with teachers, a sense of **not knowing what's coming next** and the **impact** the exclusion will have. There can also be stress about how to catch up on missing lessons or exams.

Stress can lead to students behaving in ways that results in patterns of exclusion.

CONFUSION

Students are likely to feel confused if they **don't understand why** they have been excluded or see it as unjustified.

Some students also feel confused when there is a **lack of communication or clarity around the reasons for exclusion**, what it's going to be like, how they are going to catch up on school and what the impacts are.

QUOTE

*"I think when you get excluded, especially if you feel it's wrong or whatever, even if you don't feel like it's wrong, I think the first reaction is you're quite **angry**." Focus Group Participant*



THE FEELINGS

Young people reported 11 feelings around exclusions that need to be understood:

LOW MOOD

Some students may feel **isolated or upset before** an exclusion.

During and after an exclusion, **many students experience low mood** because they may feel:

- depressed
- regret
- anxious
- isolated
- bored
- careless
- mistreated
- resentment
- abandoned

SELF-IMAGE / CONFIDENCE

Peer pressure and a desire to fit in can lead to behaviour that results in exclusion.

Punishment, including being shouted at and excluded, can cause **humiliation**. This can be caused by:

- feeling picked on
- feeling isolated, judged and abandoned by the school
- feeling different from peers because you are being monitored (e.g. if they have to report to the teacher at the end of each lesson)
- feeling you've let yourself down

Some students may feel they are getting the **attention** they require when they are excluded. Some students may feel indifferent because they feel they are above the school system.

ENERGY / MOTIVATION

Many students feel a lack of agency throughout the exclusion pathway:

- Some students don't feel like they have the **power or agency to appeal the process**, especially if it has happened multiple times
- Some students don't feel **control or agency over their lives or the path they are taking**
- Some students don't feel like they have the **agency to change** their life, especially those in pupil referral units

Exclusions can have a **very negative impact on many student's mindset** because it feels like they have been abandoned, lack agency and aren't cared about by their school.

LABELLED

Many students feel labelled before, during and after the exclusion process.

Some students feel that they are **assigned deterministic labels by teachers and peers** which affect how people treat them. Sometimes these labels are based on **racist stereotypes and are discriminatory**. These labels can **affect a student's motivation to change** because it reduces their belief they will ever be seen as different or better.

QUOTE

*"Yes, at the time it was fun but then real time now, deep in that, it's not really fun because you're **missing out on education**." Focus Group Participant*



THE FEELINGS

Young people reported 11 feelings around exclusions that need to be understood:

LIBERATION

Some students see exclusions as a type of **freedom** and find **humour or relief** in the situation.

Some students feel **relieved or happy to be back** in their normal environment after an exclusion.

PROCESSING ACTIONS

Young people shared two common pathways in processing emotions around exclusions:

- **Reflecting** on behaviour, then maybe feeling **guilty, regretful or ashamed**, and using this to **change for the better**
- **Not reflecting** on behaviour, but feeling **angry or resentful towards the school** (especially if it feels like injustice) or **forgetting** the behaviour/exclusion after a few days

SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS IMPACTED

Exclusions can have impacts across relationships with parents, teachers and peers. Impacts on these relationships can include:

- Feeling **resentment or anger** towards teachers and the school
- **Weakened social relationships** due to feelings of isolation, lack of connection, judgement and being separated
- Feeling **scared of what parents will think and do**, and how it will impact relationships

The breakdown of relationships with peers and role models at school can push students towards relationships with external people whose influence leads to involvement in youth violence.

QUOTE

*"I feel like **exclusions lead to a domino effect** in a sense because if a child, let's say ethnic minority, **especially black boys** let's say, keep on getting excluded and they have this certain **label put on them** by teachers and they just are not getting anywhere in school, **they will go for the easier route**, for example like going into gangs, selling on roads to get money easily because they know that if they put their full potential in school, no one is going to hear them out, they're not going to get anywhere, they're not going to achieve as much as they can achieve. So, I feel like yes, that can also be a huge issue."*

Focus Group Participant



THE SOLUTIONS

Young people told us about 8 solutions to the issues with the exclusion process:

1) HOW SCHOOLS DECIDE

How schools decide on punishments affects how the student feels, the long-term impact of the punishment and the sense of belonging that the student has at the school.

Things schools should do during the decision-making process:

- Involve the student, and potentially parents, as early as possible in the decision
- Ensure consistency across all students
- Have a supportive and open conversation to hear the perspective of the student
- Gather relevant perspectives from teachers and other students
- Explore alternative routes, other than exclusion

Things schools should consider during the decision-making process:

- The root cause
- Short-term consequences (including safety of student and peers)
- Long-term impacts
- The student's home life and wider circumstances
- How the student will reintegrate

2) SCHOOL TEACHING SUPPORT

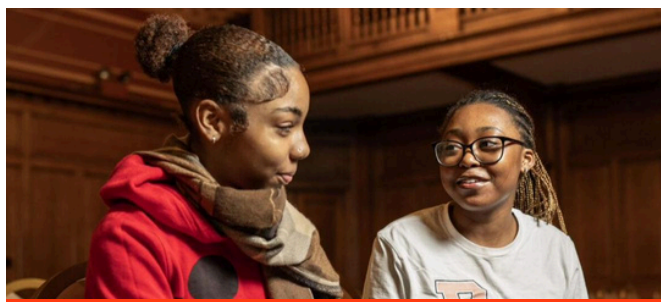
Schools should prioritise a **personalised, holistic and inclusive approach to teaching support** across the exclusion pathway by:

- Providing teaching support that responds to each student by catering for different learning styles during lessons
- Increasing one-to-one educational and emotional support for students.
- Keeping teaching support as a constant for excluded students to encourage them to stay engaged with work and the school.
- Personalised reintegration plans with academic, social and emotional support.

QUOTE

"There should be a meeting between the leading team in a school and the student, but not in a way where the student is being basically maybe put on trial or something similar to that, but just a genuine conversation about what led to the behaviour and what they can do to help them. Because obviously if a student is about to get excluded, maybe if they were asked, oh, what do you want to happen? Instead of just saying, oh you're excluded, I think obviously the student would give a reasonable thing. They wouldn't want to be excluded."

Focus Group Participant





THE SOLUTIONS

Young people told us about 8 solutions to the issues with the exclusion process:

3) SCHOOL'S APPROACH TO ACTIONS

Schools need to be active in supporting students at risk of becoming involved in youth violence by:

- Preventing exclusions where possible (as young people felt it could increase the likelihood of becoming involved in violence because of the increased freedom/time or the resentment towards the school for abandoning them)
- Supporting engagement in the school community
- Supporting young people affected by gangs, don't kick them out
- Spot the early signs and provide support
- Providing training for how to deal with violent situations by supporting the young person
- Prioritise understanding the root cause of students' violent behaviour instead of only punishing them
- Providing programmes including anger management, mental health support, aspiration building, academic support, help groups

Schools need to support students during exclusions and communicate that their education and wellbeing are still a priority of the school.

Things to consider around punishments / exclusions and reintegration:

- Exam periods and impact on learning
- Safety e.g. home environment, walking home in the dark from late detention
- Being discreet to allow for a smoother reintegration
- Provide adjustments during reintegration including adjustments to structure and timetable.

4) SELF CARE

Schools should keep students **engaged with hobbies, activities and positive outlets before, during and after an exclusion** to help with their wellbeing and the processing of their emotions about what has happened.

5) PROCESSING / ADDRESSING ACTIONS

Schools need to **support students to understand and reflect on their actions throughout the exclusion pathway; before, during and after**. This should focus on understanding their action and the impacts, and how to change their behaviour.

Schools should **prioritise de-escalating behaviour and providing opportunities for in-the-moment reflection through time-outs** in order to help student's behaviour not escalate to a level that might require exclusion.

QUOTE

"I don't think students should get excluded when they're in gangs because if a student joins a gang, clearly, they need help rather than just kick them out and abandon them like most schools do. As soon as a school finds out a child is affiliated, they'll kick them out instead of helping them which I think is wrong."

Focus Group Participant



THE SOLUTIONS

Young people told us about 8 solutions to the issues with the exclusion process:

6) SOCIAL CONVERSATIONS

Students must be able to have **regular conversations with somebody who can support them**, including with their mental health. Students need to feel like they are **seen, heard, respected and cared for by at least this one person**. This could be a teacher, mentors, pastoral staff, peers with shared experiences, parents or external support staff. Students need to be able to trust that the conversations will be kept confidential. These **conversations need to happen before, during and after an exclusion**.

Schools should **provide space for conversations, guidance and advice to raise awareness of and prevent students getting involved in violence**. This should include conversations with people who have lived experience of things like violence, prison and gang membership.

7) WIDER ENVIRONMENT

Schools need to take a **holistic approach to supporting young people, considering and addressing the student's wider environment**. This includes their home life, friendship groups and future aspirations. They must **collaborate with key adults and organisations in a young person's life** (for example parents, youth workers and other organisations) to provide holistic support.

This holistic approach should be used:

- **Before** exclusions have happened to try and prevent exclusions happening at all
- **During** an exclusion to ensure the student has a safe and positive environment
- **After** an exclusion to utilise positive influences and minimise negative influencers from a young person's wider environment to support their progression (personal and academic).

8) RELATIONSHIPS WITH TEACHERS

The relationships that students have with their teachers is vital to their experience of school and potential exclusions. Teachers need to **prioritise positive connections and relationships with students** as it can motivate students to not get excluded and can support them during and after an exclusion to change their behaviour and maintain their wellbeing. Some students may want contact with teachers during the exclusion, some may not.

Positive relationships are characterised by:

- A sense of **trust** in the student
- A **strengths-based approach** - not looking for a student's negatives, but building on their strengths
- A **personal connection** between student and teacher
- **Calm** teachers who aren't reactive or explosive
- **Empathy** for the student
- A sense of the **student feeling understood, cared for, valued and accepted**.
- Teachers with an understanding of how to support students **mental health**.

UP NEXT

Our research has told us a lot about what young people need before, during and after an exclusion, and how more holistic support at school may have a wider positive impact on reducing youth violence.

We've created the next two infographics to visualise a 'better' exclusion journey and the impact on youth violence.



A 'Better' Exclusion Journey

Based on findings from London PAC's research with 71 young people

before exclusion

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

1



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

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



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 create personalised re-integration 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 schools can help reduce youth violence

Based on findings from London PAC's research with 71 young people



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

Social conversations with those involved in violence (e.g. prisoners, police, 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

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



Reflections on being a Peer Researcher

Embarking on the path of a peer researcher has been a journey of discovery, insight, and intellectual growth.

My early entry into the research domain allowed me to carve out a niche in a field often devoid of youthful perspectives.

My interest in this role emerged from critically analysing the systemic social issues within my community and recognising that neglect was an inadequate response to these challenges.

The role taught me about the significance of my lived experience as well as the lived experiences of others.

Our interviews advocated for providing a platform to individuals who have faced exclusion, enabling them to discuss their interactions with education, educators, peers, and their domestic environments. Conducting these interviews deepened my empathy for those marginalised by an inherently biased system.

The synergy between research and social action facilitated a seamless transition from findings to initiatives. This social action gave voice to the participants of our interviews, highlighting the importance of informed action for meaningful change.

As my journey progressed, the glaring absence of young voices in the research sphere became starkly evident. Working alongside a diverse team was enriching to our research, blending a multitude of skills and experiences.

The experienced researchers expanded my understanding through their unwavering guidance and attentiveness, while their openness to learning from our youthful insights fostered mutual growth and knowledge expansion.

I'm so thankful to have been chosen for this project and so excited to see where we next go with it!

Sincerely,



Peer Researcher and Social Action Lead,
PAC London Team



WHAT NEXT FOR PAC LONDON?



Sharing our findings to influence policy and practice

We are meeting with key stakeholders, including politicians, educators and community practitioners, in order to share and put these findings into action.



Turning our research into Social Action

We turning the findings from this report into social action assets, including an interactive film and a workshop to deliver in schools.



Kicking off Phase 2

We are starting a second phase of research exploring links between mental health and youth violence in schools.

OUR INVITATION TO YOU

We didn't make this report for you to just leave on your (virtual) desk!

It's time to do something, we are asking you to:

1. **Share this report** with somebody who needs to read it.
2. **Talk to us;** we're a friendly bunch, really! If you've got an idea we need to hear or are doing something similar - get in touch with hannajones@mcpin.org.
3. **Join the mailing list** to receive our further work and invitations to events by the London Peer Action Collective. Email contact@mcpin.org to be added to the list.
4. **Connect us with young people** to take part in our next phase of research or be change makers. We're looking to work with young people affected by youth violence.
5. We're not going to end youth violence by research alone - **tell us how to use our research.** Tell us about an event or network that we need to be at.

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



THE LONDON PEER ACTION COLLECTIVE

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