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Time to Listen

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Abstract

My report aimed to explore how young women affected by youth violence face de-prioritisation, credibility judgment, and adultification, while examining why they feel disbelieved and powerless. It also highlights where these girls and young women found respect and belonging after experiencing marginalisation, and presents their views on peer groups, emphasising themes of coercive control and patriarchy.

I conducted a literature review and interviews with five women and two men who self-identified as having been affected by youth violence, and a policy and research manager for a national charity. I analysed the literature review and data collected to conclude with the following findings and recommendations.

Addressing the issue of girls and young women affected by youth violence feeling unheard and disbelieved is urgent. Incorporating lived experience experts in policing strategy and creating public scrutiny groups for violence against women and girls' (VAWG) responses are essential. Interviewees emphasised the need for girls to feel respected and included in education, particularly during transitions and for those removed from mainstream schools. Integrating VAWG reduction into youth violence strategies is critical to avoid further marginalisation and to recognise the complexity of their experiences.

Chapter 1: Introduction – setting the scene

This study has been a long time in progress. It started in 2019 when I was working as a police officer in the Metropolitan Police.

I noticed that young men were the focus of briefings on youth violence, but that there was also an understanding that girls and women could be 'being used' to carry weapons and drugs. During searches of properties suspected of drug dealing and while on targeted violence hotspot operations, girls and women were often present. At a street party where gunshots were fired, another officer and I noticed two girls, aged 13 to 14, who said they had been invited on Snapchat and drove them over an hour home. On another occasion, a 15 to 16-year-old girl was in a car with a convicted drug dealer in an area known for street drug dealing and where knives had been found during weapons searches.

I also observed that the word 'grief' was often used to refer to situations involving girls and women, such as when a woman attended the police station to report that she was being harassed by an ex-partner. A group of officers discussed who should take the report and said words to the effect of, "You should go, she's going to be grief".

I applied for a Griffins Fellowship because I had a sense that girls and young women's experiences of youth violence were not fully understood, were deprioritised and that there was confusion over whether girls were victims in the eyes of police or offenders. While on patrol at Notting Hill Carnival, a member of the public shouted, 'Fuck the police, save our boys' at myself and a colleague. This prompted me to think more broadly about trust in police and the place of girls in discussions on youth violence.

I was not really sure, even then, if the study was about the impact of youth violence on girls and women or if it was about how police and other agencies thought about the girls who were often connected to, subject of or just hanging out with young men who were suspected of street drug dealing and violence.

Between 2020 and 2022, COVID lockdowns and the sudden deaths of my father and partner's father in a short period of time led to interruptions of my study. COVID lockdowns created uncertainty about how to carry out interviews, which in turn delayed my ability to submit an accurate application to the University of Cambridge's Institute of Criminology Ethics Committee. The loss of family members while working full time, also reduced my capacity to dedicate the time needed to conduct my study.

In mid-2020, I changed jobs and began working for a community and youth team within a housing association, overseeing youth programmes aimed at supporting children and young people to transition into adulthood happy, healthy and safe. I have observed many brilliant programmes and initiatives in this sector, alongside some notable patterns. For example, pressures on community and youth service budgets can lead to organisations being more pressured to deliver high attendance numbers for programmes, which in turn can lead to the prioritisation of programmes more likely to deliver these outputs, such as sports. Although there are many sports programmes aimed at girls, I have observed that they are still more typically being attended by boys. I have also seen how many activities targeted at engaging with girls focus on social and emotional health, relationships and wellbeing, which contrasts with those targeted at engaging with boys that use language such as 'building teamwork and leadership skills'.

Although my study has taken so long to complete, I remain committed to understanding what is happening to girls who often experience the interlocking disadvantages of gendered assumptions about what it is to be a young woman in society as they interlock with the social inequalities of race and class.

The experiences of the girls I initially met through policing included growing up in areas with disproportionate levels of policing, knife crime and robberies, relative to neighbouring, wealthier areas, as well as girls who attended schools and youth groups who experienced the devastating impacts of knife crime taking the lives of their peers. Through this study, I met young women who had experienced domestic abuse, social services intervention, school exclusions, heavy police presence in their community, growing up as a young carer, and surviving rape. In my current role, I have observed increasing stress on families facing economic inequality, through increased demand for crisis food intervention and through the immense stress experienced by families bidding for suitable social homes. However, youth-led projects and supportive networks offer opportunities. Community surveys I've worked on consistently highlight young people's safety and creating opportunities as key priorities.

Between 2020-2022, I interviewed five women and two men who self-identified as having been affected by youth violence, and a policy and research manager for a national charity. However, since these interviews were originally conducted the issue of women and girls' experiences at the hands of the police, as well as the epidemic of violence against women and girls has moved steadily up the political agenda.

In 2021, Sarah Everard was abducted, raped, and murdered by a Metropolitan Police officer, sparking protests about women's safety across the UK. In the year ending March 2022, sexual offences in England

and Wales reached a record high of 193,566 (ONS, 2023), and in 2023, it was reported that nearly 70% of rape survivors had dropped out of investigations in a single quarter the previous year (Syal, 2023).

In March 2023, the Casey review identified "institutional homophobia, misogyny and racism, and other forms of discrimination" in the Metropolitan Police (Casey, 2023: 235), and concluded that the "de-prioritisation and de-specialisation of public protection has put women and children at greater risk than necessary" (2023: 15).

In 2024, Sir Mark Rowley, Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, called for funding to tackle violence against women and girls (VAWG) on par with terrorism policing (Martin, 2024). The Labour Government pledged to halve VAWG in a decade, address misogyny in schools, and strengthen police training (The Labour Party, 2024). Although these events have resulted in VAWG moving steadily up the political agenda, there still seems to be little attention paid to what the girls who are living alongside or impacted by the rates of serious youth violence, Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE) and Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) have to say about their lives and how they are or are not listened to.

The aim of my report is to:

- Explore how girls affected by youth violence face de-prioritisation, credibility judgment, and adultification, despite long-standing awareness of these issues in criminal justice (see 2.4)
- Understand why they feel disbelieved, unheard, and powerless
- Identify where and by whom they felt respected and a sense of belonging after experiencing marginalisation
- Present their views on peer groups, focusing on themes of coercive control and patriarchal structures.

Chapter 2: Locating this study within existing research

This chapter reviews relevant literature to position the study within existing research and provide context to the themes identified through the interviews. It includes key statistics on youth violence (see 2.1), explores who is most affected by youth violence (see 2.2), and how girls and young women are perceived in the criminal justice system (see 2.3). These core themes are then discussed through the eyes of my interviewees in Chapter 4 and used to inform the findings and recommendations which conclude the report.

2.1 An overview of youth violence in England and Wales

The Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime (MOPAC) in London stated: "Children and young people face different risks than previous generations" as "knife crime and youth violence is increasing" (Greater London Authority, 2017: 14). In 2015-16, there were just over 6,200 victims of serious youth violence in London, which is an increase of approximately 4% on the previous year and an increase of approximately 20% on 2012-2013 (London Assembly, 2016). There were approximately 3,400 knife or offensive weapon offences committed by children resulting in a caution or sentence in the year ending March 2023 in England and Wales (Youth Justice Board, 2024). This is 23% greater than ten years ago, but 4% fewer than the previous year and marks the fifth consecutive year-on-year decrease.

Youth justice statistics for 2022-2023 show that boys, representing 51% of the 10-17 age group, made up 84% of first-time entrants (FTEs) into the justice system, which reflects long-term trends (Youth Justice Board, 2024). In 2022, possession of weapons and violence against the person offences each accounted for 19% of child FTE offences (2024). Over the past decade, weapon possession offences among child FTEs has risen by 16 percentage points, with 98% of knife or offensive weapon offences committed by children in 2023 being possession-related (2024). While the total number of offences by children has decreased, the proportion of violence against the person offences increased from 21% in 2013 to 34% in 2023 (2024).

The increases in the proportion of possession of weapon offenses amongst child FTEs, the proportional increase of violence against the person offences committed by 10–17-year-olds, and the inequalities on who is disproportionately affected by youth violence (see 2.3), highlight the pressing need to understand more about youth violence drivers and impact on young people's lives. However, these

statistics represent reported crime, not necessarily the true scale of violence affecting young people, specifically girls and young women.

A survey in the UK of 3,000 children in schools over a seven-year period found that 37% of respondents would not report a crime to the police [even if it had occurred]; 34% because they thought the police would not listen and 29% thought that the police would not be able to help (Howard League, 2007). Another survey found that children who initially reported they were not a victim of violence, later reported that they had experienced one of the specific types of violence listed (Youth Endowment Fund, 2022). Almost half of teenagers who reported being a victim of robbery, assault, sexual assault, or who had been threatened or assaulted with a weapon, did not report themselves as having been a victim of violence (Youth Endowment Fund, 2022).

2.2 Who is more likely to be affected by youth violence?

The risks of violence and contact with the criminal justice system are not shared equally among children. Children who receive support from a social worker, regularly miss school classes or receive free school meals, are more likely to have been a victim of or witness to violence than children who have not (Youth Endowment Fund, 2022). Young people aged 16- and 17-years old living in children's homes are more than twice as likely to be criminalised than non-looked after children (Howard League, 2016).

Individual factors overlap with family and community circumstances, as well as social, economic, and environmental factors to have varying effects on which children and young people are more likely to be associated to offending behaviour (Farrington, 2015; Jolliffe et al., 2017). For example, increased likelihood of offending behaviour has been linked with poor engagement with school for a range of reasons, including school exclusion, undiagnosed disabilities, and bullying (McCrystal et al., 2007; McAra and McVie, 2022).

Evidence shows that young people from minority ethnic (global majority) backgrounds are over-represented in the justice system (Abrams et al., 2021; Goldson et al., 2021; van den Brink et al., 2022), and young people in the justice system are often found to have grown up in less stable family environments, where family conflict, trauma or violence is present (Manly et al., 2012; McAra and McVie, 2010). The theories below aim to provide further explanation and understanding of this interplay of different factors that mean risks of violence and contact with the criminal justice system are not shared equally among young people.

Developmental criminology studies how criminal behaviour develops over the life course, emphasising the impact of early childhood experiences on later criminality (Sampson & Laub, 1997; Elder & Shanahan, 2007; Muncie, 2021). The Cambridge Study of Delinquent Development (CSDD) of boys and men identifies major early risk factors for antisocial behaviour, including impulsiveness, low academic achievement, parental conflict, low income, and high-crime neighbourhoods (Farrington, 2005). The CSDD also links adolescent violence to poor parental management – see Hawkins et al., 2000, Widom, 1989 and Esbensen et al, 2010) – while peer association and areas of deprivation are key environmental factors (Farrington, 2007). In developmental criminology, criminal behaviour is influenced by a complex interplay of biological, economic, psychological, and social factors – not solely by individual characteristics.

Several early risk factors in developmental criminology, like parental drug use, align with the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) framework. As ACEs gain policy attention, there are calls for more research on how socio-economic status influences ACEs (Walsh et al., 2019). It is argued that addressing childhood adversity requires tackling its socio-economic drivers, especially with rising UK child poverty. Ignoring these factors would weaken policy efforts (Walsh et al., 2019). While gender differences in ACE exposure are often reported, they are rarely emphasised, and data is inconsistent (Vaswani, 2018). However, sexual abuse is consistently reported as disproportionately affecting girls and young women (Vaswani, 2018; Bellis et al., 2014).

Life course theories highlight that people's involvement in crime is sustained, activated and altered depending on their exposure to different kinds of people and/or environments under ever-evolving circumstances (Sampson & Laub, 1997; Elder & Shanahan, 2007; Muncie, 2021). Within the life course, it is argued that there are crucial social bonds that can impact on desistance from crime, such as parenthood, finding employment and neighbourhood change (Sampson and Laub, 1993). Those with strong ties to fulfilling employment and family and community are shown to be more likely to desist from crime (Maruna and Mann, 2019; Muncie, 2021).

Additionally, a sense of belonging and feeling part of a community is an important factor in healthy childhood development (Riley, 2022), and the neighbourhood children grow up in can determine levels of access to resources which are important in preventing contact with the justice system (Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn, 2000). Increasing community safety, connectivity and employment within neighbourhoods has been linked to helping improve children's education attainment and mental health, and reduce risk taking behaviours (Bandyopadhyay et al, 2023).

Much of the foundational research of developmental and life course theories has largely focused on boys and men. Further research has shown that violent offending by girls and women often involves experiences of abuse and unstable family environments (Batchelor, 2005). Over half of women in a study reported disruptions in childhood caregivers, and many were in local authority care (2005). The Getting Out for Good project found that girls involved in 'gangs'[1] often shared experiences of behavioural issues, mental health struggles, and disengagement from school (Jump & Horan, 2021). Additionally, a review highlighted shared experiences within this group of the influence of antisocial peers, neighbourhood marginalisation, and social devaluation of female roles (Khan et al., 2013).

2.3 Perceptions of girls and young women in criminal justice: from past to present

For much of the twentieth century criminology has been focussed on men, with most of the theory and research being focussed on male offenders and most criminologists being men too (Newburn, 2017). Historically, media coverage depicted liberation as a key reason women commit crime (Jewkes 2004, Chesney-Lind 2006; Heidensohn and Silvestri 2012).

The second half of the twentieth century saw the development of modern feminist criminology, which criticised the existing study of criminology for its:

- Failure to theorise or engage in the empirical study of female offending
- Neglect of female victimisation and male violence against women
- Over-concentration on the impact of the criminal justice system on male offenders

Newburn, 2017: 325

In the 1980s, it was argued that feminist criminology as it was developing may not be the best way to understand women and crime. Heidensohn proposed an approach that took into account insights from the roles and social controls of women from other studies of women's oppression (1985). Carlen observed that most women who were sent to prison, were being sentenced according to the courts' assessment of them as wives, mothers and daughters, as opposed to the seriousness of their crimes (Carlen, 1988). Heidensohn concluded that girls in the criminal justice system were "still being defined

[1] The term gang was widely and consistently used by interviewees in this study, which is why I have chosen to use it, but I acknowledge that its definition and use requires further discussion which goes beyond the scope of this study. See Smithson & Ralphs, 2016; Choak, 2018; Marshall et al., 2005; Berelowitz et al, 2013; Aldridge and Medina-Ariza, 2008.

into stereotypically sexually delinquent roles and then being 'punished' or protected for their own good," (1985: 199).

In the twenty first century, these findings continue to be replicated. "Research in Britain and elsewhere has shown that decisions concerning girls reflect concerns about their sexuality and independence" and that girls are perceived to be a difficult group to work with (Gelsthorpe and Worrall, 2009: 209). Girls have been perceived as uncontrollable and worse than boys because of the high expectations placed on their standards of behaviour, and double standards have been applied to girls' and boys' sexual behaviour (Gelsthorpe and Worrall, 2009). In one local authority, girls were excluded for aggressive behaviour that was considered inappropriate for young women, with indications that a higher threshold for unacceptable behaviour was applied to boys (Carlile, 2009b). A study of referrals to a 'Youth Inclusion Support Panel' found that seven out of 11 girls were referred because they were 'sexually promiscuous' or 'sexually active', whereas none of the 44 boys referred had been so for these reasons (Sharpe, 2009). Another study found that in two incidents of non-consensual touching [one involving a boy and one a girl], professionals showed indifference towards the boy, while the girl's behaviour was seen as "dangerous in terms of her sexuality" and raised questions about her 'caregiving responsibilities' (Carlile, 2009a: 336-337).

Barbara Hudson's argument that adolescent boys are allowed a "developmental space for behavioural experimentation prior to the emergence into adulthood", and that "no such discursive leeway is allowed to girls," (Carlen, 1988: 810) still appears relevant today. In essence, girls are seen as "embryo" women, never a "developing person" (Sachs and Wilson, 1978; Carlen, 1988: 810). This idea links to the more recent focus on the adultification of girls and young women by police. The Casey Review recommended that the Metropolitan Police should "provide training for all officers who work with children to prevent 'adultification', where police officers and others regard children, especially Black and ethnic minority children, as threats rather than children who need protection from harm." (Casey, 2023: 21-23)

Findings that Black girls are nearly three times more likely to be subjected to the most invasive form of strip searching by the Metropolitan Police than their white peers (Gidda and Thomas, 2023) indicate how the adultification of Black girls has led to inequality in the way in which they are treated. Another study found that some youth professionals deflected away from abusive behaviour towards young women by inadvertently minimising the impact of male crimes, painting women and girls as sexually promiscuous, and holding women partially responsible for their own abuse and exploitation (Havard et al, 2021).

Since 2010, there has been recognition of and calls for more gender specific support for women and girls experiencing group-related serious youth violence (Syeda, 2015). The National Crime Agency (NCA) concluded: "...females may be underrepresented as both offenders and victims of exploitation" in county lines activities (NCA, 2019: 2). In 2013, two of the 39 police forces in England comprehensively mapped [located and logged the connections of] girls and young women associated with street gangs, after all 39 were urged to do so (Berelowitz et al, 2013). Youth professionals have warned that criminal groups were "exploiting a known blind spot for law enforcement… because gender was a proxy for invisibility and that feature alone made someone attractive to contemporary gangs" (Havard et al, 2021: 7). It is difficult to ascertain the extent of girls and young women's involvement in criminal gangs, due in part to them being less visible in public spaces (Havard et al, 2021). This observation that men, unlike young women, are viewed as the natural occupiers of public space, and are thus more visible, is not new (see Carlen, 1988). Whilst data on the extent and nature of young women's involvement in criminal groups is minimal, it is largely accepted that they "are associated with gang members and this association has important implications for their lives" (Aldridge and Medina-Ariza, 2008: 20).

In 2017, the Lammy report concluded that girls and young women involved in 'gang culture' were being "controlled through threats and intimidation" by these criminal groups (2017: 20). The NCA also concluded that male offenders target vulnerable young women, to then exploit them in county lines activities, pursuing manipulative romantic relationships with young women, using gifts to groom them, leaving young women believing they are in a consensual relationship (NCA, 2019).

The theory of coercive control helps understand the gender-based vulnerability, and abuse young women experience in criminal groups (Havard et al., 2021). Controlling or coercive behaviour in intimate or family relationships includes isolating a person from their friends and family or controlling their daily lives under the guise of it being in their best interests (Crown Prosecution Service, 2023). Coercive control can involve grooming a person by fostering dependency, often exploiting somebody's social and emotional vulnerabilities (Bettinson & Bishop, 2015; Havard et al., 2021). One of the specific tactics gang members have been found to use was to isolate young women from family and friends (Havard et al, 2021), which is easier when those social ties and sense of belonging are weakened to begin with. Overlooking these dynamics taking place within patriarchal hierarchies risks further exploitation of girls and young women (Havard et al., 2021).

It has been argued that in the 'gang' literature, girls and young women are typically narrowly defined through their gender conforming, auxiliary roles, unlike boys and young men whose identities are explored in much more depth and nuance (Choak, 2018). This study recognises that girls and young

women affected by youth violence are not one homogenous group defined by singular gender confirming roles or by labels, such as 'victim' or 'offender'. Young people themselves have been found to consider the term 'victim' to signify weakness and 'offender' to be stigmatising and disempowering (Owen and Sweeting, 2007; Muncie, 2021). Young women specifically tended to reject the label of 'victim', emphasising instead their ability to actively decide their everyday life choices (Batchelor, 2005). Batchelor argues that young women's agency needs to be respected by ensuring young women are made to feel valued (Batchelor, 2005). This emphasis on ensuring young women feel a sense of mattering is explored throughout this study (see chapters 4 & 5).

Interviewees in this study described situations of victim blaming (see 4.1.2). Research has found that some agencies continue to label survivors and victims of exploitation as either innocent or blameworthy, which results in a 'hierarchy of victims' (Thiara et al, 2015: 22). In one study, professionals at an advocacy service described blatant discrimination by the police against young women, where police were seeing these young women as 'good', 'not so good' and 'bad' victims because of their gang affiliation, which for the police meant a normalisation of sexual violence (2015: p.22).

The representation of young people as the perpetrators of crime has, it has been argued, "left us blind to the extent to which young people are also victims," (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997: p. 93). Youth victimology literature helps contextualise the lives of many girls and young women who are affected by youth violence by looking beyond their criminal involvement and considering the social harms young people are exposed to through familial and institutional abuse, negligence or indifference (Muncie, 2021). Interviewees in this study gave many examples of how they had been victimised by family circumstances, through exploitative relationships with peers, sexual violence and police interactions. They gave examples of where they had been perpetrators of crime, including carrying knives and drugs, and one interviewee gave an example of committing violence through fighting with another girl.

The concept that young women are either a victim or perpetrator, but never both, does not acknowledge the plurality of criminal gang associated violence and victimisation, and limits our understanding of girls' and young women's experiences of youth violence (Pyrooz et al., 2013). This study provides a 'both and' analysis, rather than an 'either or' analysis, acknowledging that girls and young women are often thought of as victims or potential victims, or dismissed as victims, but the victimisation they have experienced is not a statement on their identity, rather one part of their complex and individual life experiences.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

I conducted eight semi-structured interviews with five young women and two young men, as well as a policy and research manager for a national charity. The young women were asked to come forward via youth charities and local authorities if they self-defined as having been affected by or involved in youth violence. The five women aged between 16-25 and two men aged 25-30 self-identified in this way. One of the women and the two men self-identified as being Black2. Four of the interviewees were working or volunteering in youth engagement/ambassador/support worker roles, and used this experience to reflect on observations made about the young people they had worked with, as well as their own experiences.

The interviews followed the same core set of questions to ensure consistency but were semi-structured – the most frequently used method to study young people (Heath et al., 2009) – to allow for flexibility so that interviewees could expand and discuss issues as they wished (Choak, 2018). This approach helped make the interviews flow, rather than being overly formal and stilted (2018). Some of the interviews took place over multiple days, which meant interviewees had time to reflect on questions and come back to them more than once.

I chose qualitative research to gain a more personal understanding about the effects of youth violence on young women, and their experiences of police through first-hand accounts. Qualitative research has been deemed most suitable for researching sensitive topics and representing 'experience and personal stories' (Skelton, 2001, p. 95). Criminologists have been urged to study first-hand accounts of women's experiences, rather than rely on "distorted, received wisdom about women," and these accounts have become central to feminist analyses" (Heidensohn and Silvestri, 2012: 337). Carlen argued that taking seriously women's own accounts helps avoid erasing the uniqueness of individual women's experiences (1988).

I also interviewed a policy and research manager who had recently completed research on violence affecting young people. This enabled me to consider other accounts and perspectives beyond those I interviewed, whilst primarily focussing on the first-hand accounts of young women themselves.

[2] Other protected characteristic information was not collected, which would have enriched the data further.

This research received approval from the University of Cambridge's Institute of Criminology Ethics Committee. Through the application, participant information sheet and participant consent form (see Annex A-B), I sought to ensure there was informed consent from all research participants and explained the duty of care I had as a researcher. Informed consent centres around principles of transparency and honesty. Individuals should understand that their participation is voluntary, that they can withdraw from the research without providing a reason and that information that could affect a subject's willingness to participate should not be withheld (Bryman, 2012: 138). These key points are included in the participant consent form (Appendix B) which was provided to and discussed with all interviewees.

I acknowledge that my experiences and biases influence my research, and being reflective throughout the process is essential (Bryman, 2012). Reflexivity doesn't eliminate power dynamics but makes me more aware of my position as a researcher (Choak, 2018). While researchers often hold structural power, interviewees have valuable knowledge crucial to the study, showing that power is multidimensional (Choak, 2018; Bourke, 2014). As a former police officer, I considered how this might affect rapport and power dynamics, mitigating risks by sharing information about the project and reflecting on how my background could shape my interpretations.

All personal data, including participant's names and any geographic locations, have been anonymised to protect individual's identities. Participants were asked if they would like to be referred to by a specific pseudonym but as they did not have a preference a letter was allocated to each contributor, helping to avoid readers making any assumptions about interviewee's based on the name given. I have used in-depth quotes throughout my report, because those being studied should 'be able to speak for themselves wherever possible' (McCarthy-Brown, 1991: 14) and to avoid misinterpretation of their stories (England, 1994; Choak, 2018). I acknowledge that by recording these voices here, it does not equate to a platform of agency. It is my role to hear, record and interpret these voices, presenting them as accurately as possible (Riessman, 1993).

I conducted a six-stage thematic analysis: familiarisation, coding, generating, reviewing, defining themes, and writing up findings (Braun & Clark, 2006). I transcribed all interviews and coded them into themes including early childhood, school and peer experiences, and interactions with police and social services. Additional themes emerged, such as belonging, invisibility of young women, and the impact of not being heard. After coding, I excluded the two interviews with men, as their reflections on misogynistic discourse confirmed the women's feelings of objectification (see 4.4). Acknowledging the limitations of the report, I prioritised the young women's voices, whilst ensuring that the prominent

experiences of police mistrust, and peer group pressures and structures, from the men's interviewees were represented.

Chapter 4: Analysis

The lives of the interviewees in this study are punctuated by experiences of youth violence, police presence, child criminal exploitation, and child sexual exploitation, either directly or through their peers and the environments they grew up in. This chapter examines how they made sense of their experiences, how they were perceived by those in power, and how these perceptions may have influenced their treatment.

4.1 How is this group of young women perceived?

This section is split into the two key themes that emerged when analysing the ways in which young women affected by youth violence are perceived by the institutions they encounter while growing up; firstly, the invisibility of the victimisation and harassment they may have experienced and secondly, when their victimisation is recognised, victim-blaming girls for their experiences is commonplace.

4.1.1 Hidden victimisation and harassment: "I was told to have knives in my house because I'm not going to get stopped"

The first observation is that while there has been more acknowledgement of the effects of youth violence on young women [see section 2.3] in recent years, interviewees said that young women were not visible to the police. K described how she felt there was a gap in the language and terminology being used by professionals and the reality of the experiences of girls and young women, which is linked to their lack of visibility and a lack of understanding among professionals of their daily realities. She said when she hears terms like 'sex trafficking', to her it is "just your crack house down the road and there will be an underage girl there that is used."

She continued: "If there's two boys outside fighting, the police come immediately." K infers that girls and young women often experience abuse in private settings, making the harm less visible to the public and reducing the likelihood of police intervention. Additionally, the private nature of the abuse can make it harder for victims to seek help due to fear of further punishment.

The policy and research manager interviewed said: "Speaking to young women involved in the research and stakeholders, there was a clear threat of gender specific or sexual violence, particularly against girls caught up in things like county lines," which is less visible than street-based violence. Again, girls'

invisibility derives from the type of victimisation they may experience being more likely to happen behind closed doors, rather than in a public setting.

G explained how her gender allowed her to carry knives on behalf of her peers. She described her experience of a stop and search interaction:

> "I was told to have knives in my house because I'm not going to get stopped and you know what this is true… me and this boy were walking, and the police stopped him, and I stopped as well… Because I'm a female and because I was lighter, the boy I was with was Black, they stopped him, they searched him, and they let me go. Even though I had a knife on me, and I had drugs on me. They all know that females aren't going to be stopped, especially young girls."

During my time in the police, I noticed growing awareness that girls and young women could be involved in street drug operations, but the connection between offending and victimisation was often not fully understood or at times, accepted. While increased visibility could improve understanding and support for them, it should not lead to greater criminalisation, as labelling them as gang-involved could worsen their treatment within the criminal justice system. Gangs are often seen as inherently violent (Centre for Social Justice, 2009), which means gang-involved women can be stigmatised and viewed as deserving of the violence they experience, leaving them invisible and underserved (Lloyd and Ramon, 2016; Havard et al, 2021). Traditional law enforcement responses that focus on criminalising gang activities can further criminalise vulnerable young women and obscure the coercive control they face, making it harder to address their specific needs and risks of exploitation (Havard et al, 2021).

4.1.2 Victim-blaming: "Pull down the skirt because you're going to distract people."

Judgements over the credibility of young women as victims of crime has been a regular theme in the literature on the gender and justice (see 2.3). It was also discussed in the Casey Review where she concluded that within the Metropolitan Police "at the outset of investigations, judging a victim's credibility appeared to be the over-riding factor, more than pursuing the suspect" (Casey, 2023: 134).

K described how she felt boys' and girls' behaviour was treated differently, which impacted the way teachers responded to her behaviour while she was in school:

> "It's not even intentional half the time – 'oh, boys are badly behaved, they've got ADHD, they're struggling, they've got something going on at home'. But the minute I'm badly behaved as a female, I'm losing the plot, I'm acting out because of this, that and the other."

K also observed how girls were blamed for the potential harassment they may experience in the school uniform policy:

> "In terms of school uniform, obviously there is a big difference between females and males. Even in my all-girls school, it wasn't 'pop down your skirt because it looks nice'. It was 'put down the skirt because men are going to do this. Pull down the skirt because you're going to distract people'."

B described an experience she had with the police where she had reported an on-going case of harassment:

> "They decided to take the perpetrator's side of the story and believe that I was in a relationship with the person when I wasn't. They were a stranger – a 27-year-old harassing an 18-year-old girl, and they didn't do anything about it."

B described how officers believed she was in a consensual relationship with a man nine years older than herself at the time, rather than questioning this age difference and potential imbalance of power dynamic in the relationship.

Judgements over women and girls' credibility when they report issues, and the way in which perceptions of young women effect the ways in which they are treated, raise questions about the multiple and complex layers of victimisation young women affected by youth violence may experience. This is particularly important when reflecting on youth violence policies and strategies that minimise the impact of youth violence on girls and young women to a small section or a few paragraphs and do not make these wider connections.

4.2 What do these young women say about the agencies and institutions they have come across in their lives?

The main agencies and institutions discussed by interviewees in this study were school, social services and the police. Interviewees described how they struggled to conform with the rules of mainstream schools, which led to a range of consequences including permanent exclusion. One interviewee described how her experiences of social services led to her finding it difficult to trust the adults who were supposed to help her. There was also an overwhelming sense that interviewees do not feel listened to by the police.

4.2.1 Schools and Education

Experiences in education were highly significant for all the young women interviewed. Interviewees spoke at length about their time in education and the impacts they felt their school experiences had had on them.

K reflected on how a period of absenteeism from school led to her involvement in what she described as "stuff that is too mature for young people". She explained that an older man had got her involved in this 'stuff' after she'd developed trust in him. She said: "I would go out with them and then they would be involved… I hate him." K didn't specify exactly what she had been involved in or witness too but clearly alluded to the fact that it was sexual in nature by indicating that she had wished she'd had a better understanding of consent.

K also described the multiple challenges she faced academically in the transition to secondary school:

> "I had really shit attendance at primary school because I was involved in a lot of stuff. In secondary school, at the end of year 7 or beginning of year 8, I dropped out completely… I missed a lot of vital things… secondary school doesn't re-cap over some of those simple things. type of stuff outside of school, especially as I'm a carer for my Mum. I'm the one that does that type of stuff at home because she's not able to help me that much in regards to school work."

Interviewees reported being excluded from school and attending a Pupil Referral Unit (PRU). School exclusion, seen as the "ultimate red card," removes young people from mainstream education, impacting both personal and social aspects (Riley, 2022: 34). G talked about her experience in secondary school and in a PRU:

> "They gave me a lot of warnings…but schools don't really understand what you're going through. I ended up getting kicked out. My time at the PRU – I loved it. My grades went up… I started behaving well in the PRU, but that's another problem with them; when they see you start behaving properly, they think you're ready for school, but I wasn't. If I was to stay there, I would have got GCSE's. At 19, I'm now doing my GCSE's."

In contrast, M explained that being referred to a PRU felt like the moment her life was "going downhill":

> "When I went there, I realised I'd fucked it…they weren't offering more than Maths, English and one other subject. Fuck that. I'm only going to get like three GCSEs from the centre. Do you know how bad that is?

> "…I was always friends with older guys…. When I went to the centre… I'd obviously heard of them and seen them around, but it was like I don't personally know you lot because I don't talk to anyone my own age… I feel like I was the only girl who goes there that was like a girly girl kind of girl. I would actually do my hair, do my make-up, so all these girls started having a thing against me. They would act like they were my friends to get things out of me but end up setting me up, so I didn't go back. It was just mad to be honest…"

Both M and G described facing barriers obtaining qualifications after being referred to a PRU. A key difference the young women described between these settings were feeling a sense of belonging and that staff cared. M described feeling isolated and different from her new peers at the centre. Whereas G described a teacher at a PRU she attended: "I had a favourite teacher there. If you needed time out, you just walk out of the room. It was a sense that you're not doing nothing bad... That time was amazing." Positive teacher-pupil relationships are crucial for a child's sense of belonging at school (Graham et al, 2019). Mirroring this, in prisons, young women have been found to engage more when they feel respected by staff, contrasting with young men who tend to cooperate to avoid consequences and out of respect for rules (Ryan & Lindgren, 1999; Batchelor, 2005).

Although not the dominant theme in the interviews, the importance of establishing an outward identity was apparent in M's reflections on her experiences at school and younger self:

> "I got moved to another academy… I went there and then I got kicked out after… less than a couple of weeks. Because I was sitting in class and a girl was fucking mimicking [me]…I told her to meet me at the gates and…then I had a fight with her in front of my parents. And then I got fucking kicked out.
>
> "…I go from, 'nah, I am a tough girl, fuck that'… I will fight a bitch' when I'm angry, to then when I calm down and I'm like, 'you're not a bad person, you're not actually like that, so why is it you have to say yes to them, just to prove a point'?"

While schools can provide a sense of belonging for girls, they can also be sites of victimisation, where students may feel the most vulnerable (Howard League, 2007; Muncie, 2021). G explained that the PRU was where she met a group of young men who were involved in criminal activity. She described a pattern of victimisation and manipulation in the way groups involved in criminal activity target girls and young women who are perceived to be seeking belonging and who have weakened attachments to family or school: G said: "They're not going to go up to a girl who's with her Mum and Dad. They'll

target someone who's meant to be in school but not… who doesn't have the nice shoes on… They're very good with their words."

The policy and research manager interviewed described how youth professionals had voiced, "a real concern that PRUs were in many ways recruitment grounds where gangs would target these spaces knowing that these young people might be struggling or facing additional challenges." (see also Aldridge and Medina-Ariza, 2008: 20).

4.2.2. Social Services

For one interviewee, social services played a key role her life. She described how feeling heard and understood was essential for her to build trust and confidence in disclosing information. G explained that she had "11 or 12 social workers altogether", most of whom she felt didn't understand her situation. She explained that one social worker was very supportive however:

> "He understood and was there for me…He didn't feel like a social worker…For once I wasn't paperwork to him… I was actually a human to him. He knew I had feelings. He asked me about them and took time to just be there for me… what really, really helps is if you've been through it… you understand the struggle, you understand that family isn't there for you." (G)

G's description of her social worker's approach reflects the conclusions of the 2013 Children's Commissioner's Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Gangs and Groups, which found that in every example of good practice [in children's services], "there was a focus on the child" (Berelowitz et al, 2013: 10

4.2.3 Police

Interviewees' reflections of their experiences with police expressed themes of not being understood, heard, or able to trust adults. B described how her view of the police was shaped by her mother and childhood:

> "Because of my personal experiences with the police, from since I was like young, really young, even when I was a child, even before I was born… My mum was pregnant with me, and they did something to her... So, all the way up until then until now, it's just been continuous, negative experiences and it makes me feel powerless.
>
> "In my community, the way I grew up, in times of need and we've called them, they're not there. And if they do show up, they show up late and the crime has been done and the

> perpetrator has gone and they're just there to show face basically… nothing positive… Even when I see them on the road I just think, why are you here, because you don't do anything for the people. The role of the police is that they cause a lot of distress… They've never brought any type of peace to me or my communities… They are especially hands on with Black men in my area, they like to be aggressive towards them, stop and search them for no reason."

K explained that she struggled to be "open minded and unbiased" towards the police due to her experiences growing up where she was told 'we don't trust them', and due to her personal experiences, despite having a desire to be open-minded and change perceptions. K described one situation when she was younger where she remembered the police coming into her house in the middle of the night while she was in bed in her pyjamas and them coming into her room. She explained how it had made her feel scared and vulnerable. All the interviewees reflected on how a combination of their personal experiences, where they grew up, and their families' experiences and attitudes towards police have impacted how they viewed the police and their lack of faith in the police's legitimacy. This reflects findings on police legitimacy and the primacy principle in the literature – see Jackson and Bradford, 2012; Jackson et al, 2012; Rosenbaum et al, 2005; Worden and McLean, 2017.

Interviewees expressed feeling disbelieved or dismissed when reporting incidents to the police, a sentiment echoed in the Casey Review, which noted that victims are not being heard and not getting the service they should expect. The review highlighted a case where a sexual assault victim repeatedly requested a female officer but was instead contacted by male officers, one of whom was described as rude and mocking (Casey, 2023). Just as misogyny has been found to be an institutional problem in the Metropolitan Police, so too has racism (Home Affairs Committee, 2021; Casey, 2023).

In describing the earlier incident where she reported to police being harassed by a 27-year-old man and officers concluding that she was in a consensual relationship with him, B also reflected:

> "With Black women, whenever we have an issue, they don't take us seriously, even recent things that have happened to me; me being harassed by somebody, which went on for too long and the police were aware of it."

G described a situation she experienced:

> "I was out with my friends clubbing, I left my friends and made my way home and a random guy started following me and wouldn't leave me alone to the point where I had to call on a stranger to help me and had to go into this office building and wait for the police to come. They took

> over an hour to come and when they did come, they took down my details as if I was the one making trouble and they kept asking me if I know the man and why is he following me, instead of asking the man the question. They didn't say or do anything to the guy. They took his statement, and they told him to go." (F)

B and G's examples depict perceived victim blaming, experiencing prejudice about their credibility, and the sense that they as the young women had somehow been complicit or encouraging of the male's behaviours.

Despite their negative experiences, some interviewees acknowledged that the police should have a role in reducing youth violence and protecting young people. On stop and search, M said: "I kind of agree with it, because it's like they're doing it for our safety and we all know a lot of people are walking round with things on them, but I feel like they judge very easily. It's like, they won't stop and search someone above a certain age… they target people which I don't like."

Interviewees described how they struggled to conform with and stay in mainstream schooling, which led to a range of consequences, including permanent exclusion. The time spent talking about school conveys how important these experiences were to the young women and emphasises the pivotal age range of between 11-16 that the interviewees' experiences occurred within. Interviewees explained that when they did feel listened to by the adults in their lives, they felt more able to open-up, trust and feel a sense of belonging in a place. Conversely, they also felt that police officers had treated them unfairly, not listened to them and not believed them. Interviewees reflected that there is a role for police in reducing youth violence, but that they did not have faith in this being achieved. For the interviewees in this study, negative interactions with teachers, social workers and police resulted in a lack of trust in these organisations and a lack of faith that they were acting in their best interests. This in turn could be linked to missed opportunities for some of the young women to be protected from the victimisation they experienced (see 4.3 and 4.4).

4.3 What do these young women say about their experiences of growing up and family?

'Family' is one of the key pillars of childhood experiences and has been described as the first socialisation agent for children, before school environments and interactions with peers develop in their importance and influence (Esbensen et al, 2010). All interviewees spoke about their families. Many described how their childhood involved some or several of the familial experiences that people with experience of the criminal justice system are more likely to have experienced (see 2.3). G explained:

> "I lived with my Mum and Dad, but then my Dad was a druggie and an alcoholic, and he was very physically abusive. My Mum was new to this country… My Dad was born here so he brought her to this country, and he abused that. He violated her because she didn't know the language. She didn't know any laws. He had a control over her. My Dad went to jail when I was one or two, because he had physically harmed me, and the doctors saw the bruises on me."

G described how when her father returned home from prison, he continued to emotionally abuse her until she was 12-years-old, which instigated a tipping point in G's life, when she decided: "I'm not taking this anymore, I'm going to run away." From the age of 13, G explained that she was living in and out of care. Between the ages of 12 and 13 was also the point G met her 'best friend', who she described as being "in the gang that was in the area".

G described the nature of the relationship with this individual:

> "I was an only child until I was eight and that's when my Mum had my sister. She was born early, so my Mum was looking after her a lot. Because my Dad was being physically abusive towards her, she just didn't have any energy towards me. I thought she doesn't love me, she always leaves, so I've got him [the best friend] now, he's giving me attention, he doesn't make me do anything I don't want to do. I wasn't smoking or drinking at the time when he was. I never felt forced, I was getting fed, I had a roof over my head. It was fun."

K described the adult responsibilities she took on at home from a young age:

> "…if you've been brought up your whole life as a young carer, you tend to think the things you do for your family and the things you do for your parents [in regard to looking after them] is what every child does. And then there's that shocking realisation when you go round to your friend's house and it's like, wait, your Mum's cooking food for you? We just sit here and watch TV.... It's that shock... It taught me more for real life things than anything else because its cooking, cleaning, signing forms, filling out forms, like adult forms too – rent, bills, personal independence payment, disability, DVLA." (J)

K explained how she saw the way criminal groups exploited young people's vulnerabilities, such as their economic background, challenging homelives, and their desire to feel that they belong::

> "A lot of the groups who engage in violence tend to give off a sort of family, and a lot of kids that come from poverty or come from a background where they don't get much love from home or they don't have a good family support system, tend to look for exterior ways to get this, this

> attention, this ‘love’ and so they turn to these people and then these people exploit that and turn it to their own gain. And it also happens in terms of a quick job to get some money and then they get involved and that comes again from poverty… The rich kids don’t have to worry about getting food on the table or looking after their parents.” (J)

As well as reflecting on family, interviewees discussed how they felt the areas they grew up in had a significant impact on their childhoods. M described growing up in an area “known as a bad area”, where “everyone who walks down the road is either stop and searched or they don’t get treated how they want to be treated”.

She said: “I used to live right next to a private school that you pay for. Every time I saw people there, they just seemed so different… it was an all-girls private school…every time I saw them, they just seemed like well mannered, always smiling, well presented…when you was outside my school, it was like…screaming and shouting, this person running down the road, that person starting a fight. At this school, everyone was friends, everyone was okay.”

Interviewees revealed clear indicators of early victimisation, such as abuse and school absenteeism, suggesting that these young women were slipping through societal security nets, resulting in missed opportunities for support. The observations of interviewees illustrate that their experiences at home and in their neighbourhoods significantly impacted their transition to adulthood, leading them to feel marginalised and excluded from the wider community. These feelings highlight the legitimacy of seeking belonging through peers as a response to their marginalisation (see 4.4).

4.4 What do these young women think about their experiences with their peers?

Interviewees felt that there was an alternative form of family structure being offered by new, criminal, friendship groups they made, which gave them a sense of belonging that they felt had been missing in other aspects of their childhood, even if this sense of family and belonging was not a healthy one on reflection.

G explained that her peers felt like a family, something she sought and longed for. She described how her relationship with a 15-year-old began:

> “He was in the gang that was in the area. He lived a couple of roads away from me. He also didn’t have a good family life… He had the house to himself a lot of the time… I was 12 at the time and he was 15… Whenever I ran away, I would go to his house. I would stay there. That was almost every other day.

> "I didn't know at first, but whenever I would stay, people would come and go, and it was really weird because they wouldn't stay. He would give them something and they would go away. That's when I thought he might be selling drugs. One time when I was at his house he came back from hospital and his hand was broken and that's when he basically told me he's part of this gang and he basically does what they have to do. He had a lot of knives and guns at his house."

G described how she then became more directly involved in the criminal activity she'd been introduced to:

> "When I was like 13…I was in and out of care, because me and my family would have a lot of fights and the police would come. When I was 13 the guy at the time, he actually ended up raping me and we lost contact. From then I was like 'I want revenge'… so that's when I went to the gang and was like 'we need to do something'. They basically went after him. They didn't want him to be part of the gang anymore because that's just not acceptable. Well, that's what they say anyway. He ran away to another area and that's when I became part of them. I was selling drugs for them, and it felt like a family…It feels like you're on top of the world…Everyone liked me."

G repeatedly referred to the group she was spending more and more time with as feeling like a new family:

> "You know when you have no family, I understand why girls go into it, because you get attention… It feels like a sense of protection, even though I didn't need it… They were feeding me. They were complementing me… It was that sense of, when the older guys come around, they were praising me a lot; 'oh, you didn't get caught, you made this much money'… Then I was getting presents… My parents have never treated me like this; this is love… I felt good, not in terms of carrying it, but in terms of pleasing them."

G described feeling like part of a family, while throughout her testimony are examples of exploitation, victimisation, sexual violence, and grooming. The compliments, praise and presents appear to be geared towards subtly encouraging her to get deeper into activities the older players wanted her to undertake, as she describes feeling good about pleasing these individuals but not about the act of carrying the drugs and weapons. Her experiences match the definitions of coercive control. G explained how the group she was involved with was structured:

> "We had what you called the 'olders', they're like 30, 25. They're the ones getting… the main drugs and they're the ones running it. They are always men… The actual highest one would be one person, and he would have all the drugs. And most of the time, what I heard from them, it was just like a white man… And then there were the 25, 30-year-olds and they were selling it to people who were 16, 17. They were the ones who give orders to them and then they give orders to people like me, the 'youngers'… so the oldest person…Their hands are clean so if it ever comes out, it's not going to touch them. But the people who were taking risks were me, in terms of drugs, and other people who were my age. The ones above me, so like 16, 17, they were the ones doing the stabbings."

The structure G describes is a patriarchal system in which young women and boys are exploited to handle drugs by older men who distance themselves from the criminal consequences and risk to their own personal safety, whilst reaping financial benefits. 'Patriarchy' in this context is defined as, "a sex/gender system in which men dominate women and what is considered masculine is more highly valued than what is considered feminine. Patriarchy is a system of social stratification, which means that it uses a wide array of social control policies and practices to ratify male power and to keep girls and women subordinate to men" (Chesney-Lind, 2006: 9). In this structure, G did not describe a system that enabled young women to progress into positions of higher power. She said: "They don't respect women. It's an ego thing. Why is a woman telling me what to do? I'm higher than her."

M described the roles of young women within her group of peers:

> "It's either you're a set up chick or you do something for the gang members, whether that's sexual activity, whether you're holding something for them, or even information. It's not that you're involved in the gang and you're going to go ride out and go and kill someone."

G described how she saw other girls and young women, who became pregnant by older boys and men that were involved in criminal activity, being controlled, and receiving threats after they themselves tried to leave the peer group, even in instances when those older boys and men were in prison. K explained how she felt education on consent is crucial to help raise awareness of the signs of being in an abusive relationship: "It's got to the stage where a lot of females think it's normal or think its attractive to have really toxic, abusive men, which maybe something you're into, but… they're getting into it without it being a talked about, consensual topic."

The roles and experiences of young women and girls affected by youth violence described so far are those of these interviewees. It is also important to explore the further complexity and multifaceted

nature of girls' and young women's experiences within peer groups in relation to youth violence. Harding (2012) explores girls' social capital within gangs and how girls cultivate social networks, form alliances and access resources that contribute to their wellbeing and safety.

It is also important to acknowledge that the patriarchal structures and experiences of sexual violence described are reflective of wider societal inequalities. Several surveys have shown girls experience high levels of sexual harassment and sexual violence in schools and colleges, including online abuse, and in 2017, one third of girls and young women at mixed-sex secondary schools reported experiencing some form of sexual harassment at school (Ofsted, 2021). At one school, girls said they could be asked to send nude or semi-nude images from up to 10 or 11 boys each night (Sellgren and Wills 2021; Riley, 2022). Acknowledging the critical need to address issues of sexual exploitation in criminal groups does not diminish their prevalence in wider society and failing to recognise this context risks further demonising young Black men, who already face prejudice related to youth violence and gangs. See Choak, 2018; Beckett et al, 2013.

To conclude, interviewees found an alternative sense of family and belonging in peer groups, which was missing at home and in mainstream school, leading them to engage in criminal activity for acceptance. They described these peer groups as patriarchal and misogynistic. These patriarchal dynamics in drug dealing cannot however be viewed in a vacuum from broader trends in sexual harassment and violence that affect girls and young women daily, for example in school and college. The experiences of victimisation described, for example through coercive control tactics, can also sit alongside young women wanting to establish their reputation (see 4.2) and alongside them accessing resources that contribute to their wellbeing and safety (see Harding, 2012); thus, highlighting the complexity of their lives.

Chapter 5: "They don't take us seriously"

In this chapter, I will summarise the key findings of this study.

Firstly, despite decades of awareness about how girls and women are perceived in the criminal justice sector (see 2.3) – such as the unequal behaviour standards placed on boys' and girls', judgement over girls' and young women's credibility, and the adultification and sexualisation of girls – young women affected by youth violence continue to feel the impact of these persisting perceptions. While the language around issues like county lines and child criminal exploitation has evolved, girls' experiences remain unheard and their intersectional realities of race, class, and disadvantage are often overlooked.

Secondly, the literature has found that people whose personal resilience and well-being is precarious need to feel they are being listened to and in turn empowered (Borg, 2004; Price and Sampson, 2016). The examples provided by interviewees in this study describe situations where young women affected by youth violence were left feeling disbelieved, unheard and powerless:

- "With Black women, whenever we have an issue, they don't take us seriously."
- "…it's just been continuous, negative experiences and it makes me feel powerless."
- "For once I wasn't paperwork to him."

This matters because it makes young women feel that they are not taken seriously, are de-prioritised, and that professionals in their lives do not understand the complex experiences they have been through, making them less likely to trust those professionals with their stories, leading to missed opportunities to prevent harm.

Thirdly, interviewees identified when they felt heard by teachers or social workers, which significantly impacted their sense of belonging in education and their ability to disclose victimisation. Addressing young people's holistic wellbeing to enhance their sense of "mattering" has been found to contribute to violence reduction (Billingham and Irwin-Rogers, 2022; Kilkelly, 2023). Professionals should prioritise creating safe spaces for girls and young women in educational settings and address the root causes of their mistrust in agencies, such as minimising referrals to multiple social workers during critical developmental periods. Additionally, complaints about victim-blaming by police must be taken seriously to improve their sense of mattering.

Fourthly, the findings of the Casey Report provide countless examples of how not listening to the experiences of girls and young women, such as those in this study, can have disastrous consequences on the ways in which they are treated by those in positions of power to protect them. If these experiences were taken seriously, this has the potential to change the ways in which the police perceive girls and young women, in turn having the potential to influence how they respond to reports, for example of harassment.

Lastly, interviewees described the patriarchal structures of the peer groups they were involved in and gave examples of how coercive control was being used as a tactic to deepen their involvement in criminal activity. This demonstrates the importance of embedding VAWG reduction, acknowledging the role of coercive control, into youth violence reduction policies and strategy, rather than signposting to separate VAWG policies and strategy, and missing opportunities to share learning, take a holistic view, and reduce risk of harm.

Chapter 6: Recommendations

In this final chapter, I will set out three recommendations based on the findings above:

- The issue of girls and young women who are affected by youth violence not feeling heard, not being believed, and having their credibility judged, **needs to be urgently addressed**. The new Labour government's manifesto has committed to stronger training on racism and VAWG (The Labour Party, 2024). While my police training included sessions on Adverse Childhood Experiences, more is needed, for example involving lived experience experts, such as those commonly working in healthcare, to use their personal knowledge and expertise to inform policing strategy, and responses to youth violence. Additionally, public scrutiny groups should be introduced to analyse police responses to VAWG, providing a similar function to stop and search scrutiny panels. Policing policies must recognise how a systemic disbelief of girls and young women has eroded their trust in adults meant to protect them.

- Interviewees in this study emphasised that girls and young women need to be enabled to feel a sense of belonging, be listened to and feel respected in education. This highlights a **need for greater understanding of and improved support at the key points of transition in education,** for girls who are at risk of being excluded from mainstream school. For those girls and young women removed from mainstream education, the analysis highlights a need for **improved pastoral support with trusted adults** to help them feel listened to and help foster a sense of belonging in education.

- Interviewees' accounts of patriarchal structures, misogyny and coercive control demonstrate the need to **embed VAWG reduction policies and practice into youth violence strategies, policy and procedure**, rather than seeing them as separate issues. Separation of these issues could lead to further marginalisation of girls and young women's' experiences of youth violence and increasing public and criminal justice attention on girls and young women's' crimes, with the unintended consequence of separating their offending behaviour from their victimisation (Newburn, 2017). It could also result in missed opportunities to share learning, take a holistic view of girls and young women's' lives, and reduce risk of harm.

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Appendix A: Participant Information Sheet

Participant Information Sheet

Introduction:

I am a Research Fellow at The Griffin's Society, conducting a study on girls and young women's perceptions of the police response to serious youth violence. I am also a former Police Officer, having previously worked in the Metropolitan Police Service, and am conducting this research outside of my current day-to-day role at a housing association.

I am conducting this research because I am passionate about building trust and confidence in police among young people. I believe that in order to be an effective police force, young people need to feel that they can ask the police for help and support no matter what situation they are faced with. I also believe that it is important to seek out and document the opinions young people when researching and creating policy recommendations for issues that affect them, both directly and indirectly, such as youth violence. I hope that by participating in this research, you will feel that your opinions on police responses to youth violence are valued.

About The Griffin's Society:

The Griffin's Society is a registered charity that sponsors research to bring about change in how women and girls are dealt with in the criminal justice system. For over ten years the Society's Research Fellowships have turned a spotlight on how women and girls are treated in the criminal justice system. The Society believes that those who work directly with women and girls are best placed to see what works and what doesn't. Through its fellowship programme and with the support of the Institute of Criminology at the University of Cambridge and academics from across the UK, the Griffin's Society provides research fellows with the opportunity and the tools to carry out research with the aim of bringing about change in practice and policy. For more information, please visit: www.thegriffinssociety.org

Research Objective:

The purpose of the research is to publish a 10,000 word academic paper exploring girls and young women's experiences of youth violence and policing responses to it.

Through interviews with girls and young women affected by or involved in serious youth violence, as well as professionals in this sector, I aim to provide reflections and analysis on questions around the theme of violence affecting young people, including:

1. How do young women affected by youth violence perceive the police response to serious youth violence?
2. How would these young women transform/shape the police response to serious youth violence?

Participant Overview:

In order to carry out this research, I am conducting interviews and organising focus groups with young women and girls who consider themselves to be affected by serious youth violence in some way.

- Interviews: one to one interviews with participants to discuss a broad range of issues relating to their opinions and experience of youth violence.
- Focus groups: group discussions about youth violence, its wider consequences and the police response to it.

I am inviting any young women aged 16+, who feel they have been affected by youth violence to take part in either an interview or focus group to support this research. The term 'affected' is being used in a very broad sense and can include a wide range of experiences; for example, somebody who has seen social media content relating to youth violence, somebody who has witnessed an incident, somebody who is affected by youth violence because of activities in the school they attend etc.

Appendix B: Consent Form

Consent Form

This consent form should be completed by participants involved in interviews and focus groups organised by Ellie Ward, as part of a piece of research on youth violence, which is sponsored by The Griffin's Society. Further information about the research project can be found on the attached Information Sheet. Please ensure you have read this and are happy to confirm you would like to contribute to the project.

This form confirms that participants have agreed to be interviewed or take part in a focus group, and permits the researcher to use some or all of their contributions in a research paper that will be published by The Griffin's Society. Contributors will be given a pseudonym in the published report so that their anonymity is protected. No personal information about participants will be published publicly or shared with third parties, unless further permission for this is given.

A digital copy of this form will be retained on a secure, password protected file, only accessible to the researcher (Ellie Ward). It will be kept separately from the interview/focus group transcripts and any other documents that would link the participant's personal information to the research project.

Purpose of contribution

Interview/focus group with Griffin's Society research fellow Ellie Ward in support of a study on girls' and young women's perception of the effectiveness of the police response to serious youth violence.

Consent to participate in interview/focus group

Please tick all that apply:

1. I agree to participate in the above interview/focus group. I have read (or listened to) and understood the information sheet, and had the opportunity to ask any questions I would like before taking part.	
2. I understand that the audio of the interview/focus group will be recorded and the recording will be kept in a secure, password-protected drive, only accessible to the researcher. I also understand that a transcript of the interview/focus group will be kept on a separate secure, password-protected drive.	
3. I understand that my participation in this study is voluntary and I can withdraw at any time without giving a reason, including during an interview/focus group.	

4. I understand that I can ask that any information I provide will be destroyed upon request before the publication of the report.	
5. I understand that I will not receive financial payment as a result of being interviewed/taking part in a focus group.	
6. I agree that some or all of my contributions may be used by The Griffin's Society for the purpose of a research project on youth violence. I grant any lisence that may be required for this under any applicable law or regulation.	
7. I understand that this signed consent form will be kept digitally on a secure, password-protected file by the researcher and that it will only be accessible to the researcher. I understand that this printed copy of the consent form will be stored in a secure place, only accessible to the researcher, and destroyed upon publication of the final report. I also understand that this consent form will be the only document containing my name, signature and contact details, and that it will be stored separately to any transcripts or other documents related to the research, so that this information is not connected to the project.	
8. I understand that any personal information about me will not be published publicly or shared with any third parties, and that my contributions will be published anonymously, using a pseudonym, unless I specifically give consent otherwise.	
9. I understand that the researcher (Ellie Ward) has a duty of care. This means that if I disclose information about myself or which identifies another as being at risk of imminent harm, she will be obligated to alert the relevant agency.	
10. I consent to the following uses of quotations (published anonymously) which I provide: · In reports and briefings prepared by Ellie Ward and The Griffin's Society, and distributed, for example, to policy-makers, politicians and professionals in the criminal justice sector. · In the final published report accessible via The Griffin's Society website (www.thegriffinssociety.org).	

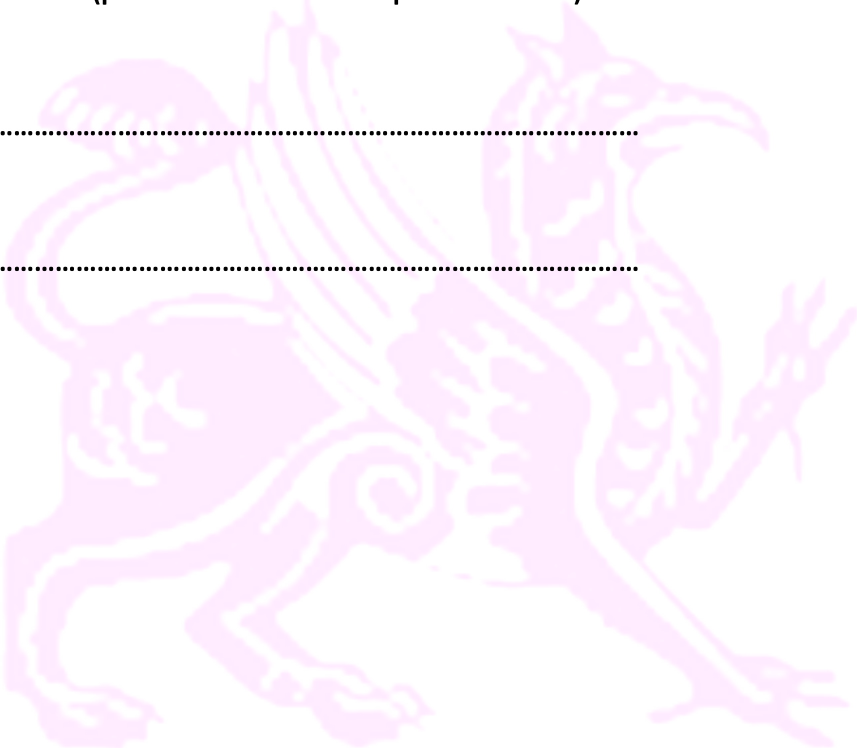
Name…………………………………………………………………………………………………….

DOB (if under 18)…………………………………………………………………………………..

Location of interview ………………………………………………………………………………..

Signature ……………………………………………Date…………………………………………

Preferred contact details (please add email or telephone number)



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ENDS